

ELECTHER

WOMEN

50:50



ENGENDER

MAKING IT HAPPEN FOR 2027: Transforming local democracy for women

A Call to Action from Engender, Elect Her and
Women 50:50

Gender Equal Representation In Scotland's Councils

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. Although a step in the right direction, this figure remains well below what is necessary to achieve women's equal representation within councils.

Gender inequality within councils is not new. We know that the barriers to women's participation in local politics are complex, multiple and, above all, persistent. We also know that there are significant additional barriers facing women with multiple minoritised identities, including Black and minority ethnic women, disabled women, LGBTI women, as well as women who are carers.

Indeed, May's disappointing result should not come as a shock - we knew well before election day that women numbered only around 33 per cent of candidates on ballots. And while we know that councils across Scotland remain overwhelmingly white – for example, Scotland's capital city has only one woman of colour councillor – because of a lack of robust equalities monitoring data, we do not have a clear enough understanding of how women in all their diversity are represented.

These are chronic, systemic problems which pose serious questions about the legitimacy of our institutions and the health of our democratic processes.

Following the underwhelming results of May 2022, yet again there is talk from political parties, councils and government of a “need to do better.” But progress towards equal representation continues to be glacial. The election cycle continues, and too often, windows of opportunity to review and initiate the types of long-term, sustainable change needed to achieve better outcomes are missed.

What Needs To Happen

Key factors preventing women's equal representation in our councils are structural, cultural and deeply ingrained. Progress requires simultaneous actions targeting multiple facets of women's experience of local politics. This involves commitment to long-term change from all actors who hold power within the political sphere, including current councillors, councils as institutions, political parties, government, parliament and news media. Formal recognition and action is essential to ensure we are not having the same conversation in 2027.

We are calling on the Scottish Government to explore the creation of a Multi-Stakeholder Taskforce dedicated to addressing this issue which would:

- keep the issue in the collective spotlight over the next five years;
- facilitate longitudinal monitoring of women’s participation and representation in local politics;
- uphold transparency and accountability and progress evaluation throughout the election cycle.

What Can You Do?

We have created a suite of materials, including reports, original research and accounts of lived experience, which present key recommendations for different stakeholders in the political sphere. We urge you to identify the ways in which you can engage, laying the foundation for change in 2027.

Making It Happen For 2027: Resources	
What Women Want (from their Elected Representatives)	A quick “how-to” guide helping local councillors ensure the needs and concerns of women are central to local decision-making.
Reading Into the News: A Review of Gender Representations of Politicians in the May 2022 Elections in Scottish News	Original research critically examining women politicians’ representations in the May 2022 election news.
Making Local Politics Work For Women: The experiences of women local councillors and their reasons for not seeking re-election	Report on retention rates of women councillors, including insights from interviews with women councillors who stepped down in 2022, completed by a student on recent placement with Engender.
Walking Away: Why Don’t Women Stay in Elected Office?	Examination of key factors turning women off from local politics.

Key Recommendations

These are not an exhaustive list. Our campaign reports provide greater detail and context. The following are the bare minimum of actions required if we wish to see women’s local representation increase by 2027.

Political Parties

- **Design targeted support for women councillors – particularly those from diverse backgrounds and facing multiple discrimination** – in the role, focusing on multiple-term retention.
- **Use the Equal Representation Toolkit** to understand where internal practice is failing and facilitate more diverse representation.
- **Commit to voluntary quotas at all elections:** enshrine this in party constitution, election byelaws or equivalent so progress cannot backslide.
- **Adopt policy positions which support the interest and welfare of women councillors** - i.e., access to statutory parental leave, fairer salary.

Councils and Councillors

- Councillors: **Use What Women Want resource** when making decisions.
- Councils: **Adopt COSLA voluntary guidance on parental leave.**
- Councils: **Take action on working practices with gendered impact** (e.g., hours of business).
- **Tackle toxic culture:** develop clear and responsive pathways for complaints, better workplace HR-style support, and take action on abuse, bullying and harassment in all forms.
- **Ensure the continuation of COSLA's Barriers to Elected Office Special Interest Group.**

Government and Parliament

- Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee: **Continue to explore barriers to participation in local democracy** through evidence sessions and consultations with those involved, particularly councillors who are not re-standing.
- Scottish Government: **Continue Candidate Diversity Survey at all elections,** and explore ways to creatively maximise response rate.
- **Increase councillor remuneration.**
- **Guarantee access to parental leave for councillors and improve overall terms and conditions of the role.**

News Media Editors and Journalists

- **Introduce greater diversity of voices writing about local issues** and politics in general.
- **Create practical opportunities for more women to enter political journalism.**
- **Platform critical discussion about women's continued exclusion** from politics.
- **Approach and quote more women councillors** and candidates in stories about local issues.

- **Write about the influence of local politics on people's daily lives**, not solely (a) at election time and (b) as a proxy for national power struggles between party leaders.
- **Reflect on the real-life impacts of editorial choices** on the lives of marginalised communities.

If we truly wish to see substantive progress between now and the 2027 Local Authority Elections, all those with power must commit to action. Across the key sectors, leaders must begin to deliver the changes needed over the next five years to secure more women in decision-making positions in Scotland.

System change requires us **all** to take action. The 2027 election will be the test of our efforts across these different spheres of power. With your support, we are **#MakingItHappenFor2027**. Let the work begin.

Let's not waste another five years before taking the action that we know is needed now - come the next local elections in 2027, we must not still be asking, "where are the women?"

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 works 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.