MIND THE (REPRESENTATION) GAP:

How London's councillors reflect the diversity of its population

Findings from the 2024 London Councillors Survey – August 2024

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MIGRANT DEMOCRACY PROJECT

LSE

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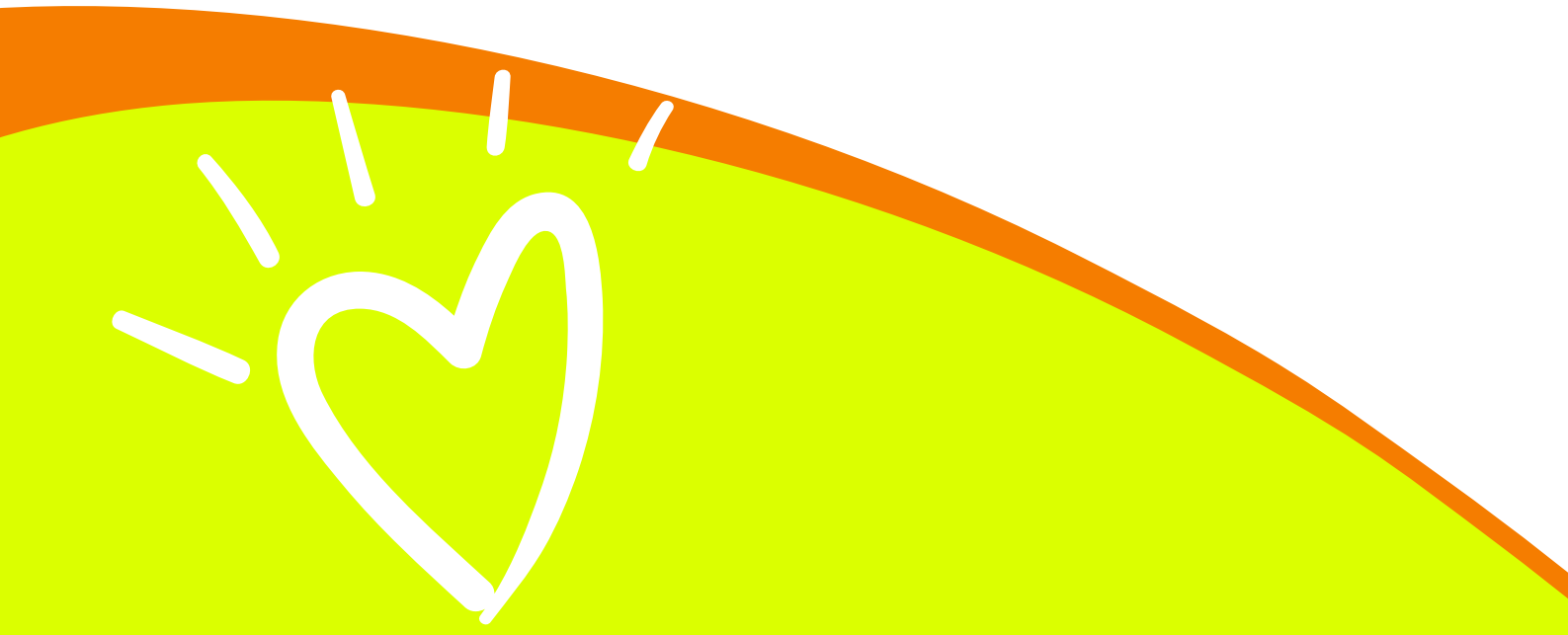

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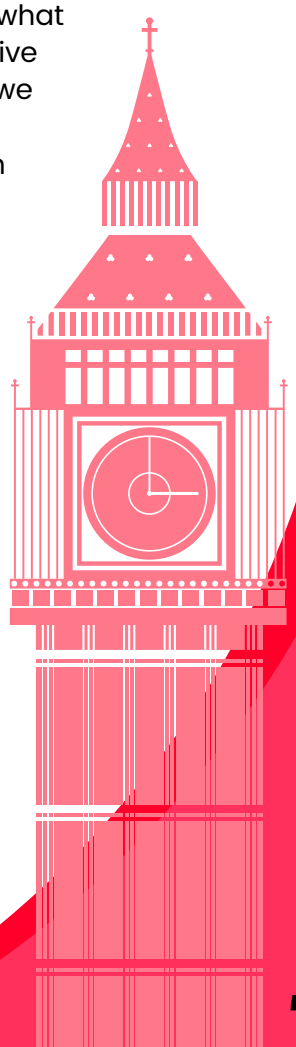
INTRODUCTION

According to the 2024 British Social Attitudes report, 58% of respondents say that they 'almost never trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner', a record high (National Centre for Social Research 2024). This mistrust has ties with failures in public policy delivery, as well as with the impression that politicians often do not descriptively or substantively represent the communities they are elected for (ibid; Holt-White 2024; Uberoi and Carthew 2023).

In this report, we focus on the latter: the issue of descriptive representation in local government, and more specifically, of local government representation in London. We aim thus to answer a pivotal question for local democracy: ***to what extent do elected councillors reflect the diversity of London's population?*** While this is a simple question, the astonishing response is that - up until the publication of this report and annexed dataset - we did not have a clear and comprehensive picture of the personal characteristics of elected local politicians in London. Our report, funded in part through the Civic Data Innovation Challenge, gives a first glimpse into the diversity and representativeness of elected representatives.

To answer our research question, we designed and carried out the first **'London Councillors Survey'**, the first fully-representative survey of elected local politicians in London.[1] The report is structured as follows: first, we explain what political representation is, the difference between substantive and descriptive representation, and why the latter matters. Second, we briefly explain how we collected the data and created survey weights. Third, we present the main findings of our London Councillors Survey and compare them to data from the 2021 Census for London's population. Fourth and final, we discuss the results before concluding with suggestions for future research.



(1) For a discussion of existing data on local councillors in London, see the discussion in the Pilot Report for this project: 'Does your local council represent the diversity of its population? A pilot diversity survey in the Borough of Camden', available at: https://www.migrantdemos.org.uk/resources-reports

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

In a democracy, everyone's voice is theoretically valued equally. Yet, despite the general assumption that political representation is one of the core requirements of a successful democratic system, it is often the case that many communities in societies across the globe do not feel represented by their elected politicians. But how does political representation manifest itself in practice in the United Kingdom? And why does it matter? As Hanna Pitkin argues, political representation is "the activity of making citizens' voices, opinions, and perspectives "present" in public policy making processes" (Pitkin 1967). Generally speaking, the academic literature has focused on two main types of political representation: substantive and descriptive.

Substantive representation refers to representatives advocating and enacting policies that align with the needs of their constituents (Dovi 2018). According to this concept, qualifications for representatives are primarily focused on the views of the representative and their ability to carry out policies in the interest of the individuals that voted them in office, rather than their personal characteristics such as socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity, or gender.

Descriptive representation differs from substantive representation in that it prioritises the personal characteristics of representatives over their policy positions or advocacy efforts (Dovi 2002). These characteristics can include socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity, or gender. Voters often value these traits, believing that they make policymakers more attuned to the specific needs of their communities (Bratton and Ray 2002). Ideally, representatives should mirror the demographic makeup of the population they serve, reflecting it proportionally (Mansbridge 2000). Minority groups tend to favour descriptive representation because it helps counterbalance the overrepresentation of socially dominant groups (Pantoja and Segura 2003) and mitigates feelings of alienation within their communities (Gay 2002). Although descriptive representation can incorporate elements of substantive representation (Rosenthal 2019), this report focuses exclusively on descriptive representation, with particular attention to the issue of underrepresentation.

Many contemporary scholars have explored both the advantages and limitations of descriptive representation. One significant critique, highlighted by Bhattacharya (2021), is the issue of tokenism. Critics argue that some representatives are elected more for their symbolic value than for their ability to develop and implement substantive policies. This can result in more qualified candidates being overlooked, as well as in reduced accountability. A common criticism of descriptive representation is the assumption that shared characteristics automatically translate into shared interests (Bhattacharya 2021), which can diminish accountability (Franck and Rainer 2012). For instance, a female politician may not necessarily advocate for policies that advance women's interests, just as representatives with other descriptive traits—such as age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status—might prioritise policies that benefit themselves, their social group, or their political party over those of their constituents (Meier and Severs 2018).

Why does representation matter?

Descriptive representation is an essential component of a functioning democracy. Underrepresentation of groups in a democracy can become a problem for justice, legitimacy, responsiveness, and the effectiveness of government (Carnes and Lupu 2023; Mansbridge 1999). For instance, voters are more likely to engage with politicians they can identify with, which significantly impacts the alignment between policy decisions and the community's needs (Gay 2002). Historically, many voter groups have been underrepresented in democratic systems. Although recent trends indicate increased representation across many Western democracies, particularly in Britain (Carnes and Lupu 2023), the progress is complex. In the UK, for example, while gender and ethnic representation gaps are narrowing, the representation gap based on social class is widening (Quilter-Pinner et al. 2022).

Economic and educational backgrounds are two areas where gaps in descriptive representation persist. Politicians often come from significantly wealthier backgrounds than their constituents, a trend that has remained steady over time. In fact, working-class representation in politics is declining, particularly in Western Europe (Carnes and Lupu 2023; O'Grady 2018). In the UK, as of 2017, over 70% of party members across all major parties belonged to higher social classes (Burton and Tunnicliffe 2017). This disparity is further exacerbated by the fact that economic resources play a critical role in political participation; those with more money, resources, and time are far more likely to enter politics (Lord Alderdice 2018).

The persistent representation gaps in economic status are concerning, as research indicates that politicians from different economic backgrounds tend to prioritise policies that align with their own interests (Carnes and Lupu 2023). For example, working-class politicians are more likely to advocate for policies that reflect the needs of working-class citizens, empathise with blue-collar professions, and lean ideologically left (O'Grady 2018). This lack of representation has broader implications for democratic engagement, as working-class voters are becoming increasingly disenchanted and less likely to vote due to their declining representation (Heath 2018).

Politicians also tend to have significantly higher educational levels than the average citizen (Carnes and Lupu 2023). In 2024, 25% of UK MPs were privately educated, and 63% attended comprehensive schools, with one in five having studied at Oxford or Cambridge (Holt-White 2024). This starkly contrasts with the broader UK population, where only 7% received private education, and less than 1% attended Oxford or Cambridge (Social Mobility Commission 2019).

Scholars have proposed various explanations for these educational disparities. Some suggest that a college education correlates with the development of skills and greater civic engagement (Besley & Reynal-Querol 2011), while others argue that voters perceive higher education as indicative of better leadership qualities and decision-making abilities (Carnes and Lupu 2023). However, educational attainment is also closely tied to socioeconomic background, reflecting family income and housing wealth (Holt-White 2024), and serving as a proxy for elite status (Dal Bó et al. 2017). Contrary to assumptions about capability, research indicates that politicians with university degrees perform their roles just as competently as those without such qualifications (Dal Bó et al. 2017). This challenges the notion that higher education is a necessary prerequisite for effective political leadership.

With only 19% of the UK working-age population having attended university, compared to 90% of elected MPs, there is a stark gap in representation between those with and without higher education (Holt-White 2024). This disparity is significant because differing educational levels between politicians and voters can contribute to political alienation and widen ideological divides, particularly on social policy issues (Hakhverdian 2015). This disconnect is likely reflected in the rising support for non-mainstream parties (Hernández 2018), as voters seek alternatives to a political class that they feel does not represent their educational background or concerns.

While efforts to address gender disparities in politics have increased, imbalances remain widespread across democracies (Gulzar 2021). Although more women have sought office since the 1980s, the trend plateaued in the early 2000s (Lawless & Fox 2005). As of 2019, women held 24.3% of parliamentary seats worldwide (Hessami and da Fonseca 2022). In the United Kingdom, a record 40% of MPs elected in the 2024 election were women, up from 30% in 2019 (Allen 2024). However, women are still less likely to be selected as candidates, as political parties often draw from their existing networks, which tend to favour men (Cruz et al. 2017; Fox & Lawless 2010; Karpowitz et al. 2017).

Various policy interventions have been implemented to improve gender representation in politics. In the United Kingdom, initiatives like women-only shortlists and quotas by the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats have played a key role in increasing the number of women MPs, helping to address the persistent gender gap (Kelly and White, 2016). Additionally, resources like the Conservatives' Women2Win website offer support and guidance to women aspiring to become MPs. Despite these efforts and some progress in gender representation, underrepresentation of women in politics remains a significant issue.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to adopt an intersectional approach when examining descriptive representation, recognising that a politician's gender must be understood alongside other factors such as race, ethnicity, and class background (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Mugge et al. 2019; Paxton and Hughes 2007). In the United Kingdom, disparities in the representation of ethnic minorities remain a significant concern, particularly given the country's growing ethnic diversity. For instance, 18% of the population identified as part of an ethnic minority group in the most recent census (GOV.UK 2021). However, in 2024, only 13% of MPs in Parliament were from ethnic minority backgrounds (Ballinger 2024). This underrepresentation is even more pronounced at the local level, where only 8.3% of local authority councillors were from ethnic minority groups in 2022 (Uberoi and Carthew 2023). Even in diverse cities like London, the ethnic minority population remains underrepresented (Begum and Sobolewska 2020).

Scholars have identified several factors contributing to this disparity. Similar to other groups, persistent party infrastructures and established recruitment networks often act as barriers to new politicians, particularly those from underrepresented groups (Lord Alderdice 2018). Additionally, racism, stereotyping, and inaccessibility further hinder participation (Begum and Sobolewska 2024). These obstacles can discourage candidates, especially those from marginalised communities, from running for office (Gulzar 2021).

In response to these challenges, UK political parties have implemented various initiatives to improve representation. For instance, Labour offers candidate training specifically designed for members from marginalised communities who aspire to become politicians (Labour 2023). Similarly, the Liberal Democrats have a Racial Diversity Campaign training and supporting underrepresented groups to stand as candidates. Political parties also have sub-groups and create spaces for underrepresented communities, such as Greens of Colour or BAME Forums in some local Conservative parties. However, despite these efforts, the barriers to descriptive representation for ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom remain significant in the absence of comprehensive structural support and mentorship (Begum and Sobolewska 2024).

Representation Studies in the UK

Despite the extensive research done on politicians in parliament and other national bodies, there has been more limited research on the representativeness of local politicians in England. The literature reviewed for this research concludes that although it is an important site for progressing goals of descriptive representation, local government has less symbolic importance for political parties and so is subject to less scrutiny than parliamentary politics, perpetuating inequalities (Begum and Sobolewska 2020). This underrepresentation matters as local politics often serves as a springboard for aspiring national politicians.

In early 2024, the Scottish government published a report about the demographics of councillors and their experiences in office (The Scottish Government 2024), but no similar study has been undertaken in England. Although London is the largest city in the UK, there has been relatively little research into its local politicians. One study in 2019 found that most councils in London remain unrepresentative in terms of ethnicity, and made clear the need for further research into other characteristics such as class, disability and sexual orientation (Begum and Sobolewska 2020).

The London Councillors Survey study aims to fill this gap, by presenting the results of the first ever representative dataset about the background of local politicians in London. The results of this study are not limited to gender, ethnicity, or age; they also provide information about the educational background, housing status, and caregiving status of elected local councillors, representing a first-of-its-kind comprehensive assessment of the status of representation of local politics in the United Kingdom.

The Civic Strength Tool

The Civic Strength Tool (CST), developed by the Young Foundation in partnership with the GLA and alongside 700+ Londoners, is a tool designed to evaluate key factors that contribute to a vibrant community (The Young Foundation, 2021). The Young Foundation sees civic strength where "communities are supported by robust public and social infrastructure to build strong relationships and feel able to meaningfully engage in the issues that matter to them." the CST aims to identify different mixes of civic strength across boroughs and wards in London, looking at physical and social infrastructure, democratic participation, and relationships and social capital.

To develop the CST, data were compiled from various sources, including the London Data Store, the Living Costs and Food Survey, and other relevant datasets covering geographical and financial aspects. Users can explore the CST for specific wards or boroughs through an interactive map. While two areas might appear similar at a glance, closer examination often reveals significant differences in their strengths and weaknesses across the different domains.

A key limitation of the CST is its reliance on existing datasets, which do not fully capture the complexities of civic strength. The London Councillors Survey, which focuses on institutional trust, examines how descriptive political representation can enhance trust between communities and government.

Mansbridge (1999) argues that representatives who share similar backgrounds with their constituents can build stronger connections, based on the assumption that shared experiences foster mutual understanding.

By evaluating how representative councillors are of London's population, this study helps to deepen our understanding of "how Londoners feel able to interact with and be represented by institutions" (The Young Foundation, 2021). Additionally, the London Councillors Survey provides valuable insights into how elected representatives themselves experience local institutions, further enriching the analysis of civic engagement and representation.

METHODS

To understand the backgrounds of London councillors, we conducted an original survey between February and March 2024. The survey was administered online, on the phone or in person using the survey software Qualtrics. Our team of trained Research Assistants (RAs) reached out to all elected London councillors to invite them to take the survey. A considerable amount of effort went into outreach and engagement of councillors. Our team of RAs sent emails, made phone calls, met councillors in person, attended council surgeries and meetings to try to reach as many councillors as possible. This effort was successful: out of 1817 elected councillors in London, 521 individual councillors responded to our survey, a response rate of 29%. This is above or in line with response rates in similar samples of elected politicians (Magalhaes & Pereira 2024; Kertzer & Renshon 2022).

Questions in the survey about demographic attributes were modelled on Census questions, and followed the latest recommendations on how to measure sensitive individual-level characteristics.

This research project and the data collection followed strict ethics and data protection guidelines. Informed consent was sought at the start of the survey, and respondents were able to withdraw from the survey at any time. The project was reviewed and received Ethics approval at The London School of Economics (ref number 304465).

How well does our sample match the population?

In order to get an idea of how representative our sample is to the population of local councillors, we asked RAs to collate a full list of councillors using publicly available information. Information on area and party affiliation is available on council websites, and information on gender and ethnicity was hand-coded by RAs based on information from councillor's statements, social media profiles or council profiles. It is possible that these inferred characteristics are not the same as individual self-reports, and we therefore talk about these as "perceived" characteristics. Still, we believe that these provide an approximation of the distribution of gender and ethnicity in the population, which is helpful when comparing our sample to the population.

As Table 1 shows, our sample is representative of the population of London councillors on perceived gender and ethnicity, as well as area. In terms of political affiliation, our sample matches the actual proportion of Labour councillors well, has more Liberal Democrats and slightly less Conservatives than the population of London councillors. To account for these differences between our sample and the population, we use survey weights. Survey weights can be used in other analyses of the dataset to determine how much weight a single response should have in the overall analysis of the results, and are a common adjustment method used in surveys (Keeter 2018). Survey weights downrate responses from groups which are slightly overrepresented, and give greater weight to demographic groups which are underrepresented in the sample compared to the population. Survey weights are commonly used in survey research and by professional polling firms to account for differences in demographic distributions between a sample and the population.

Table 1 – *Distribution of sample characteristics before weighting*

Variable	Category	Frequency (sample)	Frequency (population)	Difference	N (sample)	N (population)
Ethnicity	Minority Ethnic	0.32	0.40	-0.08	166	722
	White	0.68	0.60	0.08	347	1097
Gender	Men	0.54	0.54	0.00	279	990
	Women	0.46	0.46	0.00	234	829
Area of London	Central	0.19	0.18	0.01	96	335
	East	0.29	0.30	-0.01	148	554
	North	0.11	0.10	0.01	55	183
	South	0.22	0.19	0.03	113	345
	West	0.20	0.22	-0.02	101	402
Political party	Conservative	0.13	0.22	-0.09	67	400
	Labour	0.63	0.63	0.00	325	1138
	Liberal Democrat	0.17	0.10	0.07	86	181
	Other	0.07	0.05	0.02	35	100

Table 2
Adjusted sample characteristics after weighting, ***ethnicity***

Ethnicity	Nr of respondents, weighted	Population target N
Minority Ethnic	205	205
White	308	308

Table 3
Adjusted sample characteristics after weighting, ***gender***

Gender	Nr of respondents, weighted	Population target N
Men	277	277
Women	236	236

Table 4
Adjusted sample characteristics after weighting, ***area***

Area	Nr of respondents, weighted	Population target N
Central	94	92
East	157	154
North	51	51
South	97	97
West	114	113

Table 5
Adjusted sample characteristics after weighting, ***party***

Political Party	Nr of respondents, weighted	Population target N
Conservative	113	113
Labour	323	323
Liberal Democrat	51	51
Other	26	26

Adjusting for imbalances: survey weights

We calculate survey weights in R, a statistical open-source software, using the package "survey". This uses Iterative Proportional Fitting to create weights which produce a better match between the sample and population characteristics. We use all four available characteristics, gender, area, ethnicity, and party to calculate survey weights.

As Tables 1 to 4 show, the survey weights are successful in creating a better match between the sample and population characteristics. The minimum survey weight assigned to a response in our sample is 0.49, and the maximum weight is 2.58, which is a reasonable range.

FINDINGS

In this section of the report we present the results of the London Councillors Survey. Out of 1817 elected councillors in London, 521 individual councillors responded to our survey, representing all major political parties in all of London's 32 Local Councils. We present the results on the personal characteristics of the elected representatives in London by comparing - where data is available - their individual characteristics with that of London's population using data from the 2021 Office for National Statistics (ONS) Census data.[2] Where ONS data are not available, we compare our survey results with data from nationally available statistics..

The London Councillors Survey 2024 is representative of the population of London councillors and thus presents the first-of-its-kind substantive dataset on elected local representatives in England. All the percentages calculated based on data from the London Councillors Survey are weighted to ensure they are representative of London's councillor population.

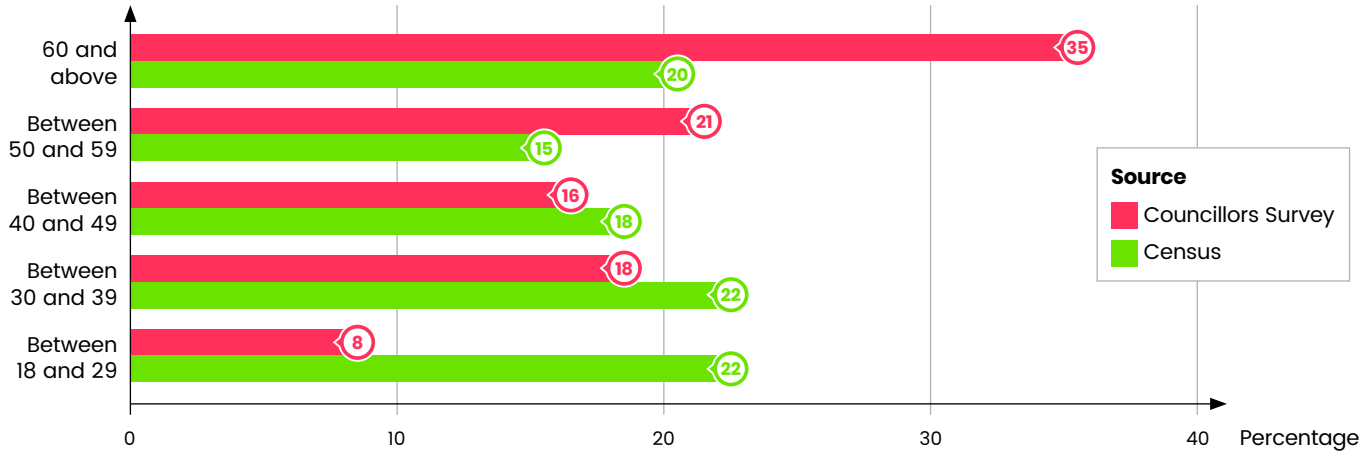
Age

In Figure 1, the London Councillors Survey data reveals the age composition of elected local councillors in London. The most represented age group are councillors who are 60 years of age or above, constituting over a third (35%) of all elected local councillors in London. In contrast, the least represented age group among councillors are those between 18 and 29 years of age, who make up only 8% of all elected councillors. Overall, the data shows that Londoners under 49 years of age are under-represented among the body of elected local councillors.

Comparing the survey results to the individual characteristics of Londoners using 2021 ONS Census data, we can calculate a 'representation gap'—the difference between the characteristics of Londoners and those of their local representatives. For instance, while councillors aged 60 and above constitute 35% of elected councillors, this age group represents only 20% of Londoners, indicating an over-representation gap of around 15 percentage points. Conversely, while 22% of Londoners are between the ages of 18 and 29, only 8% of elected councillors belong to that age group, suggesting an under-representation gap for young Londoners of around 14 percentage points.

Figure 1 – Age of London Population and London Councillors' Population

Londoners under 49 are underrepresented in London Councils



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521) and 2021 ONS Census. Data includes Londoners over 18 years of age. Percentages for survey data are weighted to ensure representativity.

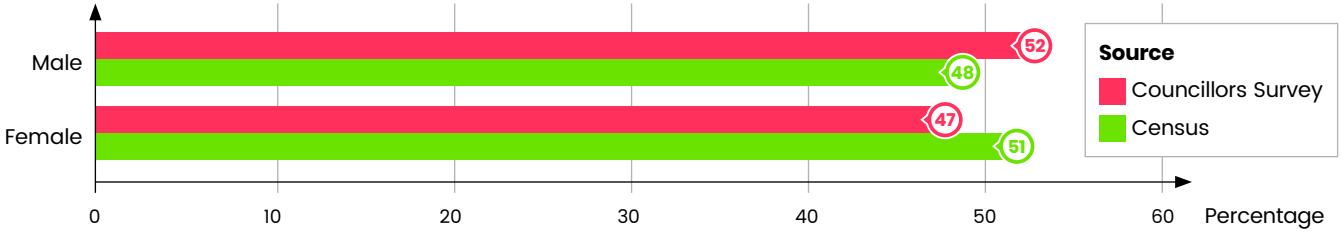
(2) The percentages based on the 2021 ONS Census data are calculated considering only Londoners 18 years of age or above.

Sex

The comparison between the London Councillors Survey and ONS Census data reveals that women are underrepresented among London local councillors. While women constitute 51% of all Londoners over the age of 18 according to the Census, they make up only 47% of elected London councillors, indicating an under-representation gap of four percentage points. Despite this disparity, the proportion of women elected as London councillors is still higher than in the UK Parliament, where only 40% of MPs were female as of the 2024 elections.

Figure 2 – Councillors' Sex

Women are underrepresented in London Councils

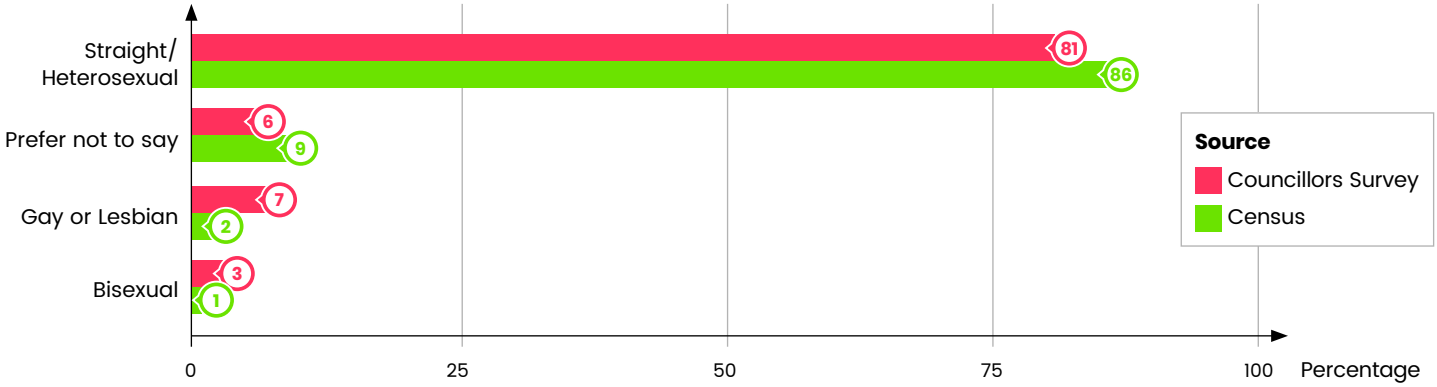


Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521) and 2021 ONS Census. Data includes Londoners over 18 years of age. Percentages for survey data are weighted to ensure representativity.

Sexual Orientation

In terms of sexual orientation, the survey indicates that 81% of respondents identify as straight/heterosexual, 7% as gay or lesbian, 3% as bisexual, and less than 1% as other. On the other hand, the 2021 ONS data shows that around 86% of people in England and Wales identify as straight, with 2% identifying as gay or lesbian, and 1% as bisexual. However, it is important to point out that in the ONS Census and the London Councillors Survey, 9% and 6% of respondents respectively chose not to answer the question about sexual orientation and thus we do not recommend using this data to calculate a representation gap.

Figure 3 – Councillors' Sexual Orientation



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521).

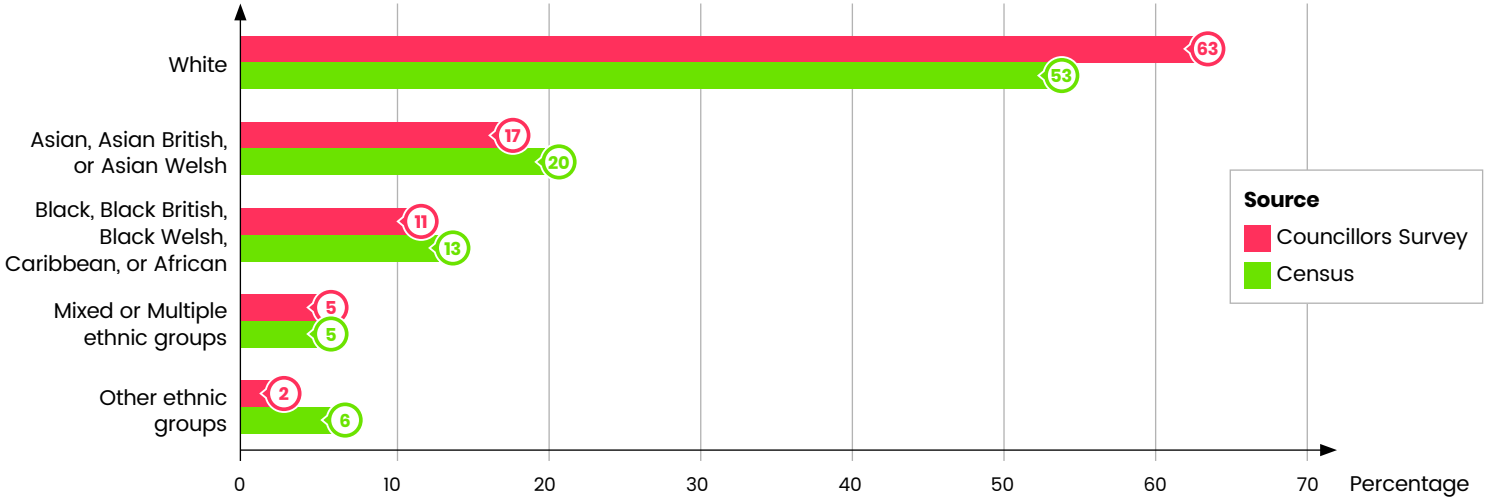
Ethnicity

Regarding the ethnic composition of elected councillors in London, survey data from the London Councillors Survey indicates that 63% identify as 'White', around 17% as Asian, Asian British, or Asian Welsh, 11% as Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean, or African, and 5% as belonging to a mixed or multiple ethnic group. Additionally, 6% selected the 'other' ethnic group category.

When comparing these statistics to the ONS Census data, we observe an under-representation gap for the 'Asian, Asian British, or Asian Welsh', 'Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean, or African', and 'Other' ethnic groups. These groups are under-represented among London councillors by three, two, and four percentage points, respectively. Conversely, 'White' Londoners are over-represented among London councillors by 10 percentage points. The Mixed or Multiple ethnic group category is proportionally represented when compared to ONS Census data.

Figure 4 – Councillors' Ethnicity

Minority Ethnic Londoners are underrepresented in London Councils



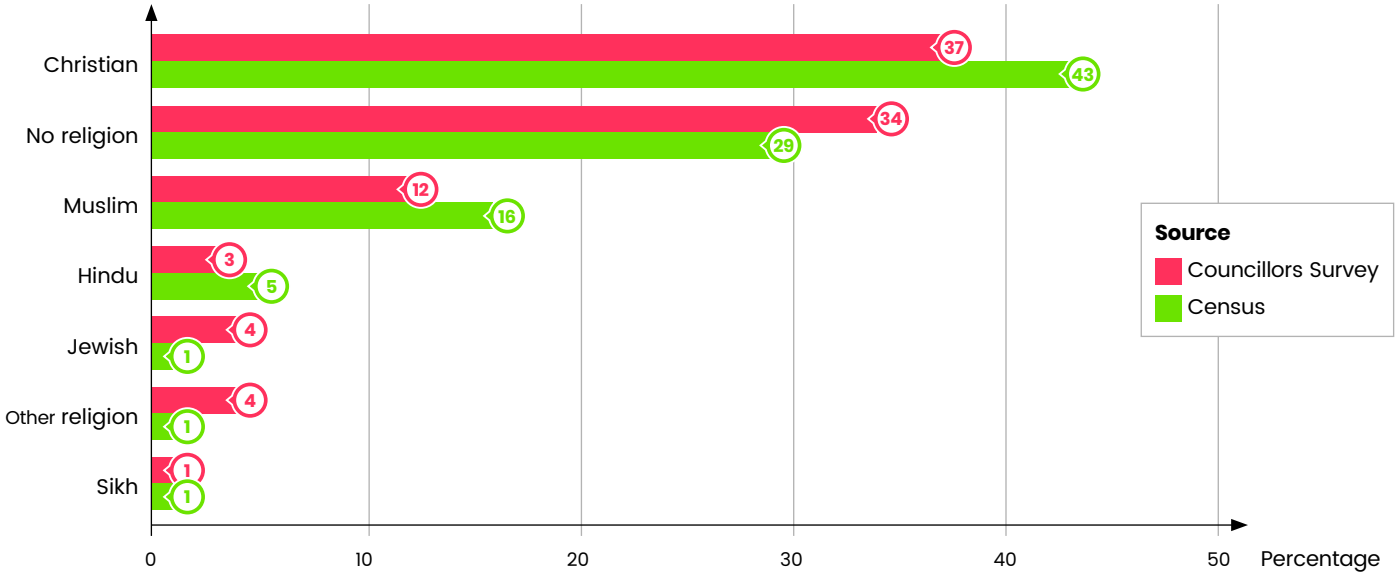
Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521) and 2021 ONS Census. Data includes Londoners over 18 years of age. Percentages for survey data are weighted to ensure representativity.

Religion

Regarding religious affiliation, 37% of London local councillors identify as Christians, 34% as having no religion, 12% as Muslims, 3% as Hindus, 4% as Jewish, 1% as Sikhs, and another 4% as belonging to other religious groups. Compared to ONS Census data, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu Londoners are under-represented among elected London councillors. Conversely, non-religious councillors and those from other religious groups are over-represented, with Sikh Londoners being proportionately represented.

Figure 5 – Councillors' Religion

Christian, Muslim and Hindu Londoners are underrepresented in London Councils



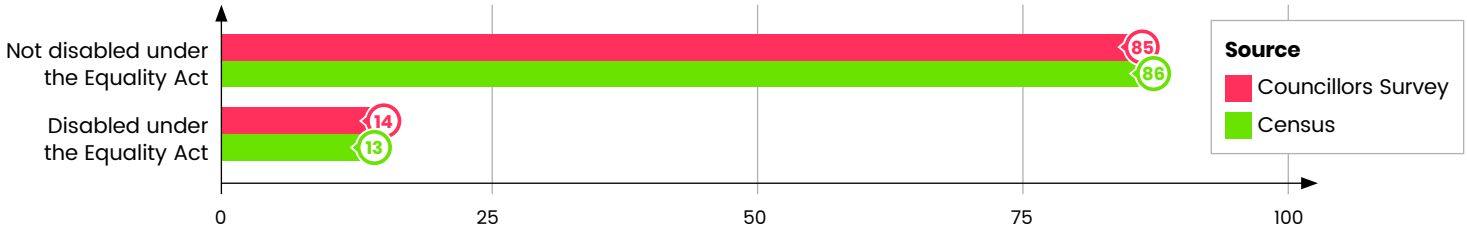
Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521) and 2021 ONS Census. Data includes Londoners over 18 years of age. Percentages for survey data are weighted to ensure representativity. The 'No religion' category includes agnostics.

Disability

Regarding the ethnic composition of elected councillors in London, survey data from the London Councillors Survey, Londoners with disabilities are well represented among elected local councillors, making up 14% of the total. This is slightly above the estimated 13% of Londoners with disabilities, as reported by the ONS Census data.

Figure 6 – Councillors with Disabilities

Londoners with Disabilities are underrepresented in London Councils



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521) and 2021 ONS Census. Data includes Londoners over 18 years of age. Percentages for survey data are weighted to ensure representativity. Do you have any physical or mental conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last for 12 months or more, which reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? [People are disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to do normal daily activities. Source: Gov.uk].

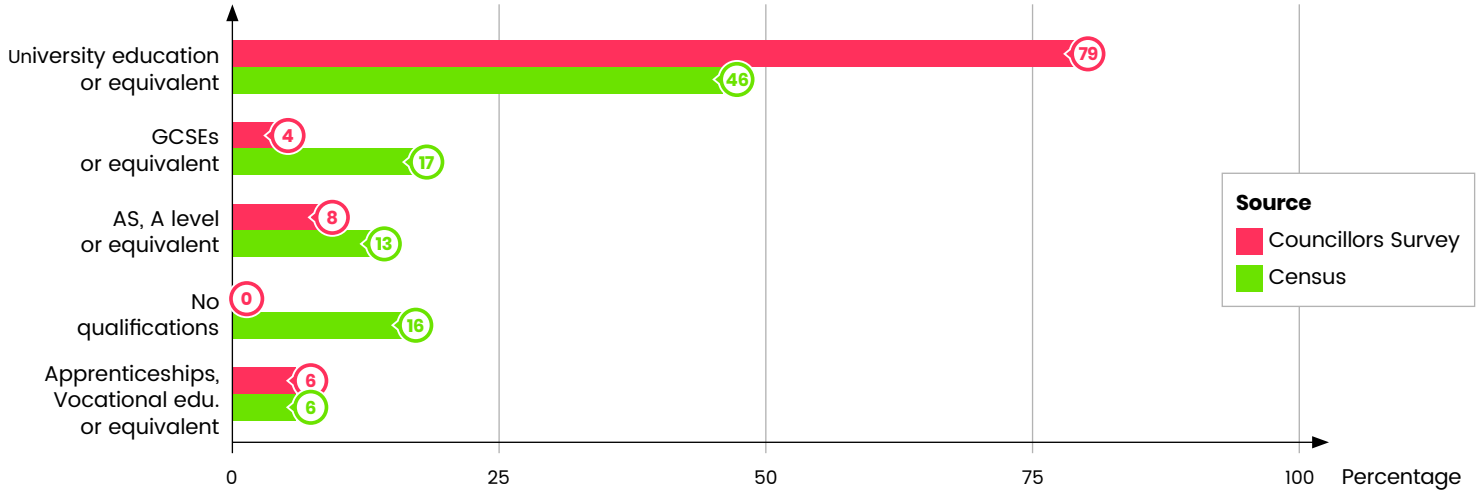
Education

According to the London Councillors Survey, 79% of elected London councillors hold a university degree or its equivalent, 4% have qualifications equivalent to GCSEs, 8% have qualifications equivalent to AS or A-levels, and 6% have earned an apprenticeship, vocational, or technical qualification. None of the councillors surveyed reported having no formal qualifications.

Comparing these findings with ONS Census data reveals significant disparities in representation. University-educated Londoners are notably over-represented among councillors, with a 33-percentage-point gap compared to the 46% of Londoners with similar qualifications. Conversely, councillors with GCSE-level qualifications are under-represented (4% vs. 17% of London's population), as are those with AS or A-level equivalents (8% vs. 13%). Notably, individuals without any formal education are entirely absent from the elected councils in London. Councillors with apprenticeships, vocational education, or equivalent, are well represented across London councils.

Figure 7 – Councillors' Education

University educated Londoners are overrepresented in London Councils

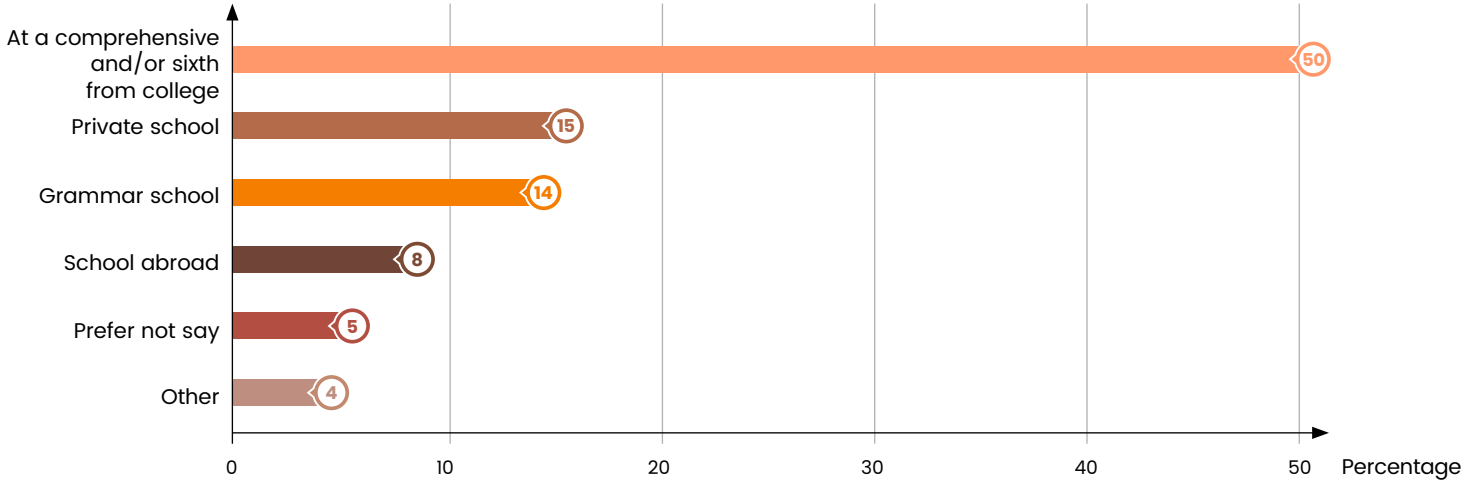


Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521) and 2021 ONS Census. Data includes Londoners over 18 years of age. Percentages for survey data are weighted to ensure representativity.

The London Councillors Survey reveals diverse educational backgrounds among elected councillors. Half of respondents attended comprehensive and/or sixth form colleges, 15% were educated privately, and another 14% attended grammar schools. Additionally, 8% received their education abroad, 5% did not disclose their educational background, and 4% selected the 'Other' category.

While Census data does not detail educational backgrounds specifically for London's population, we can draw comparisons with England-wide statistics. For example, data from the Private Education Policy Forum in January 2021 indicates that approximately 6.4% of all school pupils in England were privately educated. Similarly, according to a Briefing Paper from the House of Commons Library, as of 2022, only 5.3% of secondary pupils across England attended grammar schools (Long et al 2022).

Figure 8 – Councillors' Education Type



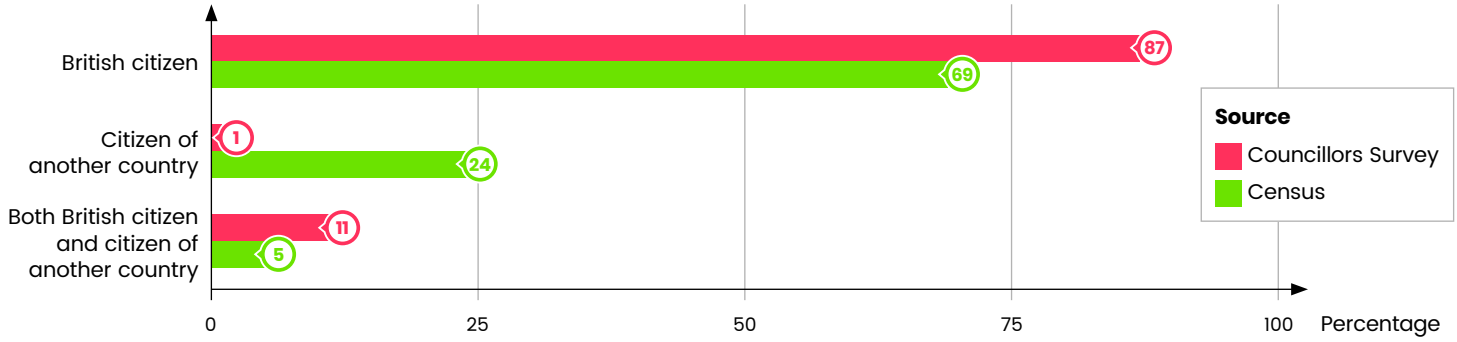
Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521).

Nationality

The London Councillors Survey asked about the nationality of elected local councillors. Around 87% of councillors are British citizens only, with 11% reporting being both a British citizen and a citizen of another country. Only 1% of elected councillors report not being British. These findings can be compared to data available from the ONS Census data, which asks a very similar question about 'passports' held by Londoners, a proxy for citizenship. According to ONS Census data, only around 69% of Londoners hold a British passport, whereas only 5% hold both the British and the passport of another country. Close to a quarter of all Londoners do not hold a British passport.

It's important to recognise that while passport possession often aligns with citizenship, there are cases where individuals may be citizens of a country without holding its passport.

Figure 9 – Councillors' Nationality

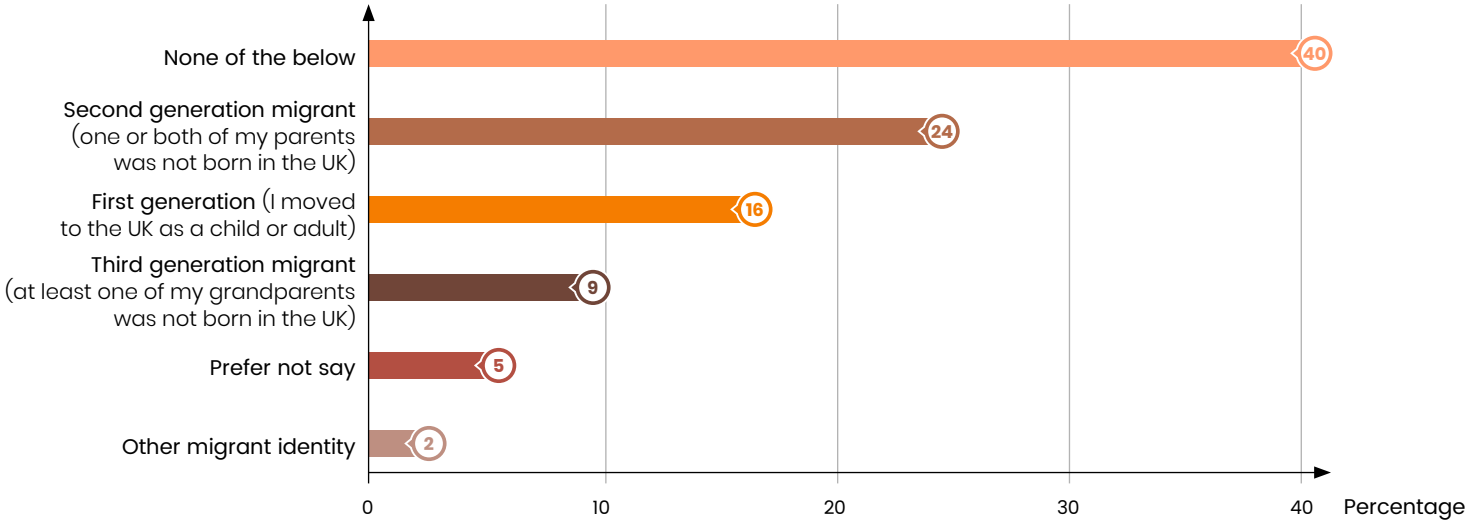


Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521) and 2021 ONS Census. Data includes Londoners over 18 years of age. Percentages for survey data are weighted to ensure representativity. Whereas the Census data is based on Passports Held, the London Councillors' Survey asks about the citizenship of the councillor. While very similar, it is likely that in many instances individuals who hold the citizenship of a country might not have the respective passport.

Migrant Identity

When considering the background of elected London councillors, approximately 40% do not identify with any migrant background category—neither as first, second, nor third-generation migrants. Around 24% identify as second-generation migrants, meaning at least one of their parents was born outside the UK. Another 16% identify as first-generation migrants, having moved to the UK from abroad themselves. Only 9% identify as third-generation migrants, with at least one of their grandparents born outside the UK.

Figure 10 – Councillors' Migrant Identity



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521).

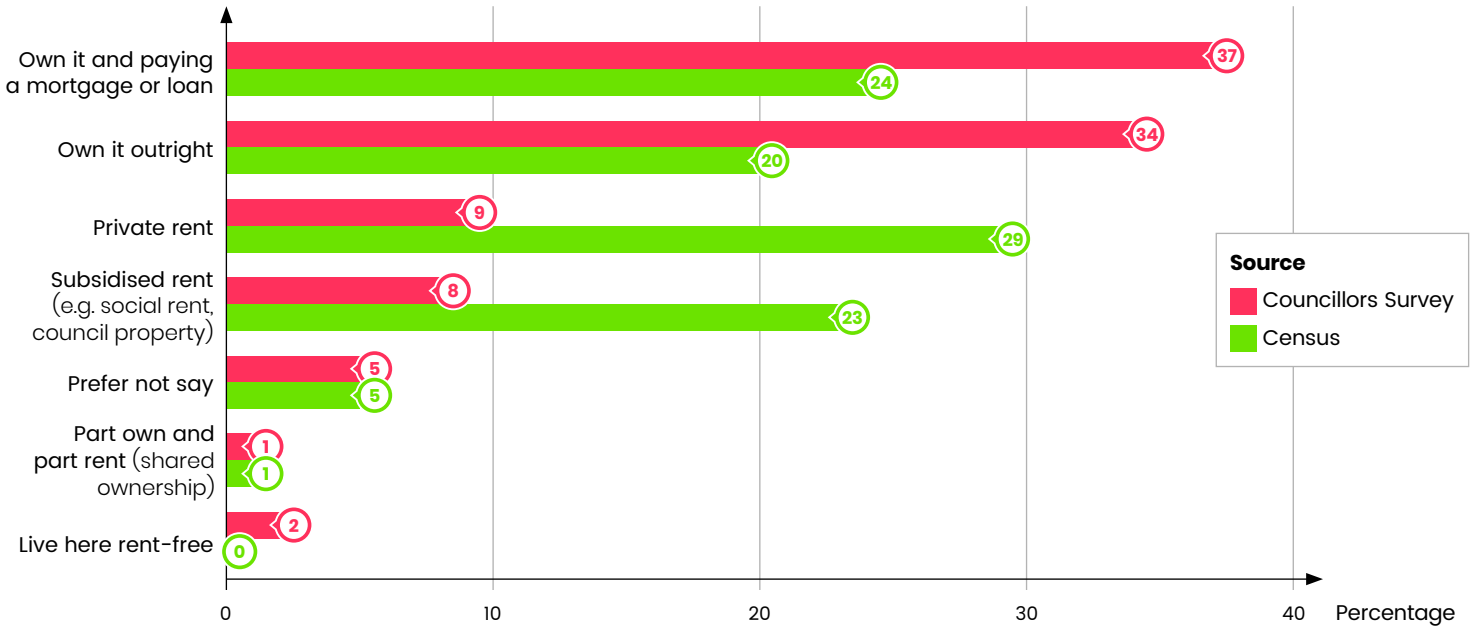
Property Ownership

When it comes to the housing tenure of elected London councillors, the London Councillors Survey reveals that approximately 71% own their homes. Within this group, 37% are currently paying off a mortgage, while 34% own outright their properties (that is, they are not paying off a mortgage). Only 9% of councillors rent privately, and a further 8% reside in subsidised or social housing, such as council estates. Finally, two percent of councillors live rent-free in a property they do not own.

Comparing these findings with ONS Census data highlights significant discrepancies. Census data shows that only 24% of Londoners are home-owners with ongoing mortgages or loans, and 20% own their homes outright. This difference represents a gap of 13 percentage points and 14 percentage points less than the percentage of elected London councillors with the same type of tenure. Conversely, 29% of Londoners rent privately, and 23% live in subsidised housing, representing gaps of 20 percentage points and 15 percentage points, respectively, compared to councillors. The only group by tenure which is well represented are those who own a share of their properties (for example, through shared ownership schemes). In summary, private renters and Londoners living in subsidised housing are under-represented in London councils.

Figure 11 – Councillors' Housing

Renters are underrepresented among Councillors in London



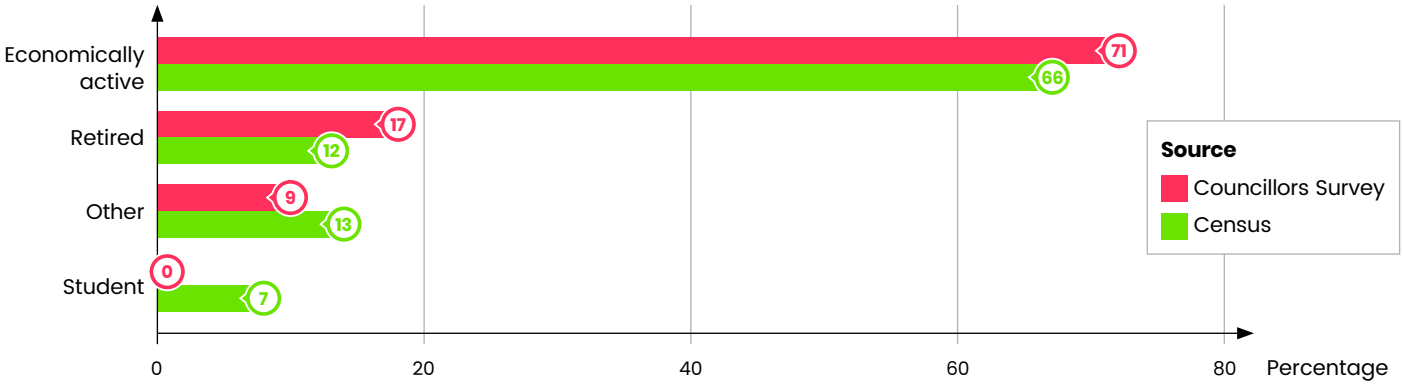
Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521).

Employment

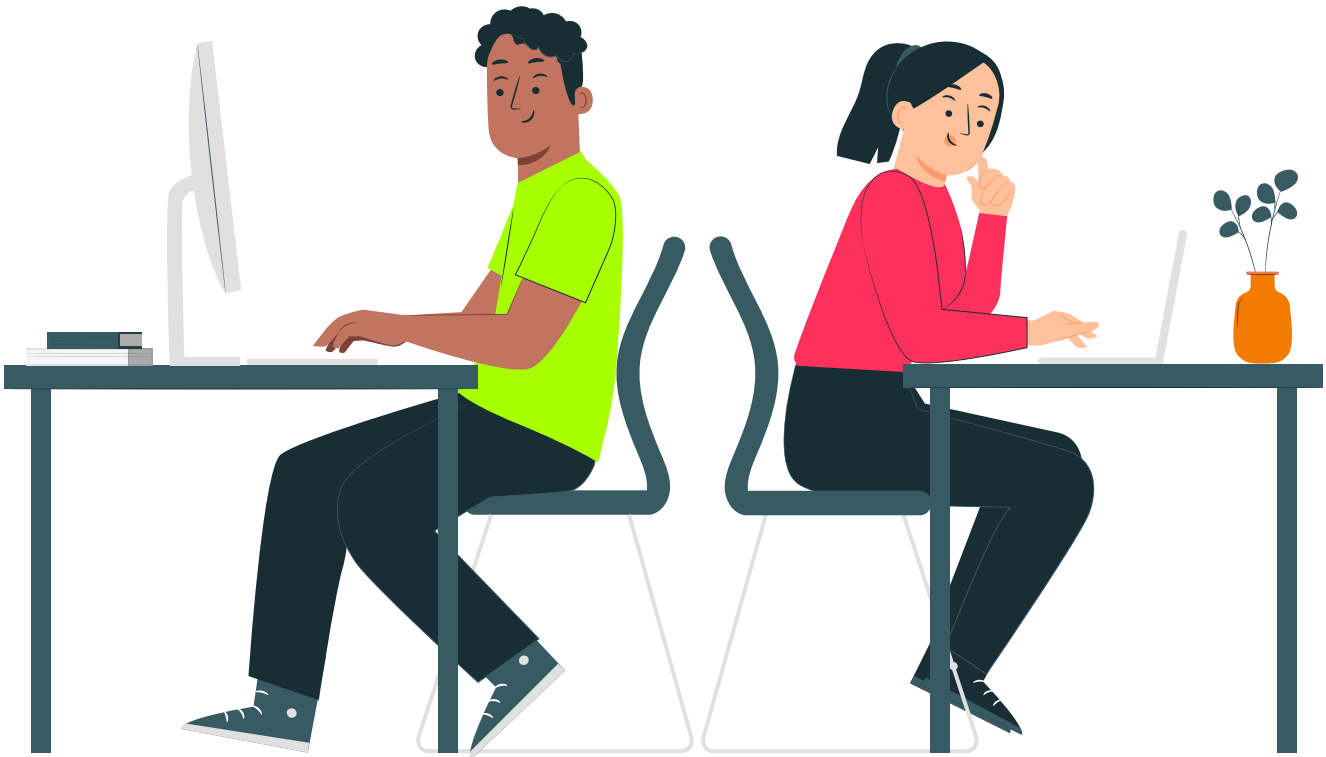
Regarding employment status, the London Councillors Survey indicates that approximately 71% of councillors are economically active, encompassing both full-time and part-time roles, while 17% are retired and 9% fall into the "Other" category. Very few councillors are full-time students. Comparatively, ONS Census data shows that 66% of Londoners are economically active, with 12% retired, 7% are students and 13% falling into the "Other" category.

These findings suggest a slight under-representation of economically active individuals among councillors by 5 percentage points, and an over-representation of retired individuals by the same margin. It's worth noting that the "Other" category for councillors includes full-time cabinet members whose elected position constitutes their primary occupation, which complicates direct comparison with Census data.

Figure 12 – Councillors' Employment



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521) and 2021 ONS Census. Data includes Londoners over 18 years of age. Percentages for survey data are weighted to ensure representativity.



CONCLUSIONS

Despite the importance of representative politicians to civic satisfaction and engagement, there has historically been little data available on who our local councillors are. We developed and fielded the first of its kind large-scale survey among London councillors, asking councillors questions on their personal and socio-economic characteristics. With a high response rate of 29%, we believe this project has begun to bridge important knowledge gaps around representation in local politics.

We hope that this data will enable Londoners to have a greater awareness of who represents them, along with facilitating the public debate on the strengths, weaknesses, and representativeness of our democratic institutions. The gaps in representation we identified in this survey can serve the public interest, civil society organisers, and political parties to strengthen their recruitment and support of candidates from the diverse communities who make up the social fabric of London.

What do the findings show about civic strength?

The London Councillors Survey results suggest that there are important representation gaps which are usually overlooked because no reliable data is available. Our results highlight the importance of collecting, in a systematic way, information on councillors' backgrounds. Because descriptive representation - as discussed in the Literature Review section of this report - can have important symbolic and policy consequences, representation gaps should be accounted for in local area estimates of civic strength. Future, even more large-scale data collections with sufficient coverage at the borough level should be used to combine with - and inform - the Civic Strength Tool. Given the link between trust and representative democratic institutions, we suggest it would be particularly useful to compare the gaps in representation across areas with high and low levels of institutional trust. It would also be useful to compare councillors' perceived areas of policy priority for their constituents, compared to what their constituents themselves think are the policy priorities of the same areas. More systematic, borough-led councillor census data collection would pave the way to fully integrate data on elected officials' backgrounds with the CST.

Key Learnings from this Study

Our report has proven that it is possible to gain better information about our local councillors. However, this study has a number of limitations. First, it is worth acknowledging the self-selection bias inherent in voluntary survey studies; it has been noted that more affluent and more educated people have a higher likelihood of responding to surveys (Curtin, Presser, and Singer, 2000; Goyder, Warriner, & Miller 2002; Singer, van Hoewyk, & Maher 2000), which may account for part of the gap we see in result of the report and the Census, although this is unlikely to account for this disparity in full.

This bias is compounded by the difficulty which MDP had with reaching councillors. There was large variation in the contact details and surgery slots available for councillors across boroughs. Many councillors did not respond to multiple attempts for personal contact. In addition, the team experienced problems with surgeries being cancelled at short or no notice, which exacerbated this problem.

There were also some misconceptions among councillors which made it difficult to get data from certain groups. The perception of 'Diversity' as a politicised topic presented a challenge for researchers, particularly as it was conducted in the run up to local elections. This may have resulted in some politicians (particularly Conservatives in this case) being less inclined to respond to the survey in the first place. Additionally, there were some concerns about data collection of this kind being too personal. Finally, many councillors believed this data was already available.

Recommendations

Centralised collection of data on elected officials should also be supported across boroughs. Changes could include training and information for elected officials to be comfortable in sharing relevant data, and for it to be anonymised and transparently reflected on the borough council website, such as how the makeup by political party currently is displayed on the website of some borough councils. This should be in the remit of Democratic Services, which in some boroughs are separate from Electoral Services, and in others are joint.

To combat these issues in data gathering, we recommend that future projects work closely with party, council leaders, and mayoral authorities. Perhaps a council ambassador in each party could be appointed to raise awareness of the goals, methods, and importance of the survey for democratic engagement. In any case, support from prominent local councillors would be invaluable to continuing this work and completing future rounds of survey research on councillors' characteristics.

We also recommend careful messaging and timing the study to avoid periods of data collection taking place close to any elections where possible, to further distance the work from the perception of it carrying a political agenda. This would also allow for more time to collect survey answers, as responses consistently came in through the run of the survey, Researchers also need to ensure enough time is set aside to collect the data required, having set a realistic goal and piloting various approaches to incentivise data collection.

Future Research

Irrespective of these limitations, we believe this work has provided an invaluable insight into the makeup of our local councils. We would like to see this project expanded beyond London to compare representation levels in different areas of the country, as well as repeated every four to five years to track changes. Additionally, de-aggregating the data and looking at variation between districts in councillor experience and representation could be an area for further study. Comparing this data with levels of representation in national politics would also be a fruitful area for future research.

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