

ELECTHER

WOMEN

50:50



ENGENDER

WALKING AWAY:

Why women are leaving their
positions as councillors

Following the May 2022 election, women’s representation in councils rose from 29 per cent to 35 per cent, an increase of only 6 per cent. 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.

In this piece, Maggie McTernan from Elect Her explores why women are leaving their positions as councillors and what can be done to make sure we’re not asking “where are the women?” at the next local elections in 2027.

In recent years there has been a welcome focus on encouraging women to put themselves forward for elected office. All the major political parties have women’s sections which encourage and support women, and some use affirmative measures, such as all-women shortlists, in order to increase women’s representation in elected office. In the past 30 years, there has been considerable progress made in the number of women getting elected. In Westminster, up until the 1980s, women made up less than five per cent of MPs. From the ’90s onwards, however, there has been a steady rise, and women currently make up 35 per cent of the House of Commons.¹ Over the same time, progress on women’s representation on councils has made slower progress, although starting from a higher base. In 1997, 28 per cent of councillors were women,² and by 2022, this had only increased to 35 per cent.³ Nevertheless, men remain over-represented in politics at all levels, and the typical councillor in Scotland is a white man in his fifties.⁴

Getting women into council isn’t enough

While there has rightly been a focus on getting more women into elected office, there has been less focus on women remaining in politics. However, there is evidence that women are likely to leave elected office sooner than their male colleagues. Women who become councillors are more likely to stand down after

¹ Uberoi, Elise, Watson, C., Danechi, S., Bolton, P., & Tunnicliffe, R. (2022). *Women in politics and public life*. House of Commons Library.

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01250/SN01250.pdf>.

² Improvement Service. (2022). *Scotland’s Councillors 2017-2022*. Improvement Service.

https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/8287/scotlands-councillors-2017-22.pdf.

³ Oscar Research. (2022). *Live Elected Representative Gender Analysis Report*. Oscar Research.

<https://www.oscar-research.co.uk/data-intelligence/genderanalysis.php>.

⁴ Improvement Service. (2022). *Scotland’s Councillors 2017-2022*. Improvement Service.

https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/8287/scotlands-councillors-2017-22.pdf.

one or two terms.⁵ It is also significant that when women leave council, they are more likely to return to constituency-level voluntary work,⁶ while men are more likely to move on to other professional political roles, whether in elected office or in the wider political arena. If we want equal representation in politics any time soon, there needs to be as much focus on keeping women in politics as on getting women to stand in the first place.

This is of particular interest to me, as I was elected as a councillor in May 2017, but I chose not to stand for re-election in 2022.⁷ When I stood down from council, I was one of ten women standing down, out of 84 councillors - we made up a third of the women sitting on the council at the time, and more than half of us had only been elected for one term. One of my last acts as a councillor was to bring a motion to council - together with women from other parties and passed unanimously - regarding the low rate of women in councils and the numbers of women standing down. It highlighted some of the cultural and structural barriers, including low pay and misogynistic behaviours experienced by women, and called on the council to look at what steps it could take to address these barriers.⁸

The importance of data

If we want to see more women standing for council and staying there for more than one term - and if you are reading this, then I hope you agree with me that we do - then the first thing we need to do is gather the data that gives clear evidence of what is happening. The Centenary Action Group are campaigning for the enactment of s.106 of the Equality Act 2010,⁹ to require political parties to publish data diversity information on all candidates for the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament, and Senedd Cymru. This should be extended to include information on councillors. Once enacted, this can be built on to gather comprehensive information to track diversity from selection to standing down, which will give us a clear picture of the current situation and will assist in identifying where the blocks are to women being equally and diversely represented.

⁵ Allen, P. (2012). Falling Off the Ladder: Gendered Experiences of Councillor Turnover. *The Political Quarterly*, 83(4), 711–713.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ My reasons were a mixture of personal - balancing council commitments with other work and caring responsibilities - and cultural - a frustration with the antagonistic culture of politics.

⁸ The full text of the motion is included at the end of this paper.

⁹ Centenary Action Group. (2019). *Enact 106*. Centenary Action Group. <https://www.centenaryaction.org.uk/our-campaigns/enact-106>.

Cultural and structural barriers

Sexism and sexual harassment

As well as gathering the data, we need to listen to the voices of women in elected office, to understand the cultural and structural barriers they face in office. In the debate held in response to my motion, several women spoke of the barriers they faced - it is available as a webcast and makes for powerful listening.¹⁰ One of the issues raised was their experience of sexist behaviours, which included so-called everyday sexism as well as sexual harassment.

Women experienced these behaviours in person and online, including from fellow councillors. Councillor Jen Layden said:

“Being called sweetheart or darling is unacceptable. I am a councillor. Being told that ‘you can squeeze by me anytime’ is disgusting, and going on Twitter and telling female councillors that you know where they live is just creepy and every male councillor in this chamber really has to reflect on their behaviour because when you talk to us like that you’re sending a message to the community and to other people in this city that that is okay to treat us like that. And I do not want anybody to come back to me with ‘it’s just politics’ or ‘toughen up’. We would not tolerate this in any other workplace.”

This sexist culture is reflected in the reasons given by some women standing down from Westminster in 2019,¹¹ who cite the toxic levels of abuse they were receiving as a reason for leaving. These experiences of sexist behaviours were also identified by the Local Government Commission (LGC), a collaboration between the Fawcett Society and the Local Government Information Unit, set up to examine councils across England and Wales, asking the question “Does Local Government Work for Women?” The report identifies “a harmful culture of sexism in parts of local government politics which would not be out of place in the 1970s”.¹²

¹⁰ Glasgow City Council (2022) *Council Meeting*. Glasgow City Chambers. https://glasgow.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/663541.

¹¹ Deveraux Taylor, R. (2019). ‘Abused and dehumanised’ female MPs stand down. *The Herald Scotland*. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/18037983.abused-dehumanised-female-mps-stand/>.

¹² Local Government Commission. (2017). *Does Local Government Work for Women? Final Report of the Local Government Commission*. Fawcett Society. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=0de4f7f0-d1a0-4e63-94c7-5e69081caa5f>.

Tackling this sexist culture will take leadership from the top in political parties. It requires clear and consistent messages from parties that any sexist behaviour is unacceptable. It requires accessible and independent complaints procedures, so that women can raise their concerns without a fear of backlash for speaking out, or an impact on their political career going forward. And it requires parties to acknowledge, examine and address the impact of unconscious bias present across the parties. This is the same for our political institutions - the LGC report recommended that councils should be required to establish a formal, cross-party standards committee, to deal with complaints about councillors' behaviour, and also to deliver appropriate training to tackle discrimination.

Male-dominated culture

The “male-dominated culture” has been identified as a key barrier to getting women to stay in both parliament and councils in a review of the evidence conducted by Professor Sue Maguire for the Government Equalities Office.¹³ An aspect of this that came up in our council debate was how women could find themselves being marginalised and their voices ignored. Councillor Soryia Siddique spoke about this from her perspective as, at the time, the only woman of colour in the largest and most diverse local authority in Scotland:

“[I am] sometimes the only diverse voice at meetings in the most diverse ward in Scotland, there have been too many meetings where I feel invisible.”

Multiple discriminations

The LGC report also highlighted the double discrimination faced by women of colour, having to deal with racist as well as sexist cultures, often within their own political parties. In supporting women in elected office, political parties need to address other discrimination such as racism, homophobia and transphobia, and ableism and attend to how these intersect, particularly for women. The Equal Representation Toolkit is a valuable resource that supports equal representation of women, disabled people, BAME people, and people from the LGBT+ community that parties can use to audit their organisations at all levels and make concrete plans for change.¹⁴

¹³ Maguire, S. (2018). *Barriers to Women Entering Parliament and Local Government*. University of Bath. <https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/barriers-to-women-entering-parliament-and-local-government/attachments/barriers-to-women.pdf>.

¹⁴ Equal Representation Coalition. (2021). *Equal Representation in Politics*. <https://www.equalrepresentation.scot/>.

Low pay and lack of flexible working

A further barrier for women in elected office is the unpredictable pattern of work. The role of a councillor is one that demands evening and weekend work, different hours week to week, making it difficult to manage around any other work, or caring responsibilities. Women remain more likely to be responsible for caring, both for young children and elderly relatives, and so this will disproportionately impact on women. Councillors' low pay, and the inadequate support structures for councillors, were identified in our debate as a particular barrier to women, especially underrepresented groups of women, standing for or remaining in council. A recent survey conducted by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)¹⁵ found that councillors in Scotland reported typically working 38.5 hours a week for £18,604 remuneration per year.¹⁶ This means, as Councillor Kim Long observed:

“Many councillors are therefore forced financially to have a second job which creates an unsustainable workload, impacts the health of councillors, and creates an additional barrier for disabled people to being elected. People who are more likely to experience poverty including BME people, trans people, and disabled people are further from being able to take on a job with low pay and because women's greater caring responsibilities leave a finite number of hours for earning an income, we are ruled out from doing or staying in this job.”

It is not just the conditions of work that can be barriers, but the council buildings themselves. Councillor Kayleigh O'Neill, elected in May 2022, has highlighted the problems she faced as a wheelchair user on her first day in the council buildings. The corridors and lifts were narrow and difficult to navigate, she was not given any information on what to do in case of an evacuation, and she was unable to get to some meetings due to a lift being out of order.

COSLA and the Scottish Government have committed to conduct a review into councillor remuneration,¹⁷ which is welcome news. The next step is a broader review of councillor terms and conditions to identify where barriers can be removed. Over the past two years, we have learnt how quickly organisations can respond to change, and we need our councils to maintain the flexibility that has

¹⁵ COSLA. (2021). Time is right for a realistic remuneration for councillors, says COSLA. *COSLA*. <https://www.COSLA.gov.uk/news/2021/time-is-right-for-a-realistic-remuneration-for-councillors%2C-says-COSLA>.

¹⁶ Councillors pay and conditions vary across the UK.

¹⁷ COSLA. (2022). Increasing the diversity of local councillors. *COSLA*. <https://www.COSLA.gov.uk/news/2022/increasing-the-diversity-of-local-councillors>.

come from hybrid working. We need structures in place to enable councillors with caring responsibilities to balance their work and caring commitments. A good example of this is the model family leave policy developed by COSLA,¹⁸ and all councils should adopt this policy. Building on this, COSLA should work with councils to develop healthier working practices across the board.

Training for councillors

Induction training for councillors has improved in recent years, outlining their roles and responsibilities, however, continuing professional development is patchy. In my experience, there was generally someone to offer support and guidance when I asked, but that meant I had to know what to ask in the first place - and as a first term councillor, that was challenging, as I didn't know what I didn't know! The LGC report highlighted the value of mentoring for supporting women to build their confidence in the role of councillor. In addition, the report noted another model for encouraging councillors, that of sponsorship.¹⁹

This is where the sponsor, generally a more senior person in the organisation, supports their protégé to develop their profile in the organisation. The sponsor will bring the protégé along with them, sharing networks and putting the protégé forward for opportunities. Such schemes, if operated within councils and political parties, would help to balance the informal "old boy's networks" that still proliferate across politics. One of our aims at Elect Her is to build a community of women across divergent political views, identities, and experiences, so that as they go forward, they can call on this community for affirmation, information, support, and networking.

What change is needed now?

We are now about four and a half years out from the next council elections, and if we want to see equal representation in our council chambers, the work needs to start now. Elect Her are joining with Engender and Women 50:50 in a call to action, **Making it Happen for 2027: Transforming local democracy for women**. This is not a call for more discussion - there is plenty of evidence on the changes that need to be made, and we want more than more talk about this. As social entrepreneur Pheona Matovu says:

¹⁸ COSLA. (2020). Family leave for councillors. COSLA. <https://www.COSLA.gov.uk/news/2020/january-2020/family-leave-for-councillors>.

¹⁹ Omadeke, J. (2021). What's the Difference Between a Mentor and a Sponsor? *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2021/10/whats-the-difference-between-a-mentor-and-a-sponsor>.

“Let’s stop applauding what you say you’re going to do, and hold you to account for what you said you would do.”²⁰

This is why **we are calling for a multi-stakeholder taskforce dedicated to addressing this issue, and monitoring progress on action.**

We all benefit from having council chambers that better reflect the diversity of our communities. When there is a wider range of lived experience in the room, this improves policy making and scrutiny of council operations. But this is not going to happen without action by political parties and councils. So let’s start now, working to make it happen for 2027.

²⁰ Comment made at a panel event as part of the Scottish Parliament Festival of Politics, on 12 August 2022.

Motion adopted by Glasgow City Council

"Council notes, with concern that at the last election, just 29% of Scotland's Councillors were women; and that this inequality extends to other elected office more broadly; and that it is even more pronounced for young, disabled, BAME, and LGBT+ women.

Council further notes a considerable number of news reports that a number of female Councillors intend not to seek re-election at the upcoming election, including many who were first elected five years ago; that this is a worrying trend across Local Government; and that this trend is further evidence of the findings in the recent CoSLA Councillors Survey.

Council believes that this is evidence of a structural and cultural problem across Local Government in Scotland, and the rest of the UK; and that all parties and all politicians have a huge role to play in supporting more women of all backgrounds into politics and to stay in elected office and to tackle the misogynistic behaviours that exist in our Council chambers.

Council notes the findings of the CoSLA Councillors Survey that on average, Scottish Councillors work full-time equivalent hours on their councillor duties (38.6 hours/week). Council notes that the allowance for Councillors is £18,604, resulting in an equivalent hourly rate lower than the Real Living Wage of £9.90.

Council believes that there will not be significant change to the number of women, or other under-represented groups, running for local election or re-election until the workload and level of responsibility of the role of Councillor is fairly remunerated. Council welcomes the forthcoming independent review of Councillor pay by the Scottish Government and CoSLA and calls for urgent action to address remuneration and make the role accessible to all.

Council welcomes the recent Scottish Government commitment to an independent review of councillors' terms and conditions including pay to support greater diversity in Council chambers.

However, Council recognises that there are steps that can, and should, be taken locally to help address these problems, and to provide greater support and encouragement to those who are elected including hybrid options for council meetings.

Therefore, Council resolves to instruct Officers to engage with COSLA, COSLA's Challenging Barriers to Elected Office Group, and others, to prepare a report to the appropriate Council committee to carry forward any relevant and necessary changes to policy."

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.