

Response from Cllr Kelly Parry, SNP Local Government Convener

Thank you for the invitation to submit comments in regard to the ongoing work on this issue by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

I note your reference to the review of councillor remuneration that is currently underway. Clearly the issue of remuneration is one of the major barriers, although perhaps the wider issue is the pressure around the number of hours worked, and the lack of other funding or backup. While the legislative aspect of the work of parliamentarians means that there isn't a like-for-like comparison to be made, it's not simply the salary differential that applies. 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. On the salary side, we await the outcome of the SLARC review, but it is notable that if you treated the current £20,099 salary as a full-time job of 37.5 hours per week, then we are paying councillors only a few pence above the Real Living Wage.

I appreciate that, in different council areas, and dependent on ward size, then the work required can vary. Equally, at an individual level we can 'draw the line' to a degree on quite how much can be achieved in any given week. That of course can be regulated by those of us who have other employment commitments too, and simply don't have any more time to give. But at present, there is no required time commitment. There is no time and motion study of the role. Someone could be getting paid the same basic salary regardless of whether they put in 70 minutes or 70 hours in a week. So perhaps, rather than simply focussing on salary, SLARC should be giving thought to what commitment we are asking of our elected members, and – as a start point - requiring councils to schedule meetings and committee work with that in mind.

Moving on to the questions posed by the Committee:

Data Gathering and Statistics

The SNP has, over a number of local government elections, monitored the gender balance of its candidates. That extends to application and selection stages as well. For the 2022 process, there was also agreement reached at local council campaign committee level to try to set a quota for selection of BAME and disabled candidates where potential candidates meeting those criteria were available in that area. The data was made public at the close of our selection process in 2022.

Quotas

While I would agree with the top-level commitment that Engender call for, there should also be a recognition of the law in this area. Council elections are not one election in Scotland – there are elections to 32 distinct bodies. As such, where a party already had gender balance in its group in the previous term, there's no legal basis for a 'corrective' measure to be taken in a selection process, because there's no correction required. While that may not often be the case, it's worth keeping in mind that, where parties may wish to go further – most especially on underrepresentation of ethnic minority or disabled candidates – the current legislation can restrict us.

Within that though, the SNP has sought to make progress. Where more than one candidate is being put up in any given ward, there would usually be a requirement for gender balance. Overall, we would ask our council campaign committees to strive towards a more balanced slate of candidates across the local authority area, although incumbency issues can often prevent that from being realised.

It is not simply about setting quotas though. Creating a culture where local committees strive to 'do better' on representation is the key. That is what encourages the work at earlier stages in terms of encouraging and developing candidates from underrepresented groups to make the journey towards standing for election, thereby ensuring that a diverse pool of individuals is available for selection, and therefore making those targets more achievable.

Selection Process/Campaigning

I would certainly agree with a number of the concerns that have been reported to the Committee. Regardless of what progress the SNP has made on gender balance in particular, there is still work to be done. In terms of our assessment and selection processes, we have strived to become as transparent and open as possible to remove potential barriers and unconscious bias from those selecting candidates. Contests are under a one-member-one-vote process which takes out the 'behind closed doors' element. Nominations in many council areas in 2022 adopted a 'self-nomination' approach, where anyone who had been approved as a suitable potential candidate could put themselves into a selection contest for the ward they were interested in without having to get support from a local branch in the first instance.

As has been said, processes need to start well in advance of elections, in terms of identifying potential candidates who are already active in their communities. That said, the barriers that we are discussing play a major part in that. Getting a commitment that someone will make themselves available for candidacy three or four years down the line is not easy, most simply because circumstances can change. But it should be borne in mind that other criteria apply when seeking to stand for a political party, and again that means someone having an active involvement – and membership – over that period of time if they are identified at an early stage and then developed through to the point of candidacy.

It would also be unfair to put too much emphasis on the part that political parties have to play in the welfare of councillors. In the same way that MSPs are not seen as employees of the parties, and receive support across the board from the parliamentary authorities, there is most certainly a role to be played by individual councils in how they support those who are acting for the benefit of local taxpayers. At the moment, that can be a postcode lottery for councillors. That applies most especially when it comes to multiple-term retention. Regardless of support and encouragement from their party, if councillors – and women in particular – are getting little or no assistance from the council that they represent, then it is inevitable that some will feel that there is no incentive to continue.

On the issue of Single Transferable Vote and the ballot paper, the SNP has long been of the view that a different approach is required, even if that is limited to 'reverse' ballot papers.

Alphabetical bias is well recognised, and while that might not disproportionately impact because of gender or other diversity issues, addressing the issue is long overdue.

Councillor Retention/Support Networks

The SNP has a number of bodies for underrepresented groups, including disabled members, those from BAME backgrounds, and LGBTQI+. Our approach in recent years has been to mainstream the gender-balance approach as far as possible. These support networks exist, and are represented at national level, as well as having national office bearers for women, equalities, disability and BAME issues. Naturally, those groups are keen to highlight the electoral success of their own members, and support them in their efforts, in order to encourage others to follow in their footsteps, and so there is an incentive in providing such support.

For those already in elected positions, because we are in the fortunate position where in all but one council area we have at least several SNP councillors in each group, there is a degree to which peer support is the biggest factor in helping councillors regardless of their background. In addition, local branches are there to help support the great work that our councillors do, and again they will usually want to do whatever they can to make sure that any problems faced by councillors can be overcome.

On top of that, our Association of Nationalist Councillors works as a body within the SNP to highlight the issues that councillors face, whether that be as a result of existing legislation, or because of individual council approaches, or in some cases because of the SNP's own structures. In the latter case, the ANC will seek to take forward solutions to those issues on behalf of individuals, or more widely for all SNP councillors.

With regards to duty of care, I addressed this in part earlier. There is certainly work for parties to do, but it should be remembered that there are many Independent or otherwise non-aligned councillors out there, so in the absence of party support, where would that duty of care come from? If there's an acceptance – and there ought to be – that duty of care in the workplace is required, then councils do have to take responsibility on that front. After all, the workplace is not within a political party – it is within a council. And so the culture that exists, and the challenges that councillors face, arise within the environment that is shared by the rest of the council workforce, or from voters.

Where parties can help, they should. In that sense, advice and support to our councillors can come from myself as the elected Local Government Convener, from party staff, and from elsewhere in the SNP council group.

Culture and Toxicity

We'd be keen to take a cross party approach into tackling the toxic nature of politics for women. We need to seriously consider the effect on women, from mental health and wellbeing perspectives as well as putting women off continuing or considering politics as a career. It's clear to us that this toxic culture affects women to a much greater degree than men. Whilst we support the work being done by the third sector around this – a much wider view needs to be taken, including social media platforms to take real action on this.

Within parties, it's undoubtedly true that not everyone will have a positive experience, and that can very much come down to individuals within a local party, either at office-bearer level, or at activist level. Further to that, the culture with a political grouping at council level makes a big difference to the experience that a councillor might have. Within the SNP we have, at national level, made clear that we have a culture based on inclusiveness and tolerance, and sought to get local leadership on promoting that culture through our elected members and others. That extends to the policing of negative behaviour by members, either online or in person, where those who cannot meet our standards are removed from the dynamic. Of course, whatever we can do within the party is a fraction of the wider problem, which as mentioned earlier requires input from councils too.

Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit

We very much welcomed the production of the toolkit. SNP staff have worked with Engender on the incorporation of this into our online training portal. This was flagged to all branches in the run up to candidate selection for 2022, and going forward anyone seeking to stand will be required to complete this part of the online training portal. There were also two training courses run in conjunction with Engender aimed at local office bearers, which were well received.

Cllr Kelly Parry
SNP Local Government Convener