

Diversity in Political Representation in Scotland: Engender Response to Scottish Government Data Improvement Proposal

January 2022

INTRODUCTION

Engender welcomes the Scottish Government's plan to collect data on the protected characteristics of candidates standing for election, and is glad of the opportunity to comment and provide feedback on this [proposal](#). It is hoped that the introduction of a framework for collecting this data will be a crucial step in addressing the persistent inequalities which exist within political representation in Scotland.

At present women are underrepresented at all levels of politics. The current lack of robust, detailed and intersectional data on who our representatives are is a major barrier to progress in terms of gender parity in our political institutions at both local and national levels. Without this information it is very difficult to fully understand the cause of (and possible solutions to) the chronic underrepresentation of women - as well as other minoritized groups, including Black and minority ethnic people, LGBTI+ people and disabled people.

It is well established that increased diversity in politics has a positive impact on all aspects of public life. Diverse representation increases participation and engagement in the democratic process, and the inclusion of diverse voices enriches and enhances policy outcomes for us all.

Engender is a member of the [Equal Representation Coalition](#)¹, a partnership of organisations from across the Scottish equalities sector working together to address barriers to participation in politics and increase diversity in political representation. The introduction of a formal framework for gathering data of this kind has potential to make a significant contribution to informing work in this area.

The below is in direct response to the proposal, and draws attention to areas of the document where we would seek clarification, or which we feel warrant comment or further consideration.

COMMENTS ON SECTIONS 1-9 OF THE PROPOSAL DOCUMENT

For the sake of clarity, please note that the numbering and headings used below correspond directly to those used within the proposal document to which we are responding.

2.2 Legislative context and voluntary commitments to publication of data

¹ <https://www.equalrepresentation.scot/about/> Please note that this feedback is on behalf of Engender, and is not intended as a joint response on behalf of the Equal Representation Coalition.

The document notes that there is currently “no legal requirement to collect or publish information on the equality characteristics of candidates for elections in Scotland.” It goes on to recognise that Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 contains a duty on political parties to publish information relating to the protected characteristics of candidates, however that this has never been commenced by the UK Government, and would not cover elections at a local level.

We would note that in addition to demonstrating a commitment to take voluntary action to redress this as per Inclusion Scotland’s Access to Politics Charter² (which the document references), the five largest parties have also signed the Equal Representation Coalition’s 2016 pledge, which includes an ask to [‘Audit the diversity of party members, activists, staff, candidates and elected representatives at all levels, creating a benchmark against which to monitor change’](#). Until recently there was not capacity within the Equal Representation Coalition to monitor progress on this pledge, however we are not since aware of any party taking significant action in this area.

2.3.1 Data on Election Candidates

In line with the language in this section of the report, we wish to reiterate that the methods available at present for gathering data on the numbers of women candidates (for example reliance on the personal knowledge of Returning Officers, and first names) is not accurate and is unacceptable for information of such importance and sensitivity.

2.3.2 Data on Councillors

We recognise the acknowledgment that no intersectional data on representatives is currently available, and that this is due in part to the lack of data that currently exists across the range of protected characteristics both locally and nationally. Presently data that is available is often presented only in static, separate categories, providing us for instance with information on the numbers of women, of disabled people or of young people – with no ability to recognise the way that these categories relate to one another in terms of the identity of an individual. By ‘intersectional data’ here we mean data that allows analysis that will provide a holistic understanding of the multiple, overlapping discriminations and privileges experienced by candidates simultaneously on the basis of their protected characteristics. An intersectional approach to publishing survey data would enrich our understanding of where inequalities exist, and what work is needed to begin addressing these.

We do recognise the need to ensure that published data complies with the need for personal privacy of respondents however it is also crucial to recognise the unique opportunity presented by this piece of work in relation to correcting the current dearth of knowledge in this area. In particular, access to intersectional data on council candidates which can be disaggregated further – for example by party or region – would be essential in providing benchmarks by

² <https://inclusionScotland.org/news/access-to-politics-charter>

which to measure progress over time, and will be invaluable information for those working to increase diverse participation and representation in politics in terms of where to focus efforts.

3. Proposed new data collection

While we recognise that broad consensus has been reached for the approach presented, Engender would strongly recommend a mandatory approach to collection of this data to ensure maximum participation from candidates – and ensure as large a sample size as possible, improving accuracy in our understanding and maximising the opportunity for confidential intersectional analysis of the data.

With any non-mandatory approach, there is always a significant risk that candidates will forget to participate, or will choose not to for simple reasons - for instance to reduce their administrative burden. It is our strong feeling that the potential of the data gathered in this survey to reduce inequalities in our political system is too important not to be mandatory.

While recognising that with this approach candidates are able to answer as many or as few of the questions as they wish, we feel that with a non-mandatory approach there is also a risk that candidates who are unwilling to answer one of the questions will opt out entirely rather than continue with further questions. Of course, individuals should not have to provide personal or sensitive information if they do not want to, however in order to maximise the numbers of respondents to each question, rather than make the whole survey non-mandatory, we would recommend including a 'prefer not to say' option alongside the answer choices for each question. This approach would be in line with the recent 'Data collection and publication guidance on sex, gender identity and trans status' published by Scottish Government in September 2021.³ This will provide an opportunity for respondents to selectively answer the questions, and there is value in offering respondents an opportunity to actively rather than passively record their preference not to answer, as this could be useful in informing future surveys or work in this area.

3.1 Objectives.

We support these objectives. We would seek clarity on whether the proposed approach includes an ambition to publish disaggregated data on sex of candidates by party.

3.2 Scope

The document states that “We are not proposing the inclusion of questions exploring the experiences of candidates seeking nomination and any barriers they may have faced seeking to become of previously serving as a councillor.”

While we acknowledge that this is outwith the scope of this proposal, we do wish to recognise the intimate link between the barriers to participation experienced by individuals seeking nomination within their own party, and the lack of diversity in our political institutions. Political

³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/data-collection-publication-guidance-sex-gender-identity-trans-status/documents/>

parties have a pivotal role to play in reviewing their internal practices, policies and culture in order to create the conditions in which women members are enabled to succeed.

Through Engender's work with political parties on the Equal Representation in Politics project, we understand that there is enthusiasm and interest from across the political spectrum to take action. Along with partners from the Equal Representation Coalition, we have created the Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit, a set of self-assessment resources that parties may use to review their practice and consider ways to improve diversity and equality internally. The response to this Toolkit is encouraging, however our understanding of the barriers experienced by women (and other underrepresented groups) would be greatly enhanced by further research in this area – increasing our ability to begin addressing the root causes of the issue.

4.1 Approach

The proposal states “Candidates may find some questions more sensitive than others. Instructions will be provided to respondents making clear that questions are voluntary and if there are any questions they do not want to answer, they can just go on to the next one.”

With reference to the discussion on section 3 above, we agree that it is crucial that respondents be aware that they are free to choose how/if to respond to the questions asked, but that it is also crucial that there is a high response level. Our recommendation for achieving this balance would be for the survey to be mandatory with the addition of a 'prefer not to say' option alongside the answer options for every question.

However, relevant in ensuring a high rate of response and comfort in both mandatory and non-mandatory models is clear communication with participants on the *value* of their honest participation. Alongside providing adequate practical guidance and factual background, we recommend ensuring that participants are informed as to why the project is important, and why a high response rate is desirable. This would include explaining the link between our understanding of gendered and other inequalities in political representation, the lack of data that exists on this at present, and the need to equip ourselves with this knowledge in order to begin formulating solutions.

5. Proposed Approach to Data Collection

Step 2: Dissemination of materials

It would be beneficial to know what information will be contained in the information leaflet and how this will support participants to feel comfortable in answering the questions with honesty to maximise impact, as discussed above.

Step 9: We would support retention of the original data in order to enable longitudinal analysis across multiple elections, to see change over time and to provide a benchmark to measure progress in reducing inequalities in our political representation.

Step 10: Review Exercise

As discussed above in response to section 3, we would encourage the adoption of a consistent and ideally mandatory approach to gathering data of this nature, and would welcome exploration of legislative and other mechanisms that will support this in future elections.

6. Deliverables and approach to reporting

We recognise the inclusion of a specific statement of intent within this section for the project to “provide intersectional analysis where possible” and note that there is ambition to disaggregate data on some protected characteristics at local authority level. As discussed in our response to section 2.3.2 above, access to intersectional, disaggregated data is of utmost importance in helping us to understand the shape and nature of the inequalities and underrepresentation which exists within our political institutions. Possessing this knowledge is essential to our work towards achieving women’s equal representation in politics, and to the work of others working to increase diversity of representation in politics as it will allow pinpointing of inequalities within the electoral picture, and the subsequent development of targeted support.

RESPONSE TO ANNEX A: PROPOSED QUESTIONS AND RATIONALE

Protected characteristics questions

Sex

We are broadly comfortable with the wording of this question however would ask that it is made clear to the respondent within the question that they are able to give an answer which affirms their lived sex and which may differ from the sex recorded on their birth certificate, and that there is no need for a Gender Recognition Certificate to do so. This would reflect the user guidance for the sex question for the 2022 census⁴.

We would also recommend the inclusion of a non-binary option here. Although there is a prompt to the respondent regarding non-binary identity in the wording of the “Gender reassignment/Trans status” question, there is a risk of losing data if we do not include a specific option which recognises non-binary respondents within the Sex question. The absence of this will disadvantage our understanding of non-binary people’s participation in politics.

Finally, we would strongly recommend the inclusion of a ‘prefer not to say’ option alongside the options of ‘male’ and ‘female’. As discussed in our response to section 3 above, this approach is in line with the recommendations of the [‘Data collections and publication guidance – sex, gender identity and trans status’⁵ published by the Chief Statistician](#), and will be beneficial in our understanding of participant engagement with a view to enhancing the approach for future elections. In addition, we note that the other questions in this proposal which relate to protected characteristics do indeed include a ‘prefer not to say’ option, so we would recommend the inclusion of such an option here for the sake of consistency.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT US

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.

⁴<https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/media/nzljdqvn/sex-question-guidance-30-august.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/data-collection-publication-guidance-sex-gender-identity-trans-status/documents/>