

Engender response to the Scottish Parliament Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's Call for Views on understanding barriers to participation in politics

November 2021

1. INTRODUCTION

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation. We welcome this opportunity to contribute views in support of the work being undertaken by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee to understand the barriers to participation in local politics.

Women are underrepresented at all levels of political decision-making, and this is most extreme at the local level where only 29% of councillors in Scotland are women. Vital decisions in many areas disproportionately impacting women's lives are made by councils - for instance women are more likely to be employed in social care or education, and more likely to be users of public transport - however their voices are largely absent from these conversations.

Diverse representation improves democratic engagement, increases participation in elections, and enriches policy decision-making. In order to create better outcomes, it is vital that women are able to fully participate in local politics.

We believe that political parties, the Scottish Government, and local authorities all have important roles to play in removing the cultural, structural, and material barriers that prevent women's participation in the democratic process at a local level. This response considers what these barriers are and outlines key actions that each of these institutions must consider to redress the situation.

2. SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

Q3. Why are certain groups - for example women, young people and people from minority ethnic backgrounds - underrepresented across Scotland's councils?

Women are underrepresented at all levels (including within councils) for myriad structural and cultural reasons. The level of inequality is even more stark when looking at minoritized women including Black and minority ethnic women, lesbian, bisexual and trans women and disabled women.

Women are contending with a vast historical backdrop of exclusion from public life which persists in many contexts to this day. In our culture the public political sphere has long been dominated by white men who are seen as the 'default'. These assumptions underpin the roles and offices that women and men are socialised towards, and have a significant impact on elected representation. This is particularly true at council level where in 2017 just 29% of returned candidates were women.¹

When women do gain access to these spaces, they are routinely held to higher standards than men in the same positions. Women often have to work harder to prove their ability and commitment to their colleagues in order to be taken seriously. Due to the low number of women in these spaces, the women that are present are routinely also expected to act as a de facto spokesperson for women as a group, and surface-level commitments to gender balancing in committees can lead to women being asked to take on more work than their male counterparts. These both add significant pressure to what would normally be expected in relation to the duties of an elected representative. Gendered norms and stereotyping tend to push women into formal or informal spokespersons roles for 'soft' subjects such as health, education, or care and away from issues such as finance and the economy, which are still regarded as a male domain.

Women in public-facing roles in politics also often face highly gendered scrutiny in the press and on social media over issues such as physical appearance and personal life which are not experienced to the same extent by men in these roles. There have been multiple recent and high-profile instances of criminal harassment and abuse of women politicians in Scotland. The risk of harassment and abuse both online and offline is much greater for women than men, and this risk increases for women with public facing roles in politics, and again still for minoritized women – for example for Black and minority ethnic women or LGBTI women. The risk of abuse and harassment is a major deterrent for women when considering whether to stand for election at all levels.

¹ Engender (2017) Sex & Power in Scotland 2017. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/SEX-AND-POWER-IN-SCOTLAND-2017.pdf>.

The consistent lack of women within councils also means that these institutions are not driven to become accessible to women at a structural level. Unlike many other institutions, workplaces and civil settings, the lack of women in councils has meant that outdated structures, practices, and conditions have been allowed to persist and go unchallenged. It is important to note that it is not the responsibility of individual women or any other underrepresented group to challenge and create this change for themselves, but that of the whole institution.

An example of these outmoded conditions is the significant fluctuation in working pattern that can occur from week to week, something that councillors receive little support to manage and are expected to accept as unchangeable and simply the 'nature' of the job. This can make it difficult for councillors with caring responsibilities - a disproportionate number of whom are women - to manage their time and strike a workable balance between competing demands.

Another example is the lack of a legal guarantee of family leave for councillors. The voluntary guidance for councils on this issue that was introduced in 2020 is the result of the hard work and self-advocacy of councillors through the CoSLA Barriers to Elected Office Group.²

This guidance is a welcome development (previously there was no provision whatsoever), however adoption of its recommendations is not compulsory and there remains no legal right to family leave of any kind for elected representatives. In addition, the provisions of the voluntary guidance only recommend that councils offer members giving birth six months paid family leave, which falls short of what many workplaces would consider best practice.

Councillors pay and conditions are another crucial area underpinning women's underrepresentation in local authorities. The current basic rate of pay is set at £18,604 and the role is often assumed to be part-time – an assumption which fails to consider the reality of the hours that councillors work which typically vastly exceed this. It further fails to take into account women's time poverty - women are less likely to have access to a car than men, relying on slower public transport, for example - and the huge volume of unpaid care, childcare and domestic work still disproportionately carried out by women. Together these cultural, structural, and material barriers to participation keep local councils inaccessible to many and send a strong message to women that elected office, including at local level, is not meant for them. The resultant low levels of women representatives in local councils leads to a lack of role models for women of all ages who may be interested in entering this space which has a compounding effect and further

² CoSLA (2020) Family Leave Guidance for Councils. Available at: https://www.cosla.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/17838/Family-Leave-Guidance-May-2020.pdf.

perpetuates the current status quo, as well as resulting in poorer outcomes for all women impacted by the decisions made at local level.

Q4. Are political parties doing enough to encourage women, young people and people from ethnic minority backgrounds to stand for local elections?

No.

Achieving diverse local representation is about more than parties simply encouraging underrepresented groups to stand. It is about whether parties recognise and acknowledge the additional barriers that exist for certain groups trying to access political space, what proactive support parties offer to enable their members to stand, and how that support is maintained once they become candidates and councillors.

Through Engender's work engaging with political parties on the Equal Representation in Politics project³ we understand that there is appetite from across the political spectrum for increased diversity in representation but knowing how and where to begin to create this change can be a barrier to action. This can be particularly challenging in the context of a political party where many people in crucial roles are volunteers with competing priorities and for whom embarking on a process of change can seem like an insurmountable task when there are so many day-to-day things that need to be done. We have been encouraged, however, by the cross-party interest in the Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit, a practical set of self-assessment resources which enables parties to review their practice across the spectrum of party life to examine what actions they could take to be more inclusive.

Looking at an organisational level, parties need to recognise the unique power they have to create change by examining their own internal operations. All parties play a crucial role in determining who can get involved in politics, and therefore ultimately who gets elected. The Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit identifies a wide range of areas in the control of parties that could have a tangible, and often immediate, impact on the diversity of our representation.

For example, the Toolkit supports individual party members at any role or level to examine their day-to-day activities - including local and national meetings, and events such as conferences and campaigning activities - and how accessible they are. This includes considering physical access requirements as well as things like when and where meetings are held. In order to become more accessible to people with caring responsibilities, parties should consider not always holding activities in the evening so

³ Equal Representation Coalition (2021) Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit. Available at: <https://www.equalrepresentation.scot/>.

that people with caring responsibilities are not excluded and could also consider offering childcare facilities or support with childcare costs at party events, for example.

Parties must also acknowledge the role that unconscious bias plays within the party and equip themselves to challenge it. With regard to gender roles, unconscious bias shapes how duties are distributed, how members access development opportunities, and ultimately who ends up being selected as a candidate for election. As a result, men are often more likely to occupy a senior leadership position while women are regularly fulfilling more undervalued party roles, impacting future progression opportunities.

Candidate selection procedures are a key mechanism entirely within a party's control that can have a transformational impact on who becomes a candidate and who gets elected. Several of the largest parties in Scotland trialled various new methods for candidate selection for the 2021 Holyrood election including 'zipping' lists, reserving positions for disabled people and minority ethnic people, and having all-women shortlists. The outcome of these measures contributed to the election of the most diverse parliament that Scotland has seen. Parties must look at the successes and challenges of this experience and consider how to replicate or adapt this at a local level where the need is most stark.

Parties should implement rules that increase representation among women and other underrepresented groups. Engender continues to advocate for parties to introduce quota systems for women candidates, and for this to be an effective strategy parties must also ensure that those selected from within underrepresented groups are selected for *winnable* seats. The 2021 Holyrood elections serve as an example of the impact that parties can have in terms of shaping the diversity of our representation when a proactive approach is taken.

Addressing abuse and harassment (online and offline) should also be a priority to parties. Women, and especially women from minoritized groups such as BME women, LBT women or disabled women, are at an increased risk of abuse due to their involvement in politics. Such abuse is frequently personalised and highly sexualised, misogynistic, inflected with further bias such as racism or homophobia, and delivered in overwhelming volume. The public nature of this abuse has a damaging personal effect on women who receive it, in addition to a wider communicative effect to all women signalling that politics is not a space for them.

Parties should recognise the duty of care that they have to their members and representatives by ensuring robust support procedures to address abuse within the party, including reporting to police where necessary and providing support to people who experience abuse. Parties should also consider other measures that can be taken to support the general wellbeing of people in a high-profile role, for example supporting people to set boundaries and to create digital self-care strategies.

In order to demonstrate a serious commitment to inclusion and equal access, parties must also recognise the power they have to create change beyond their own structures. Parties should consider adopting policy positions that support fair pay and conditions for councillors, improved access to family leave, and other measures which protect and promote the broader interests of women and underrepresented groups, in order to create a reality where the role of councillor becomes a feasible option for anyone.

Q5. Do you feel the remuneration for being a councillor is adequate?

Remuneration for councillors is not adequate. The current basic rate of £18,604 per annum reflects that the councillor role is still considered to be part-time. In reality councillors' duties are many and varied including dealing with constituent casework, attending committee meetings, holding regular surgeries, attending full council meetings, attending community council meetings and retaining an engaged presence within the community. In order to fulfil all of these duties and meet the expectations of constituents, the role regularly exceeds that which could be considered part-time and places significant demands on councillors' ability to manage other paid work unless they have a high degree of flexibility. The Improvement Service's 'Scotland's Councillors 2017-22' report reflects this reality.⁴

In this context it is crucial to recognise the disproportionate amount of childcare, domestic work, and other unpaid care work that women carry out. The time-poverty that this results in for many women means that it is impossible to fulfil the work of a councillor – where it is necessary to regularly work additional hours for no additional pay. Further to this, to make the role financially viable many councillors need to retain a second job. Women are already more likely to be in low-paid or precarious employment, which means that there is greater risk inherent in taking on a councillor role at the current rate of pay. It is important to recognise the implications this has for who ends up in the councillor role. Too often at present the low salary keeps the role of councillor as a 'hobby job' for the disproportionately older white men who do not experience the same pressures on time or finances as many women.

The rate of pay also doesn't take into account the high-profile nature of the role and the risk of online and in-person abuse that people in public-facing roles can experience, the risk of which is increased for all women councillors but even more so for Black and minority ethnic women, lesbian, bisexual or trans women.

CoSLA has recently carried out a members' survey on the subject of councillor remuneration. The results have not been published yet, but this is a welcome development which we hope will support the creation of fairer pay conditions for councillors in order to make the role a feasible option for more people.

⁴ Improvement Service (2018) Scotland's Councillors 2017-2022. Available at: https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/8287/scotlands-councillors-2017-22.pdf.

Q6. What more can the Scottish Government, local authorities, other public bodies and political parties do to encourage and support a wider range of local councillor candidates?

Scottish Government

In past Holyrood elections including in 2021 (see Q4) when parties choose to implement candidate selection processes that ensure more equitable representation of women and other underrepresented groups, we have seen this translate into a significantly more diverse parliament. The risk of this progress being reversed is constant where there is no legal requirement for parties to maintain gender balance. We have seen this happen in the past, for example the significant drop in women's representation in the Scottish Parliament between 2003 – 2007.

Following the return of Scotland's most diverse parliament in May 2021,⁵ it is crucial that this success is replicated at the 2022 local elections where increased diversity is most sorely needed. It is clear that candidate selection procedures can be an effective way of ensuring more women are represented at all levels of politics. Although the legal power to set mandatory gender quotas for elections is reserved, Engender strongly urges the Scottish Government to make the case for the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament that would enable their introduction. Looking towards the 2022 local elections in the absence of this power, however, the Scottish Government should promote the positive impact that gender quotas have and encourage use of gender quotas to political parties wherever possible.

Another key area that the Scottish Government should take action on is to collect and publish data on local election candidates (and comparative data on successfully elected candidates) that can be disaggregated by sex and other protected characteristics. This is necessary to provide a baseline to measure progress against.

In relation to the discussion above with regards to councillor remuneration the Scottish Government should take steps to increase this nationally. In addition, they should work with local authorities to improve councillors' terms and conditions to reflect the level of work inherent in the role, and to ensure access to paid family leave for all councillors who require it.

Local authorities

While councils are not technically the employer of councillors, it is true that council chambers are the workplaces of councillors. As with any workplace it is important that

⁵ Dr Timothy Peace (2021) The journey to a more diverse Scottish Parliament. Centre on Constitutional Change Available at: <https://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/news-and-opinion/journey-more-diverse-scottish-parliament>.

councils do everything within their power to provide councillors with a safe, healthy, and supportive environment which removes barriers and enhances participation. As discussed in Q3, there is currently no legal guarantee for paid family leave for councillors, which is a huge barrier to women's participation in councils and out of step with the required legal standard for other workplaces. Councils have the power to adopt the voluntary guidance on family leave created by CoSLA and should consider this a priority. CoSLA have also created voluntary guidance on the menopause which councils should also adopt to support current and prospective women councillors.⁶

Political Parties

Further to the measures discussed above in Q4, there are a range of actions that political parties should take to support more women to become local councillor candidates.

In the absence of a legal requirement to do so, political parties should commit to use of candidate selection procedures for elections at local (and national) level that create gender balance. This commitment should be binding to ensure that it happens consistently. This could mean parties amending their constitutions to reflect this commitment and ensuring that there is sufficient education and support in place for branches and anyone involved in the selection process to realise this commitment. Parties must also ensure that this commitment translates from balance in candidates into balance in elected representatives, by placing women in winnable seats. Parties should also consider adopting party policy that supports the introduction of legal gender quotas.

Similarly to local authorities, while parties are not the employer of local councillors, there should be an acknowledgment of the duty of care that they have to the elected members who carry out work on their behalf, and action should be taken to support their welfare in recognition of this. As discussed above, parties should consider adopting party policy that protects the rights of elected representatives and should lobby at all levels for improvements in councillor pay and conditions, in order to make the role a practical option for more people who are currently excluded, including women.

As discussed above, the Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit enables parties to methodically review their current practice in terms of inclusion and equality, highlighting areas for action. There are a range of measures within the Toolkit that would enable parties to realise their potential in bringing about more diverse representation at a local level. As well as measures such as candidate selection and running inclusive events, the Toolkit allows parties to review internal party culture, consider party policy which acts in the interest of underrepresented groups, develop processes to tackle abuse, and support candidates to care for their wellbeing among

⁶ CoSLA (2020) Menopause Guidance for Councillors. Available at: https://www.cosla.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/18662/Menopause-Guidance-for-Councillors.pdf/_nocache.

many other areas. Parties should formally adopt the Toolkit and support their members to access it. The most appropriate way to do this will differ in accordance with internal decision-making processes and infrastructure. This could include introducing a requirement for local branches to use the Toolkit regularly; incorporating the Toolkit into the party's own learning and development resources; or mandating Toolkit training for all new office bearers.

Finally, all parties, public bodies, local authorities and Scottish Government bodies should look at how they support and resource individual councillors or candidates which they are responsible for with development opportunities - including engaging with the range of support programmes and resources that are on offer for example from ElectHer or the Improvement Service⁷ - but also how they access support for themselves as institutions, for example from the Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit. There is a lot of work happening outwith these democratic institutions to support the realisation of diverse representation, but this can only be successful if these institutions take a proactive rather than reactive stance in engaging with it, and truly demonstrate their commitment to increasing diverse representation in Scotland's representative bodies.

3. CONCLUSION

Women's equal representation and participation in politics is a vital first step to securing decisions that understand and respond to the lives led by women and tackling deeply rooted inequalities between women and men in Scotland. Research has shown time and time again that diversity is also good for institutions, leading to better decisions and economic growth. Addressing the persistent inequalities in access to political office will, however, require action at every level of our political system. There is a vital role for political parties to address systemic barriers to access, but this must be supported and encouraged by national policy.

Engender therefore recommends that **political parties** should:

- Recognise the unique power and opportunity they have to shape who can get involved in politics and ultimately who can become a candidate and get elected;
- Recognise the accompanying responsibility to take proactive action to address barriers to women's participation which currently exist around access, unconscious bias, candidate selection, abuse and harassment and other areas;

⁷ ElectHer (2021) Events + Workshops. Available at: <https://www.elect-her.org.uk/events-workshops>;
Improvement Service (2021) Elected Members Development. Available at:
<https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/products-and-services/skills-and-development/elected-members-development>.

- Utilise the Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit and its recommendations to support action on these and other issues;
- Adopt policy positions that support the welfare of local councillors.

Engender recommends that **Local Authorities** should:

- Recognise the workplace duty of care that councils have to councillors;
- Explore what wellbeing measures can be taken to ensure a safe, healthy and supportive workplace for councillors;
- Adopt the voluntary guidance on family leave and voluntary guidance on menopause created for local authorities by CoSLA.

Engender recommends that **Scottish Government** should:

- Promote the positive impact that candidate gender quotas can have in creating diversity to political parties wherever possible including advocating for the devolution of powers that would enable the introduction of legal gender quotas;
- At elections, collect and publish equalities monitoring data that can be disaggregated by sex and other protected characteristics;
- Take steps to increase councillor remuneration to reflect the reality of the role;
- Explore what steps can be taken within the existing devolved framework to guarantee access to paid family leave for all councillors.

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.