

## Gender representation on local councils

More than a hundred years on from when some women received the vote for the first time, women remain under-represented amongst local councillors. This means that women remain under-represented when crucial decisions are made about their daily life from social care and provision of local facilities to provision of local transport and refuge collection. It also means that many talented women are excluded from a career pipeline which often leads to higher positions in national politics.

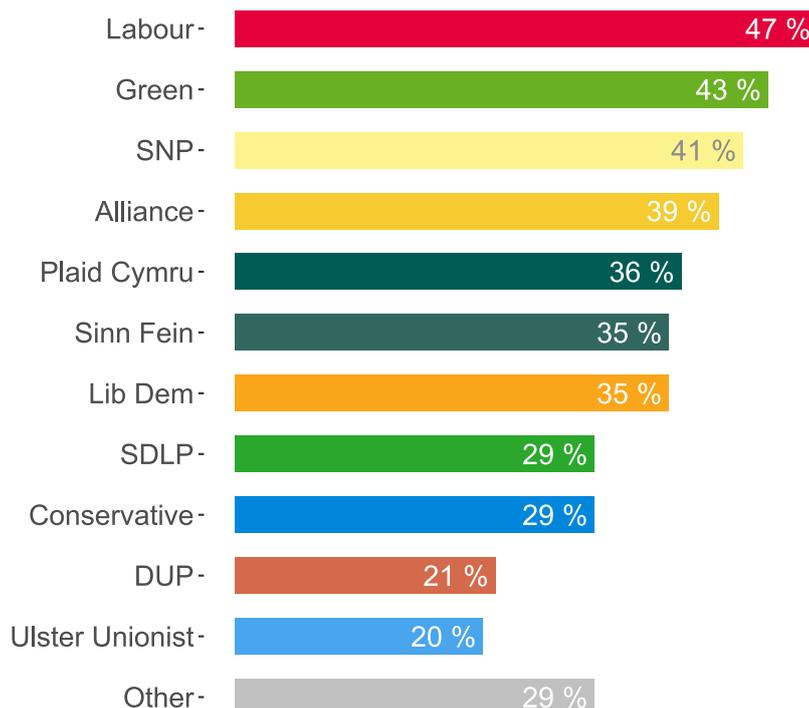
**Neither the Government nor political parties monitor the gender balance (or other diversity characteristics) of local authority councillors.** In the absence of official data, The Fawcett Society carries out regular monitoring to show political parties that action on women's representation is needed.

A snapshot taken in summer 2022 shows that just **36%** of the 19,212 elected councillors across the home nations were women. This is close to identical to female representation in the House of Commons (35%).

The increase in women's participation is proceeding at a snail's pace. The proportion of women in councils in 2022 – 36% – was only 2 percentage points higher than in a snapshot taken in 2018, 100 years after some women first won the right to vote.

**Whilst no party has parity of representation between women and men,** there is considerable variation in women's representation between the parties. Figure 1 shows that the highest proportion of women is found in the Labour, Green, and Scottish National Parties, whilst the lowest proportion of women is found in the Conservative Party, the SDLP, DUP, and Ulster Unionist Parties.

**Figure 1. % Women councillors by political party, August 2022.**



**Change since 2018.** The Labour party has seen a small increase in the proportion of women councillors since 2018, from 45% to 47%, as did the Green Party – from 40% to 43%. However, the Liberal Democrats saw a slight fall from 36% to 35%, and the Conservatives saw the same proportion of women councillors as it did in 2018, at 29%.

**How does this compare with the House of Commons?** Again, this gender breakdown by party broadly reflects representation in the House of Commons for the parties which hold seats. The highest proportion of women MPs is seen in the Labour party (52% MPs and 47% councillors) – who have employed a policy of all women MP shortlists since 1997 - followed by the Liberal Democrats (69% MPs and 35% councillors), and the SNP (36% MPs and 41% councillors). Lower proportions of women are found in the Conservative party (24% MPs and 29% councillors) and the DUP (12.5% MPs and 21% councillors).<sup>1, 2</sup>

Over **95%** of councils are male dominated. Our figures suggest that only 18 of the 382 councils have achieved at least parity of gender representation.

**Previous research by Fawcett has indicated that sexism is commonplace in councils**, and women are more likely than men to experience and to fear harassment.<sup>3</sup> What's more, most local councils do not support those with caring responsibilities to take on the role –just a quarter of councils offer formal parental leave policies.<sup>3</sup>

By council, the highest proportion of women was found in Haringey with 65% women councillors, followed by Rossendale with 61% women councillors, then Brighton and Hove, Lewisham, and Southwark, each with 56% women. At the other end of the spectrum, 40 of the councils are made up of less than a quarter women councillors. The lowest representation of women was found in Perth and Kinross, Pendle, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and West Berkshire, where women represent 15% or less of the council.

At a regional level, councils across London and the North East see the highest proportion of women, whilst Northern Ireland saw the lowest proportion of women councillors overall.

**Figure 2. % Women councillors by region, August 2022.**



<sup>1</sup> UK Parliament. Women in Parliament Today. Accessed March 2023. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/parliament-and-women/women-in-parliament-today/>

<sup>2</sup> Fawcett. A House For Everyone. 2023. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=0ebb1e86-c3f9-4e41-8bc5-740cee1181cc>

<sup>3</sup> Fawcett. New data shows we won't see gender equality in local councils until 2077. 2021. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/local-council-data-2021>

The Fawcett Society is calling for Government, political parties and Local Councils to act to increase women's representation on local councils. We are calling for:

### **The Government to**

- Enact Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, and expand it to cover local councils, which would require political parties to collect their own accurate diversity data to enable a better understanding of how women, ethnic minorities, disabled people and LGBTQIA+ people are represented. It should not be the responsibility of a charity to collect this data.
- Introduce a term limit for Councillors to tackle the problem that more men tend to remain councillors for longer, limiting the opportunities for women to stand. We recommend a limit of four terms, or sixteen years. This should be introduced with a lead-in time of two terms, or eight years, to give existing councillors time to achieve their aims.
- Ensure the Electoral Commission and local police are sufficiently resourced and equipped to enforce legal sanctions for intimidating candidates, campaigners, and representatives during election periods.
- Amend the Online Safety Bill to better address the disproportionate levels of online abuse experienced by women, especially those from Black and minoritized backgrounds.
- The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government should introduce a statutory England-wide, comprehensive parental leave policy for councillors. This should be in line with leave available to employees.
- Reinstate a formalised funding scheme for disabled candidates in England, working with disabled women involved in politics to improve its processes.

### **Local authorities to**

- In the absence of a national scheme, implement parental leave policies, to make being a councillor more accessible to those with caring responsibilities.
- Ensure that caring and dependency allowances reflect the real cost of childcare and are accounted for separately from 'main' members' allowance.
- Pilot alternative ways of working including online and hybrid engagement mechanisms to enable councillors with caring responsibilities to carry out their duties more effectively.
- Adopt codes of conduct, based on the model developed by the LGA in 2020.<sup>4</sup>

### **Parties to**

- Introduce quotas for increasing women's representation alongside representation of other protected characteristics. If this is not possible then parties must set out targets, alongside clear action plans to achieve them. This should include a review of candidate selection procedures to ensure there are no structural barriers hampering participation of under-represented groups.
- Review internal party sexual harassment and complaints policies to ensure they are transparent, quick, victim-focused and independent.

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<sup>4</sup> Local Government Association Model Councillor Code of Conduct. 2020. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-government-association-model-councillor-code-conduct-2020>

## Methodology

The data presented reflects councillor representation in August 2022 across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (including the City of London's elected common councillors). We merged [Open Council Data](#), open-access online data collected via web scraping council websites, with similarly web scraped data provided by Democracy Club, who employed an algorithm to identify gender from names and photos. Gender was manually checked from photos on councils' websites in cases where either the name algorithm could not suggest a gender or where the photo recognition and the name algorithm did not agree. In addition, 2% of the data was identified for random checking to make sure there were no systematic errors.

Whilst this analysis employed careful data cleaning and quality controls, without a statutory requirement for parties to collect their own gender data, local councillor statistics will never be completely accurate. Whilst a gender-guessing algorithm can provide an estimate of gender representation, we strongly recognise its limits – it is not able to count numbers of non-binary people or reflect individuals' identities with 100% accuracy. We are also unable to break down councillor representation by other characteristics, including ethnicity, age, or disability. This is why we are calling for the Government to enact Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010.