

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

26th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6)

Tuesday 1 November 2022

Understanding Barriers to Participation in Local Politics

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide information to inform evidence taking as part of the Committee's work on understanding barriers to participation in local politics.
2. The Committee will take evidence from two separate panels of witnesses at this meeting as follows—

Panel One

- Jessie Duncan (Equal Representation Development Officer, Engender);
- Hannah Stevens (Director, Elect Her); and
- Talat Yaqoob (Consultant and Co-founder, Women 50:50)

Panel Two

- Councillor Shona Morrison (President, COSLA); and
- Alexis Camble (Policy and Participation Officer (Equalities) COSLA)

Background

3. The Committee previously took evidence on this topic in in November 2021 with a view to exploring the reasons for the continuing relative lack of diversity in Scotland's councillors when compared to the population as a whole. The official report of that meeting is available via the following link: [Meeting of the Parliament: LGHP/23/11/2021 | Scottish Parliament Website](#)
4. The Committee then agreed to postpone further work until after the local elections had taken place.

Panel One

5. Engender, Elect Her and Women 50:50 recently publish a suite of several reports including original research and resources considering a range of issues and themes relating to women's representation in local government. The reports can be accessed via the links in the table below—

Making It Happen For 2027: Resources	
<u>Making it Happen for 2027: Transforming local democracy for women</u>	A summary of the campaign and call to action, including recommendations on what can be done to achieve gender equal representation in local politics.
<u>What Women Want (from their Elected Representatives)</u>	A quick “how-to” guide helping local councillors ensure the needs and concerns of women are central to local decision making.
<u>Reading Into the News: A Review of Gender Representations of Politicians in the May 2022 Elections in Scottish News</u>	Original research critically examining women politicians’ representations in the May 2022 election news.
<u>Making Local Politics Work for Women: The Experiences of Women Local Councillors and Their Reasons for Not Seeking Re-election</u>	Report on retention rates of women councillors, including insights from interviews with women councillors who stepped down in 2022.
<u>Walking Away: Why Don’t Women Stay in Elected Office?</u>	Examination of key factors turning women off from local politics.

Panel Two

6. A recurring theme arising in evidence previously heard was that a key barrier to participation was councillor remuneration. In June 2021 COSLA issued a survey to councillors on remuneration as part of wider work to address barriers to elected office and to increase councillor diversity. 439 responses were received, which equates to 36% of all councillors.

7. A summary of the findings of that survey was published in January and can be accessed via a link in this [COSLA news release](#). COSLA has also provided a written submission for this session which is attached as an annexe.

8. The [Scottish Government wrote to the Committee](#) in early October announcing that it had decided to reconstitute the Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee (SLARC), which was previously stood down in 2013—

“SLARC was established under the provisions of the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 to advise Scottish Ministers on the payment by Local Authorities of remuneration (including pensions), allowances and the reimbursement of expenses incurred by local authority Councillors in accordance with criteria specified by Scottish Ministers as required. As SLARC is the body recognised to recommend any changes to remuneration, it would not be appropriate to deal with the matters SLARC is established in law to provide advice on without reconstituting the body.”

9. The Government published an advert for new SLARC members on 23 September and expects that it will be reconvened from the start of 2023. SLARC is expected to report its recommendations by 31 August 2023.

Future Work

10. The Scottish Government invited local election candidates to complete a diversity survey with a view to assessing any changes or emerging trends in relation to candidates with one or more protected characteristics. The results of this survey are expected to be published soon and the Committee previously agreed to receive a briefing on its findings from Scottish Government officials in early December.

Conclusion

11. The Committee is invited to consider the above information in its evidence sessions with both panels of witnesses.

**Committee Clerks,
October 2022**

ANNEXE

COSLA written evidence for Local Government, Housing & Planning Committee: Barriers to Elected Office (BEO)

Introduction

1. COSLA is pleased to present a written submission, in advance of oral evidence, to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee as part of the Committee's ongoing work on barriers to local elected office. This submission builds on the previous oral evidence given by COSLA to Committee in November 2021.
2. We note that the Committee is particularly interested to hear from COSLA about our work around financial barriers and councillor remuneration and this written submission will outline our work in this area and then consider other pertinent issues: councillor safety, diversity data and the needs of disabled councillors.

Background

3. Tackling barriers to elected office and increasing the diversity of elected members across Scotland is a long-standing a priority area of work for COSLA. During the 2017-22 Local Government term, this work was led by the previous COSLA President Cllr Alison Evison, with political oversight and direction provided by the cross-party Barriers to Elected Office Special Interest Group (BEO SIG). The BEO SIG met three times a year from early 2019 until its final meeting in March 2022.
4. Following the 2022 local elections, a new Presidential Team was elected by COSLA Convention, with Cllr Shona Morrison and Cllr Steven Heddle taking on the roles of President and Vice President respectively. As an organisation, COSLA remains committed to ensuring that elected members are truly representative of the communities they serve through the removal of barriers for underrepresented groups. A wider range of voices at the table will ensure that local decision-making truly reflects the needs of the community.
5. In recognition of the key role that the BEO SIG played in COSLA's work on barriers to elected office during the 2017-22 Local Government term, a proposal to reconvene a new SIG and develop a new Barriers to Elected Office action plan for 2022-27 will be formally presented to COSLA Leaders in November 2022 for approval.
6. We also welcome the external recognition of the BEO SIG's positive impact in the recommendations of the *Making it Happen for 2027* campaign from Engender, Elect Her and Women 50:50.

Councillor remuneration and financial barriers

7. The BEO SIG identified financial barriers as a priority work area for 2021-22 and a survey of councillors was undertaken by COSLA to gather evidence of councillor workload, average weekly hours, and the impact of financial barriers to elected office. The key findings from this survey were published in January 2022, which included:
 - Councillors work on average full-time equivalent hours on their councillor duties (38.6 hours/week), which results in an equivalent hourly rate lower than the Real Living Wage of £9.90 (as at Jan 22)
 - 43% of councillors reported working weekly hours in a paid second job, working on average 24.8 hours per week in this additional employment
 - Financial barriers were cited by several female councillors who stated that they were, or were considering, not standing for re-election in 2022
 - Councillors responding to the survey identified remuneration as a major barrier to diversity and highlighted the difficulties in balancing the workload of a councillor alongside a second paid job that is vital for financial wellbeing
8. Following the publication of our survey findings, COSLA met with the Minister for Social Security and Local Government to discuss options for a review of councillor remuneration to ensure that the rate of pay is truly reflective of the responsibilities of the modern councillor role.
9. A [joint COSLA-Scottish Government statement](#) was issued in February 2022 to announce an independent review of councillor remuneration. For this review, the Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee (SLARC) is being reconvened, with the selection process for a Convenor and Committee members currently underway, with COSLA's Director of Membership and Resources on the SLARC selection panel. The final SLARC report with recommendations for Ministers is due at the end of August 2023.

Councillor safety

10. The safety of councillors, both online and in person, remains an ongoing concern for many of our members, not least in the wake of attacks on elected members in Scotland and the tragic murder of Sir David Amess MP in October 2021. COSLA has developed a strong partnership approach to councillor safety with Police Scotland, with online briefings to elected members on personal safety delivered in October 2021 in response to Sir David's murder, which were very well-received by councillors.
11. Police Scotland delivered further safety briefings in August and September 2022 for newly elected and re-elected councillors. The sessions were

delivered online by the Counter Terrorism Team, with support from Local Area Commanders and other Divisional staff from across the country. They were well-attended by elected members from across the 32 local authorities, with very positive feedback received about the content of the sessions and supporting resources provided by Police Scotland.

12. This relationship with Police Scotland remains ongoing, with the option for further safety briefings to be delivered if our members raise particular concerns about their safety and security.

Diversity data

13. COSLA welcomed the work that was done by the Scottish Government Elections Team to create a candidate diversity survey in the lead up to the 2022 local elections, including the early engagement with COSLA and our BEO SIG to develop the survey questions. Whilst the survey response rate may not have been as high as hoped, the results of the survey, once they are published, will still make an important contribution to understanding the current picture of diversity across Scotland's councillors.
14. COSLA would like to see the candidate diversity survey carried out at every local election from now on, with the learning from the experience of this year's survey being built upon to increase the response rate. This should include work being undertaken at a much earlier stage to publicise the survey and raise awareness of the important role that data plays in tackling barriers to elected office for underrepresented groups.
15. There is a role for Scottish Government, Local Government, and political parties to play in making the 2027 survey a success. In considering the role of political parties, however, we must also be mindful of mechanisms to encourage greater diversity of candidates amongst people who are not party affiliated and would therefore stand as an independent candidate.

Disabled councillors

16. An area of concern that has been raised by COSLA members relates to inclusion and accessibility for disabled elected members. Whilst the Access to Elected Office funding plays a crucial role in supporting disabled candidates, the abrupt end to this source of financial support at the point of election means that disabled councillors are wholly reliant on the preparedness of their local authority to provide any necessary support or adjustments to ensure they can take part in council business immediately. Much of this work is, as we understand through conversations with council officers, falling to Member Services departments to pick up, who may not have the knowledge or experience to support a disabled member, compared to Human Resources colleagues for example.
17. Another area of concern expressed by COSLA members has been around the potential loss of advances in accessibility from remote working during

Covid-19 lockdowns. As local authorities move to a hybrid system of meetings and committees for elected members, this must be accompanied by an assessment of accessibility for all councillors to ensure that no member is inadvertently excluded.

18. There is certainly potential for the Scottish Parliament to share learning and expertise in supporting disabled members with local authorities and this is something that COSLA would encourage Committee members to consider.

Conclusion

19. COSLA welcomes the continued focus of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee on understanding barriers to local elected office and the importance of increasing councillor diversity. Following COSLA's oral evidence to Committee on 1st November 2022, we would be happy to provide further written or oral evidence to support the Committee's ongoing efforts in this area.