



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

The Scottish Parliament

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Understanding barriers to participation in local politics

The Committee is undertaking work on the lack of diversity in Scotland's councillors and barriers deterring people from participating in local politics. As you will be aware, we held an evidence session on this issue at the end of 2021 where, amongst others, we heard from representatives of political parties. We then agreed to postpone our work on this topic until after the 2022 local government elections had taken place and since then, have taken evidence from relevant stakeholders on 1 November 2022, with a particular focus on increasing participation of women in local politics.

We then took evidence from Scottish Government officials on the results of their Candidate Diversity Survey on 6 December 2022. The meeting papers and official reports of both sessions can be accessed via the link below.

[Meetings | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

Some of the issues discussed fell within the remit of the Scottish Government and councils themselves, for example, perhaps the most frequently raised barriers related to councillor remuneration and long working hours. You may be aware that the Scottish Government recently reconvened the [Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee](#) (SLARC) which is expected to report its recommendations on councillor remuneration by the end of August. We await SLARC's recommendations with interest, but in the meantime have agreed to write to political parties in Scotland inviting them to respond to the questions below, which raise

issues which we believe fall within your auspice. We would be grateful of a response by 31 March 2023.

Data gathering and statistics

We heard in evidence in November 2021¹ from the Improvement Service that “the five largest parties in Scotland have signed up to Inclusion Scotland’s access to politics charter, which includes a commitment to voluntarily publish such information (on the equality characteristics of candidates for elections), including for local government elections. As far as we are aware, none has published information yet, and Scottish Government colleagues do not yet know whether any or all of the parties will meet the commitment.” **Can you please confirm whether your party has published this information, and if not, whether it intends to do so?**

Quotas

Witnesses also called for parties to introduce quotas with, for example, Engender stating – “We therefore encourage political parties to enshrine voluntary quotas or to adopt mechanisms in their election by-laws for the way in which they select candidates. We want the parties to codify that approach in their operating documents and to hold themselves to account for the number of women candidates and the diversity in the candidates that they put forward for election.” **Can you please confirm whether your party has taken the actions described above and if not, whether it intends to do so?**

Selection Process/Campaigning

We heard concerns that the selection process can be a barrier to more diverse candidates with witnesses suggesting that parties don’t always provide transparent information about their selection mechanisms, with things often being done “behind closed doors” and at times, being dependent on knowing “the right people.” Witnesses suggested that more could be done in terms of ensuring gender balance on party committees which can serve as a “pipeline” to becoming a candidate. Elect Her acknowledged that “different parties are trying different mechanisms” but considered that “none of them has got it right.”

We also heard from Women 50:50 that whilst there may be political will, we still see “a scramble for numbers to show diversity among candidates a matter of months before an election takes place, rather than the long-term investment in development and working with communities that politics should be focused on.”

Funding to assist campaigning was also highlighted as a potential barrier, particularly in respect of childcare costs – Elect Her stated that “There is occasionally support from political parties, but the feedback that we received is that it is not always enough. Additional costs for women with childcare also came through in the feedback. When a political party gives specific funding to support someone’s campaign, the additional cost for childcare is not always taken into consideration.”

Witnesses also advocated targeted support for women councillors – particularly those from diverse backgrounds and facing multiple discrimination – focusing on multiple-term retention. Parties were also encouraged to adopt policy positions which

¹ [Official Report \(parliament.scot\)](https://www.parliament.scot/Official-Report)

support the interests and welfare of women councillors, for example, access to statutory parental leave and recognition of caring responsibilities which disproportionately impacts on women.

The Committee is also interested in the potential impact of the single transferable vote in wards where a particular party has multiple candidates and whether this could be advantageous to certain candidates. Legislation requires candidates to be arranged alphabetically on the ballot paper by order of surname and the Committee would welcome any views on whether any changes to the legislation could help promote greater diversity among successful candidates.

We would welcome your reflections on the comments set out above and a summary of actions your party is taking to address the issues raised.

Councillor Retention/Support Networks

We are aware that most parties have support networks for certain underrepresented groups, including women, LGBT people, people with disabilities and BAME people. However, research has highlighted that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are also underrepresented. **Can you please provide details of the support networks that currently exist within your party and whether there are any plans to expand on them?**

We are also aware that councillors are in an almost unique position in that they are not employees of the party itself. Witnesses suggested that “Parties have a duty of care to their members, which, again, varies hugely from party to party and in different localities - Technically, they are not employees of their party, but there is a duty of care—or there should be—to support them as in any workplace.” **Can you please provide an overview of actions your party has taken to support its councillors and other actions taken in respect of the “duty of care”?**

Culture and Toxicity

We are aware that the long-standing issue of political culture and at times, the toxicity of debate, both within councils themselves but also across wider society - something that is particularly evident in online discourse, can act as a major barrier to diverse representation. We recognise that parties have taken action against particularly egregious levels of abusive behaviour, but we also heard from Engender that “some women told us that the party-political culture is unappealing to large swathes of women who would make excellent candidates and councillors” and that “there are practical things that political parties and councils can do around codes of conduct, training and awareness raising. They can demonstrate inclusive leadership on those issues and ensure that there is a zero-tolerance approach.” Parties have been encouraged to take actions to support a positive culture of respect and understanding, including—

- Peer support
- Mentoring
- show empathy and openness
- encourage positive role models

Can you please provide a summary of actions your party has taken to address unacceptable behaviour, either online or in person, and any future steps you intend to take? We would also welcome information on actions taken to encourage a more positive culture, centred around respect and understanding.

Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit and other

Organisations from across the equality sector have produced the [equal representation in politics toolkit](#) which is intended to enable political parties “to assess and enhance their current practice around accessibility, diversity and inclusivity. It includes a self-assessment tool, in-depth guidance, tailored action plans and the opportunity for users to access further bespoke support.” We heard in evidence that “Parties have been very enthusiastic about using the toolkit...We encourage them to adopt it and to formally require—through whatever party mechanisms— their members, local branches and so on to use it.” **Can you please confirm whether your party has used this toolkit and whether its use is formally required?**

Finally, I am conscious that we wrote to parties in 2021 in relation to this topic and that some of you may have previously provided responses to some of these questions. The same questions are being sent to all of the major parties with councillors in Scotland we would very much welcome responses to each question to allow the Committee to assess the situation for the vast majority of current councillors in Scotland.

We would also welcome any other comments or feedback that you think might assist our consideration of this important topic.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Ariane Burgess,
Convener,
Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee