

# Does Local Government Work for Women?

**Interim Report of the Local Government  
Commission - Executive summary**

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## ABOUT US

**The Fawcett Society** is the UK's leading campaign for equality between women and men. We trace our roots back to 1866, when Millicent Fawcett began her lifetime's work leading the peaceful campaign for women's votes. Today we remain the most authoritative, independent advocate for women's rights in the UK.

**LGiU** is a local government think tank and membership organisation. Our mission is simple: to strengthen local democracy, putting citizens in control of their own lives, communities and local services. We work with around 230 local councils and public services providers, along with a wider network of public, private and civil society organisations.

Our work encompasses a wide range of activities including: a regular policy briefing service; the annual Councillor Achievement Awards; providing the Secretariat for the Local Government APPG; learning and development seminars; a broad programme of policy events; peer challenge; research and consultancy.

The **Centre for Women & Democracy** works to increase women's access to political office and political power at all levels, and, in particular to change the ways in which the gateways to public office are controlled by political parties, the law and electoral systems. Together with partners we inform, engage and campaign to promote our aims, to celebrate women's achievements, and to amplify women's voices. We also produce a variety of publications including reports on elections, and, most recently, a collection of women's political quotations.

We are grateful to the **Barrow Cadbury Trust** for funding the Commission. The Barrow Cadbury Trust is an independent charitable foundation committed to bringing about socially just change.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to **Jemima Olchawski**, Head of Policy & Insight, Fawcett Society, for her work in steering the commission from the outset.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Only a third of councillors in England are women. Our analysis reveals that this figure has scarcely changed over the last two decades. Even fewer women progress to lead their councils. Councils do not reflect the diversity of our society, and disabled and ethnic minority women experience multiple discrimination.

New survey data reveals that within this male-dominated environment, sexism is worryingly commonplace in the council chamber and local parties. Women councillors experience barriers due to unpaid caring responsibilities and a lack of flexibility in how councils do business much more than their male counterparts. They are more excluded from informal networks, and are less confident that their voices will be heard.

Women councillors are no less ambitious to progress than men – but they feel pigeonholed on the basis of their gender, and held back by the way councils operate.

The evidence reveals an outdated culture which is holding local government back. It is ripe for change.

## Why Local Government?

Local government has a powerful impact on all our lives. Councils spend £94bn of taxpayers' money each year, almost a quarter of public spending; they employ over 1.5 million people, 78% of whom are women.\* The services they provide determine the support we receive from our first years to our dying days; and women are more dependent on those services.

But despite this, women remain underrepresented in all levels of local decision making. With budgets being cut dramatically, councils gaining new powers and the creation of new combined authorities and directly-elected metro mayors, it is vital that women are represented around the decision making table.

With so much real power over women's lives at stake, the Fawcett Society and the LGiU, funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust, have partnered to ask: does local government work for women? We have established a year-long Commission of experts which has tasked itself to gather evidence on female representation across local government in England and Wales, identify the barriers women face and where real power lies in our town halls, and make recommendations on how to advance women's leadership in local government and encourage more women to stand and participate.

Throughout the Commission we have asked not just where are the women on our councils, but are they in positions of power and do these women represent their communities? For example, how well are Black, Asian and minority ethnic women (BAME), disabled, LGBTQ, younger or older women and women with caring responsibilities represented? What different and specific barriers do these groups of women face and what can we do to improve their representation?

## Methodology

This interim report outlines key findings from data analysis of women's representation in councils across England and Wales, carried out by the Centre for Women and Democracy. It also presents the findings of an LGiU survey of 2,304 councillors, carried out between December 2016 and January 2017. A full report with the insight from our consultation and recommendations from the Commission will be published later this year.

\* Local Government Association, <http://local.gov.uk/research-statistical-alert>, citing Office for National Statistics, Quarterly Public Sector Employee Survey, Q3 2016

## Sexism in local councils

38%

of women councillors have experienced sexist comments within their party

33%

have experienced sexist comments from other councillors

10%

have experienced sexual harassment from councillors



## Representation in local councils

28%



33%

1997

Since 1997 women's representation on councils has almost flat-lined

2016

18%



29%

while it has increased by half in Parliament

## What barriers do councillors face?

28% of women

18% of men



say childcare is an issue

47% of women

26% of men



have clashes with other caring commitments

## What age are women worst represented on councils?

Age 18-34



Women were most underrepresented in this age group – there are **3.5 times as many men as women**

Age 65-74



35% of councillors are in this age group – there are **2 men for every woman**

## Incumbency benefits men

Of those who have been in office for 20 years or more, there are **three men** for every **one woman**



## Progression in local councils

43%

of women councillors say they are held back by assumptions about their gender.



Though men and women are equally likely to want to progress to a more senior role, only **17% of council leaders are women**

## KEY FINDINGS – Data on Women’s Representation in Local Government

### Women are underrepresented in local government, and progress has stalled

- ▶ 33 percent of elected local councillors in England are women, an increase of just five percentage points since 1997.
- ▶ The percentage of women Members of Parliament has risen by more than 10 percentage points, from 18 to 29 percent, over the same period.
- ▶ Wales has only 26 percent women councillors, and has seen an increase of only 4 percentage points over the last 12 years.

### There are significant differences by party

- ▶ 42 percent of Labour Party councillors elected in 2016 were women, up from 33 percent in 2008, suggesting that their adoption of quotas and targeting women candidates in winnable seats is beginning to see dividends.
- ▶ Over the same period the Conservatives have seen relative stagnation, going from 28 percent to 30 percent, and they continue to have the lowest representation overall.
- ▶ The Liberal Democrats’ share of councillors elected who are women is in reverse, having fallen from 37 to 33 percent.

### Women’s representation varies by type of local authority and by region

- ▶ Women form only 27 percent of county councillors
- ▶ 32 percent of shire district councillors and 32 percent of unitary councillors are women
- ▶ But women form 39 percent of metropolitan borough and 37 percent of London borough councillors.
- ▶ Women are most likely to be elected to their local council in the north east and least likely in the south east.

### Incumbency is a key issue

- ▶ 80% of councillors elected in any one year are incumbents. That leaves little room for change.
- ▶ Men were 1.6 times more likely to be long-term incumbent in the 2016 elections than women were.
- ▶ Of those who are in office for 20 years or more there are three men for every one woman

### There are still few women leaders

- ▶ There are just 56 women council leaders in England – 17 percent of the total and just a three percentage point increase over the last ten years.
- ▶ There are only two women council leaders in Wales out of a total of 22 councils.
- ▶ Neither the Conservative Party nor the Labour Party has ever achieved a position in which 20 percent of their leaders are women.
- ▶ Elected mayors fare little better. Since 2002 just 5 elected mayors have been women, with four women currently in office out of the 16 elected mayors across the country.

## KEY FINDINGS – Survey of Councillors

### Diversity is an issue

#### Age

Our councillors (men and women) remain disproportionately aged over 55 and ethnically white. There are gender disparities between men and women councillors within age groups.

- ▶ 35% of councillors are aged between 65 and 74. Men outnumber women 2:1 in this age group. This accounts for the majority of the difference in overall gender representation.
- ▶ Women were most underrepresented in the 18- 34s, where there were 3.5 times as many men as women.

#### Disability

19 percent of female councillors said they have a disability or long-term health condition, as did 22 percent of male respondents. Disabled women councillors told us that they experience a double disadvantage, being much more likely to experience discrimination for reasons other than their gender compared to disabled men.

#### Ethnicity

Black, Asian, and minority ethnic women remain hugely underrepresented in local government.

- ▶ Only 5.5 percent of women councillors responding to our survey identified as BAME, slightly better than the 3.8 percent of men but vastly below the 14 percent of the England and Wales population which identifies as BAME.
- ▶ 50 percent of BAME women councillors say they have experienced discrimination beyond gender compared to 41 percent of BAME men, although sample sizes were low.

### Women and men take different routes in but for similar reasons

- ▶ Women were more likely than men to become councillors following involvement in a community organisation, religious institution or charity.
- ▶ Fewer came up through parish councils than men.
- ▶ They are more likely to say they stood to improve the gender balance

But women and men are equally as likely to say their reasons for standing were:

- ▶ because someone asked them to, or
- ▶ because they were inspired by someone.

### Women councillors are just as ambitious as men

Women aren't overall less likely to want to stand again, and are equally as likely to want to progress to senior roles as male councillors (at 45 percent compared with 47 percent).

### And they have more influence than they expected

Two fifths of women say they have more influence than they expected before they became a councillor. But they differ with their male colleagues as to whether their council takes enough consideration of the impact their decisions have on women, with 19 percent compared with 10 percent of men thinking their council does not take enough consideration.

## Sexism in local government is commonplace

A worrying proportion of the women councillors responding to our survey faced sexist comments at each stage of the process of becoming elected, and this is not a problem confined to a particular party – it cuts across political divides.

- ▶ 38 percent of women councillors overall experience sexist comments when engaging with their local parties.
- ▶ A third experience sexist comments in the council chamber.
- ▶ One in ten women councillors have experienced sexual harassment when interacting with their party
- ▶ The same proportion reported sexual harassment from other councillors. This was worse for women aged 35-44 – one fifth reported sexual harassment from their fellow councillors, although this represents a small sample size.
- ▶ When standing as a councillor, there was also a gender difference between councillors identifying ‘fear of violence’ (13 percent of women; 8 percent of men), or ‘harassment or abuse from the electorate’ (46 percent of women; 35 percent of men) as barriers.

The sexism that women councillors experienced when coming into a male-dominated environment impacts on how they speak up for their residents.

- ▶ 41 percent of women experience sexist assumptions on the basis of their gender when interacting with their parties.
- ▶ Women councillors are more likely to report that their contributions are ignored or not valued with 63 percent saying they experienced this, compared with 52 percent of men.
- ▶ 44 percent of women say they felt a lack of confidence in making their voice heard.

It also impacts on women’s ability to progress. Asked why there are few female council leaders:

- ▶ 42 percent of women in our sample felt that women councillors were pigeonholed into particular roles, 39 percent felt that council culture holds them back from showing their talents, and 29 percent felt that sexism from other councillors plays a significant part.

## Women councillors are more likely to experience structural barriers

- ▶ Within their role as a councillor 28 percent of women report childcare as a barrier, compared with 18 percent of men.
- ▶ 47 percent of women report clashes with other caring commitments, almost double the proportion of men. Significantly, 32 percent of women aged 35-44 say that childcare was ‘often’ a problem (compared with 14 percent of men in that age group), while ‘clashes with other caring commitments’ is a bigger issue for women aged 45+.
- ▶ A ‘lack of maternity/paternity provisions or support’ is a barrier for women aged 18 to 44, a third of whom (compared with 16 percent of men in the age group) say it holds them back in fulfilling their role as a councillor.
- ▶ For women on county councils one of the biggest challenges is travel – the distances to meetings are an issue for almost half of them
- ▶ Both women and men experience challenges from balancing their paid work with their council commitments (14 percent of women and 16 percent of men say this is ‘often’ a problem) and insufficient councillor allowances (29 percent of women; 23 percent of men)

Almost half of women (47 percent) say a lack of access to informal networks is a barrier to them as councillors, compared with 36 percent of men. This suggests there may be some truth in the claim that real power in town halls is often held outside official meetings in ‘old boys’ networks’, and this impacts particularly on women.

## Conclusions & Next Steps

### **Women's representation in local government as councillors and as council leaders has stalled.**

Our evidence suggests that incumbency plays a part in the slow pace of change, and party decisions around positive action, such as quotas, have an impact on getting women in.

**Diversity is an issue.** Younger women, BAME women and disabled women are woefully underrepresented. Our research has shown that these women face multiple barriers to holding elected office.

**In some council chambers, sexist attitudes towards women are commonplace.** Female councillors are more likely to experience sexist comments and behaviour, and to have their contributions ignored in meetings. Outdated gendered assumptions hold women back from participating and progressing. Women are more likely to have unpaid caring responsibilities than men, which means that the lack of flexibility in how councils do business creates additional barriers.

**Women are just as ambitious as men.** Our research finds that women are as likely to stand for a second term as their male counterparts, and their motivations for standing in the first place are much the same as men's. Once there, women councillors continue to feel they have influence and are equally as ambitious to rise to the top.

**Getting more women to stand and be selected for local government is key.** Community and voluntary organisations are important pools of prospective female talent. That many women stand simply because they were asked is also an important reminder for political parties of how simple it can be to get more women into local government. But political parties should also note the barriers that women face in attending meetings or keeping up with the demands of local campaigning and be mindful of these when it comes to engaging more women.

**An outdated culture is holding local government back.** Local government's role is changing fast in response to budget cuts, devolution, and localism; yet the culture of local government in many of our council chambers is simply decades behind. By shining a light on local government with the work of this Commission we are revealing institutions ripe for change. The good news is we are also finding many women and men across local government who are ready to make that change happen.

### **Next steps – remaining evidence**

In our final report we will incorporate oral evidence from commission meetings including the experiences of senior council officers alongside councillors. We will look at the number and roles of women at the top of local government in cabinet positions, and will include interviews with women council leaders, and those women who would be councillors but who have not so far decided to stand. Finally, we will publish the findings of our freedom of information request to local authorities, identifying which have maternity, paternity and parental leave policies in place for councillors. We'll also include an analysis of our wider consultation and will take another look at where the women are in devolution.

### **Next steps – emerging recommendations**

The data explored in this report shows the challenges we need to overcome to get more women onto councils, to enable them to stay and thrive, and to empower them to progress into leadership. Emerging themes that the recommendations in our final report will address include:



**Shifting the dial on representation:** We will look at what structural changes, including at the level of party selection procedures and local election rules, are necessary to get more women elected as councillors. We want to encourage more women to come forward for selection as candidates, and will ask what more the parties, councils, local government organisations, and the government can do to bring women in.

**Improving diversity:** The women that are elected to councils are not representative of the wider population. We will look at what specific changes could support women with different intersectional identities to stand and progress.

**Removing structural barriers to progress:** We will look at the practical changes councils and the government need to make to how council chambers are run, from supporting caring responsibilities through better childcare, elder care, and maternity and parental leave, to enabling flexibility across the board, in order to make being a councillor and progressing to leadership roles work for women.

**Challenging sexism:** There is a harmful culture in some parts of local government politics which needs to be addressed. We will explore how this manifests itself so that we can raise awareness of it, and draw on evidence and ideas about how it can be confronted by women in local government and their allies.

**Helping her – networks, mentoring, building confidence:** Whilst we do not accept that we need to ‘fix the women’, we do recognise that there are informal networks in place for men from which women are excluded. Councillors themselves tell us that they feel mentoring, confidence-boosting measures and women’s networks would be helpful. We will look carefully at what might be most effective in this area.

# COMMISSIONERS

We are grateful to our Women in Local Government commissioners for their continuing input and insight with this work:

**Cllr Gillian Keegan**, Chichester District Council, Co-Chair of the Commission

**Rt. Hon. Dame Margaret Hodge MP**, Co-Chair of the Commission

**Baroness Meral Hussein-Ece**, Liberal Democrats

**Baroness Anita Gale**, Labour Party

**Cllr Angela Mason**, London Borough of Camden

**Binita Mehta-Parmar**, former Councillor and Leader of the Conservative Group, Watford Borough Council

**Heather Wakefield**, Unison

**Nan Sloane**, Centre for Women and Democracy

**Pam Cole**, Women's Budget Group

**Cllr Rita Patel**, Operation Black Vote

**Sarah Pickup**, Local Government Association

**Dr Shaminder Takhar**, London South Bank University

**Halla Gunnarsdóttir**, Women's Equality Party

**Deborah Cadman**, Chief Executive of Suffolk County Council

**Anne Baldwin**, Women's Local Government Society

**Simon Woolley**, Operation Black Vote

**Chris Naylor**, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

**Cllr Judith Blake**, Leader of Leeds City Council

**Cllr Marie Pye**, London Borough of Waltham Forest



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