



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

All local authorities in
Scotland
By email only

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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30 June 2023

Dear Chief Executive,

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. 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, for example, perhaps the most frequently raised barriers related to councillor remuneration and long working hours. As you will know, the Scottish Government has reconvened the [Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee](#) (SLARC) which is expected to report its recommendations on councillor remuneration in the autumn. We await SLARC's recommendations with interest.

We also wrote to political parties asking what steps they were taking to help encourage greater diversity. The letter along with responses from the five parties represented in local government can be accessed via the link below—

[Understanding barriers to participation in local politics | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

The Committee expects to undertake further work on this topic once SLARC's recommendations have been published, but in the meantime, we have agreed to

write to all local authorities in Scotland inviting you to comment on some of the issues that have emerged in respect of support provided to councillors. Your responses will help inform our future work in this area.

Specifically, we would welcome confirmation of any actions your council has taken in respect of—

Support for councillors with childcare or other caring responsibilities: We are aware that councillors are not employees of the council or the party they represent (where appropriate) and as such, are not guaranteed access to statutory parental leave or paid leave for other caring responsibilities. We note that COSLA has developed voluntary guidance for councils but that its adoption is not compulsory, and provision is inconsistent. We would therefore welcome confirmation of whether your council has adopted COSLA's recommended approach along with any other relevant steps it has taken.

Members services and administrative support for councillors: We note that, similarly, councils are not required to provide administrative support to councillors and have heard that the level of support provided can vary dramatically. For example, the Scottish Conservatives suggested in correspondence to us that “the pressures placed on councillors vary significantly between local authorities and are often reflected in the varying support provided...including in members services and administrative staff support.” Similarly, the SNP noted in correspondence that “many councillors will be undertaking as many hours as MSPs do, but for the most part they do it with either very little, or no administrative support, unlike MSPs who have full-time offices to handle casework for them.” We would therefore welcome confirmation of the level of members services and administrative support that your council offers to its elected members.

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 the broader political landscape and wider society as a whole - something that is particularly evident in online discourse - can act as a major barrier to diverse representation. We recognise that councils have taken action against particularly egregious levels of abusive behaviour, but we also heard from Engender 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.” We would therefore welcome a summary of actions your council has taken to help mitigate the adverse impact of such behaviour on councillors.

Any other reflections or actions your council has taken to help support councillors from underrepresented demographic groups to fully undertake their roles and to encourage retention of such individuals.

We would be grateful of a response by 1 September 2023.

Yours sincerely,

Ariane Burgess
Convener, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee