

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING A POLITICIAN:

**How local councillors in London
experience their role as elected officials**

Findings from the 2024 London Councillors Survey – August 2024

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INTRODUCTION

Where do representation gaps come from, and why do they persist? Londoners are used to hearing the phrase 'Mind the gap!'. But what exactly does that mean when it comes to understanding local politics? Many are anecdotally aware, as they look at local and national politicians, that a representation gap exists between elected leaders and their constituents. How wide is this gap, and how does it impact our democracy and society?

Political representation is "the activity of making citizens' voices, opinions, and perspectives "present" in public policy making processes" (Pitkin 1967). Representation is crucial for a functioning democracy. However, in the United Kingdom and across the world, people are increasingly more disillusioned and dissatisfied with the way democracy works (OECD 2022). According to a 2023 World Value Survey report, 32% of British citizens are highly dissatisfied with how democracy works for them, with only 17% reporting being highly satisfied with it (World Value Survey 2023). This disillusionment has many complicated roots, but one of the factors often mentioned as a main cause is the low trust in politicians. The representation gap is a significant part of that disillusionment.

Without research to understand the impacts and extent of this representation gap, we cannot begin to address the negative effects it has on democratic participation and social cohesion in London. With this study, we seek to remedy this information gap. This report is based on the results of the very first **'London Councillors Survey'**, the first comprehensive survey of elected politicians in London on both background characteristics and perceptions of challenges. This original survey was conducted between February and March 2024. 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, at a 29% response rate. This is above or in line with response rates in similar samples of elected politicians (Magalhaes & Pereira 2024; Kertzer & Renshon 2022).

With our survey we aimed to answer a pivotal question for local democracy: *to what extent do elected councillors reflect the diversity of London's population? What challenges do councillors from underrepresented groups face?* While the first question is simple, the astonishing response is that – up until the publication of our findings – we did not have a clear picture on the personal characteristics of our elected local politicians in London, nor comprehensive data on the challenges they face.

This report focuses on the potential origins of representation gaps, specifically on the challenges that councillors face in their role as elected officials as well as their aspirations. The aggregate findings from the survey are expanded through case studies based on interviews with individual councillors. In this report, we delve into pivotal questions, such as, are under-represented groups less interested in running for office? Do candidates from under-represented backgrounds have a more difficult experience in office? What are the challenges and hurdles local politicians face? How is political ambition for continued or higher office influenced by these challenges?

The report is structured in the following way: first, we explain how political representation impacts democratic participation, engagement and political ambition, looking specifically at the existing research on gender, youth, and ethnic minority representation. Second, we present the findings on political representation from the London Councillors Survey and councillor interviews. Third, we discuss the implications of the research and its limitations, before concluding with concrete recommendations for policymakers and political parties and our suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Equal access, participation and descriptive representation is essential for an effectively functioning representative democracy (Bingham Powell 2000). Beyond its symbolic significance, descriptive representation plays a crucial role in enhancing democratic engagement and shaping public policy. For example, the presence of elected officials from ethnic minorities has been shown to positively impact their constituents' lives. This includes fostering better relationships between law enforcement and minority communities, increasing political knowledge and participation among minorities, and improving voters' perceptions of governmental responsiveness (Aneja and Ritadhi 2022).

Researchers have identified several factors contributing to the underrepresentation of certain societal groups in politics and the overrepresentation of others. These disparities often stem from entrenched gendered and racialized cultural and institutional power norms (Bjarnegard 2013). Much of the research on the descriptive underrepresentation of social groups in politics has focused on gender and ethnicity. Studies on immigrant-origin populations, for instance, highlight that factors such as age, education, income, and employment are strong predictors of political participation (Stromblad and Adman 2010).

Current research on the underrepresentation of minority ethnic groups differentiates between resource-based and context-based explanations. Scholars focusing on resources emphasise disparities in income and education levels as critical factors affecting electoral participation and representation. In contrast, others emphasise context, including opportunity structures such as party systems and electoral rules. Case studies further illustrate the challenges faced by politically engaged and educated elites of immigrant origin in achieving elected office. For instance, in France, despite advocacy efforts and organised constituencies, these individuals often struggle to transition from community organising to elected positions. However, findings from the UK, as highlighted in Garbaye's study (2005), suggest a more favourable environment where candidates of immigrant origin are more likely to secure seats on local councils.

Political Ambition

To further understand the origins and persistence of representation gaps, one can turn to the extensive literature on political ambition, much of which focuses predominantly on gender. The literature on nascent political ambition has demonstrated that women are less inclined to pursue a career in politics than men. Indeed, in a study involving over 10,000 British citizens, Allen and Cutts (2018) revealed that men are twice as likely as women to indicate they have thought about running for elected office or are currently pursuing a candidacy. Similarly, data from the Citizen Political Ambition Studies, which include three national surveys of women and men in professions from which most candidates for elective office emerge, reveal a significant gender gap in political ambition. Women are less likely than similarly situated men to consider running for office, less likely to run, less likely to believe they are qualified to seek office, less likely to receive encouragement to run, and more likely to perceive a competitive and biased electoral environment (Fox and Lawless 2005; 2010; 2012; 2014).

Some studies have shown that gender disparities in political career aspirations are already evident in young people (Pruyers and Blais 2017). Indeed, using political socialisation to explain individual differences, Fox and Lawless (2014) demonstrate that parental encouragement, politicised educational and peer experiences, participation in competitive activities, and self-confidence impact young people's interest in running for office, highlighting that women are disadvantaged in these areas. Similarly, Bos et al. (2022) suggest that the disparities in socialisation between women and men from early ages, where women are typically linked to the private sphere and men with the public sphere, can play a critical role in understanding why women show less interest in seeking elected office.

The primary frameworks used to understand women's political ambition focus on the supply and demand for female candidates. The supply-side highlights factors such as women's perceived lack of self-confidence, the additional burden of household responsibilities alongside employment, and career choices that may not support pursuing political office (Lawless and Fox 2010). On the other hand, the demand side centres on how elite decision makers within political parties and institutions control access to political office. For example, even in cases where quotas are in place, political parties may possess institutional barriers and gatekeeping practices that

impede women's engagement in politics (Verge and de la Fuente 2014). In this way, women's lack of expressed ambition may actually be a reasoned choice to not pursue candidacy in light of 'a gendered political opportunity structure' (Piscopo and Kenny 2020, p.4).

Current research indicates that both party nominations and self-nominations exhibit gender bias (Lawless and Fox 2005). Women with comparable qualifications to men are less inclined to view them positively as potential candidates, while nominations by political parties and their leaders typically give preference to men over women. With regards to the role of political parties in the under-representation of women, previous research has pointed to several factors: the perceptions of party elites and their assessments of female candidates (Niven 1998); the lack of implementation of gender quotas (Krook 2009); and the ideological positions of parties and their elites regarding the role of women in politics and society. Research has also shown that men and women exhibit distinct patterns of political participation, with men typically more involved in electoral activities while women often favour less visible forms of non-electoral political engagement (Coffé & Bolzendahl 2010). Similarly, Bale et al (2020), in their research on party membership in Britain, found that women are more prone than men to engage in activities that are considered private.

Voter Preferences

The literature on voter preferences regarding candidates from underrepresented backgrounds indicates mixed findings on whether voters are biased against candidates based on race and gender. Van Oosten, Mugge and Der pas (2023) in an analysis of studies published between 2012 and 2022, found that there are three leading theories on voter behaviour related to candidate backgrounds: unjust stereotyping, useful stereotyping, and shared identification. Unjust stereotyping focuses on how stereotypes can lead to bias, discrimination, and prejudice against certain candidates. Useful stereotyping, on the other hand, highlights how stereotypes can serve as practical shortcuts for voters, helping them make decisions in low-information elections by using cues and heuristics. Shared identification involves the dynamics of voters favouring candidates from their own group, either through unconscious in-group favouritism or the belief that candidates who share their characteristics will better represent their interests (Cutler 2002).

In terms of racial bias, studies reveal a significant co-racial or co-ethnicity effect, where voters tend to prefer candidates from their own racial group over an outside monoracial candidate (Ansolabehere and Fraga 2016). When it comes to gender bias, a prominent theory suggests that voters may be biased against female candidates, with some studies arguing that gender stereotypes lead voters to favour male candidates (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 2015). Voters often use candidates' gender as a heuristic tool, associating certain traits and policy positions with men and women, although they do not consistently assign feminine attributes to female candidates (Bauer 2017; Schneider and Bos 2014). However, the effect of candidate gender is frequently overshadowed by other cues, with political parties being the most influential. Indeed, recent research underscores the strengthening of partisanship as a more decisive factor in voting decisions than gender (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 2015; Hayes 2011). The perception of competence has also been debated; while earlier studies suggested women were perceived as less competent on certain policy issues, potentially leading to voter bias (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993), recent studies find no bias against female politicians regarding perceived competence, with women being seen as equally competent as men (Carnes and Lupu 2016). Additionally, observational data shows that women win elections at similar rates as men, suggesting no clear gender bias in electoral outcomes (Sanbonmatsu 2006). Large-scale surveys also indicate that candidate gender has little influence compared to the overwhelming impact of partisanship (Hayes and Lawless 2016; Bridgewater and Nagel 2020). Although this lack of apparent gender bias could result from unobserved differences between male and female candidates, such as higher quality or effort by women (Anzia and Berry 2011), experimental studies further support the absence of gender bias. These studies, where candidate gender is randomly assigned, show that respondents do not rate female candidates more negatively or show a lower likelihood of voting for them (Schwarz and Coppock 2022).

Challenges in Office

Furthermore, the challenges faced by underrepresented groups in elected office play a key role in understanding representation gaps. For example, research shows that disabled politicians face particular challenges in elected office. Despite the fact that disabilities may be invisible or 'hidden', data consistently shows that the representation of disabled politicians in Britain falls far below the approximate 20% of individuals with disabilities in the population. A study by Evans (2022), based on interviews with 51 candidates and elected politicians in the UK, highlights several barriers faced by disabled individuals, including inadequate accessibility in the built environment and documents, insufficient resources to ensure events and activities are accessible, and pervasive ableism, which includes both overt prejudices and a lack of awareness and commitment to inclusive practices.

Another group of politicians who face specific challenges in office are those politicians with a minority ethnic background. Using data from three large-scale surveys, Lajevardi et al. (2024) found that minorities in both the United States and Sweden anticipate feeling less welcomed compared to the majority population, which discourages them from pursuing political office. In the UK, the broader polarisation of the political climate since before the Brexit referendum has exacerbated these issues, with a notable rise in abuse directed at politicians based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, and other identity-related issues. Leading up to the 2019 election, researchers analysing social media observed that female politicians in the UK, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds, were more frequently subjected to sexist abuse compared to their male counterparts (Gorrell et al. 2019). Social and psychological analyses suggest this trend is a reaction to empowered women and is influenced by deeply rooted perceptions that perpetuate existing stereotypes (Rudman and Fairchild 2004).

In conclusion, the underrepresentation of marginalised groups in politics is the result of a complex combination between supply and demand factors (Lovenduski 2016). Barriers to elected office often arise from societal attitudes, caregiving responsibilities that limit time and availability, financial costs, institutional norms, and the absence of support networks, all of which contribute to lower levels of political ambition; Hazan and Rahat, 2010). Thus, It's important to acknowledge that while some research suggests that minorities are underrepresented because they are not putting themselves forward, this is not necessarily due to a lack of interest. Many individuals may be discouraged by the significant challenges they face in entering politics. Addressing these barriers is essential to fostering a more inclusive and representative democracy, where everyone has the opportunity to participate and be fairly represented.



FINDINGS

In this section of the report we present the results from the political engagement section of the London Councillors Survey 2024. The findings of this report expand upon those on the descriptive characteristics of London councillors as presented in the report “Mind the (Representation) Gap: Does your Local Council reflect the diversity of its population? Findings from the 2024 London Councillors Survey – August 2024”, accessible at <https://www.migrantdemos.org.uk/resources-reports>

While the former focussed on descriptive representation, this report presents the findings of the survey relating to the experiences and aspirations of London councillors. 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. The London Councillors Survey 2024 presents the first-of-its-kind substantive dataset on the individual-level characteristics and detailed information on perceptions of challenges and political aspirations of local representatives in London.

These findings are complemented by case studies of individual councillors from across London, who shared their experiences of getting into and serving in local politics, and the challenges, barriers, and motivations in their day-to-day work.

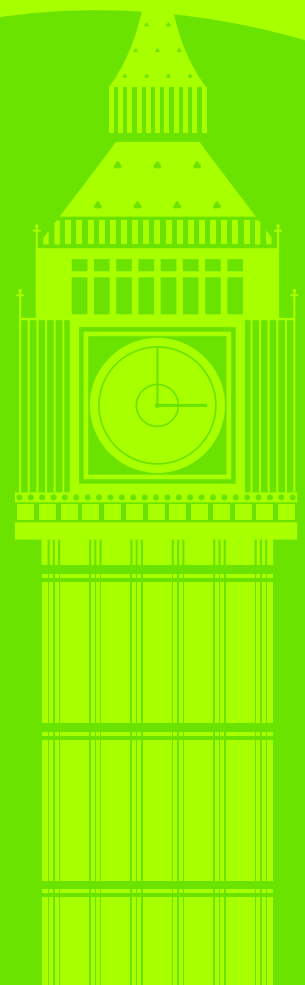


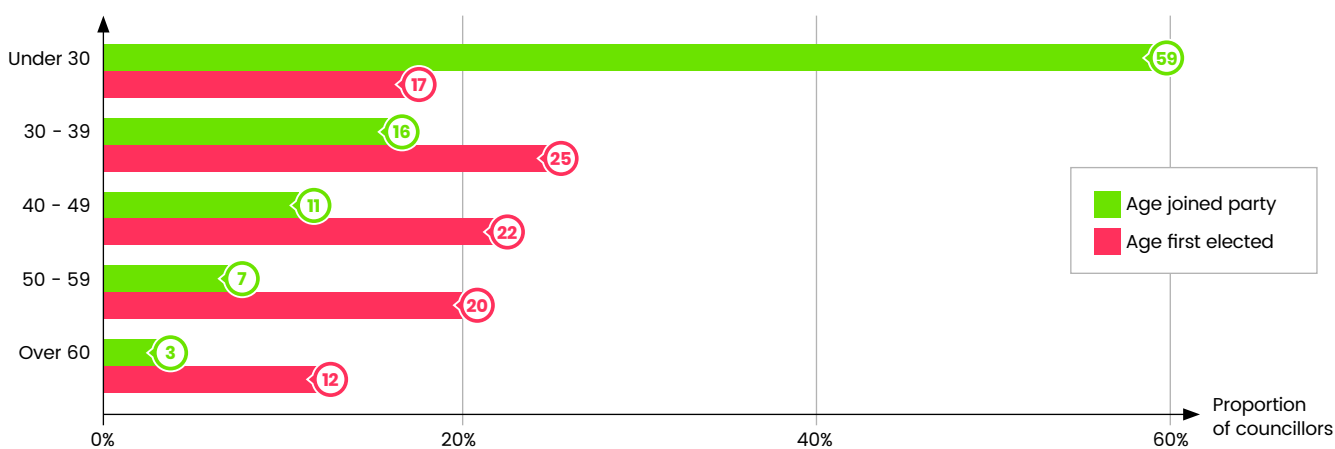
FIGURE 1

INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS AND THE ELECTION AS COUNCILLOR

The report “Mind the (Representation) Gap” shows how the most represented group among councillors in London are those 60 years of age or above, constituting around 35% of all London councillors, whereas those between the age of 18 and 29 represent only 8% of all elected London councillors. Yet, is it the case that young people are less interested in taking part in the political process?

To answer the question above, we asked councillors about the age in which they first joined a political party and the age in which they were first elected into office as a local councillor. The findings are reported in Figure 1. As Figure 1 shows, close to 60% of elected local councillors first joined a political party in their youth, when they were younger than 30 years of age. Yet, very few councillors got elected during those years, with only 17% reporting having been elected before turning 30. Why is it that this substantial gap exists, given that there seems to be a concrete interest from young people being willing to engage in the political process? Why is it that political parties fail to engage younger citizens into running for office as local councillors?

Figure 1: Age of joining party vs getting elected



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

CASE STUDY

COUNCILLOR JOSEPH VAMBE

Whilst growing up in Southwark, and inspired by his politics teachers, Joseph Vambe quickly realised that he wanted to be a politician, seeing it as a platform where he could 'create change, improve people's lives.' Without wasting any time after graduating from university, Joseph started organising in his local Labour party and, when an opening came up, ran for local government.



**This is what's so unique and important about being a councillor.
It's the fact that you're supposed to be the local expert.**



Joseph's dedication to his role makes it clear that it is important to have a councillor who is invested in and knowledgeable about their local area. With lots of development and building, Southwark is changing. Joseph sees it as his role to ensure that these changes benefit the residents he represents, managing any potential tensions between them and developers. For example, Joseph helped to secure nearly 1 million pounds from a developer to refurbish the Rockingham Community Centre. He mentions how, when he was growing up, the centre was a 'beacon for the community' and he had been sad to see how dilapidated it was becoming. His hope is to restore it to its former glory.

For the future, as the Deputy Cabinet member for neighbourhoods, Joseph is keen to make sure the entire community is consulted on decisions like this, even people who haven't typically been involved in local politics until now, such as people on estates, young people, and disabled residents. He's motivated to include everyone by developing innovative ways of consulting his constituents, encouraging everyone to have a voice.



There's a widely held belief that councillors are working extremely hard and struggling, many of us, particularly ones that are working, to keep pace.



At 24, Joseph is the youngest councillor in Southwark. He sees this as a strength, giving him a unique perspective, and says he is well supported by his colleagues to learn. Despite this, Joseph feels that the system is rigged against younger candidates. "They weren't thinking about young people when designing how [the system] would be." He describes the difficulty of juggling a full time job and managing a social life alongside the daytime commitments of being a councillor. He believes that making councillors a full-time position would lower the barriers to access for younger people who tend to have less financial security and stability.



**Do I think councillors understand their power?
No, because society doesn't understand their importance.**



Something that surprised Joseph is how much power he has to change things, saying he "definitely underestimated the amount you can do in the local authority". He notes the council's ability "to make instrumental changes across health, social care, schools", feeling that the role of a councillor is undervalued, especially as compared to that of an MP. Perhaps most pertinently, Joseph remarks that when individuals come to him, "the fact that I can just send one email, make one phone call, and get that sorted, is hugely humbling, actually."



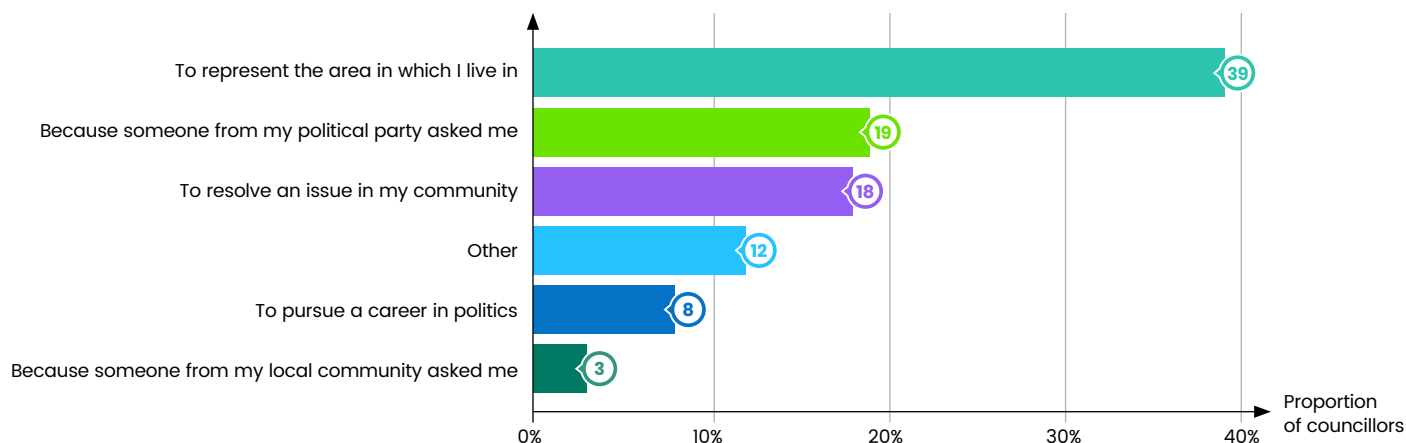
FIGURE 2

REASONS FOR BECOMING A COUNCILLOR

Another important question to understand the selection of individuals into politics is the reasons that drove them to run for office in the first place. We therefore asked councillors about their two main motivations for running for public office as councillors. As Figure 2 reports, the most common response (39%) is “to represent the area in which they live”, followed by “because someone from my political party asked me to” (19%) and “to resolve an issue in my community” (18%). Only 8% report having done so “to pursue a career in politics”.

There are two main lessons that can possibly be drawn from these results. First, citizens who run for office are mostly doing so to champion their areas or specific issues they care about, with very few reporting being in it only to pursue a career in politics. Second, these results show the importance of party networks and how political parties can play a role in supporting their most promising members into running for office.

Figure 2: Reasons for becoming a councillor



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

CASE STUDY

COUNCILLOR DAN BOWRING

Dan always had a strong interest in politics and a love for his local community. Growing up in Hounslow, standing for local election was something he had long considered. In his charity work at night shelters and with refugees, he saw people in desperate need and when the timing was finally right for him in 2022, it was the desire to affect change for those in need that inspired him to stand.

“When you lift back the lid... Oh, my goodness, there’s this entire ecosystem.”

Once in office, the breadth of the work took him by surprise. He quickly built relationships with more experienced councillors and case officers to help him to navigate the myriad of departments and policies through which the council operates. Most importantly, he began strengthening relationships within his ward, taking frequent walks to get to know the residents and businesses that populate it, and making a special effort to reach out to under-served populations such as boat dwellers and refugees.

Quoting from a recent speech of his, Dan told us that boat dwellers are “the victims of a silent scandal”. With the security of their homes reliant on exorbitant and often opaque mooring costs, boat dwellers enjoy none of the legal protections of those housed on land. Although these problems originate in national law, Dan remains committed to helping boat dwellers where he can.

Another issue close to Dan’s heart is the rights of asylum seekers. Having fled their home country due to sex-based discrimination preventing their education, he recounted working with child asylum seekers who had been unable to access education within the UK due to their five-month stay in a local hotel being classified as ‘temporary’. Although they were moved before Dan could ensure access to local schools, he is optimistic about the future for refugees under the new government.

“You can’t give someone a home if it doesn’t exist.”

Housing has been one of the biggest challenges facing the area, Dan notes. Although he is proud of exceeding the target of 1000 new homes, problems with long waiting lists and overcrowding persist. However, he has felt able to make a big difference on the Planning Committee. The architecture of the borough can shape the lives of the community and, here, Dan has felt able to do important work.

Handling the third highest rate of casework in the borough, Dan loves getting the chance to help people directly. When people aren’t familiar with the systems, they can spend years navigating issues which will take him one email to solve. “They’re overjoyed” he says, “I’m overjoyed!”

Much of his casework comes from social media, from people asking questions in local Facebook groups. For new councillors, he recommends engaging with the local community online. Being a councillor and doing the job well is about connecting with people, and, as he stresses, “there is no shortcut”.

“You have to turn up. You have to build relationships. And that takes time.”

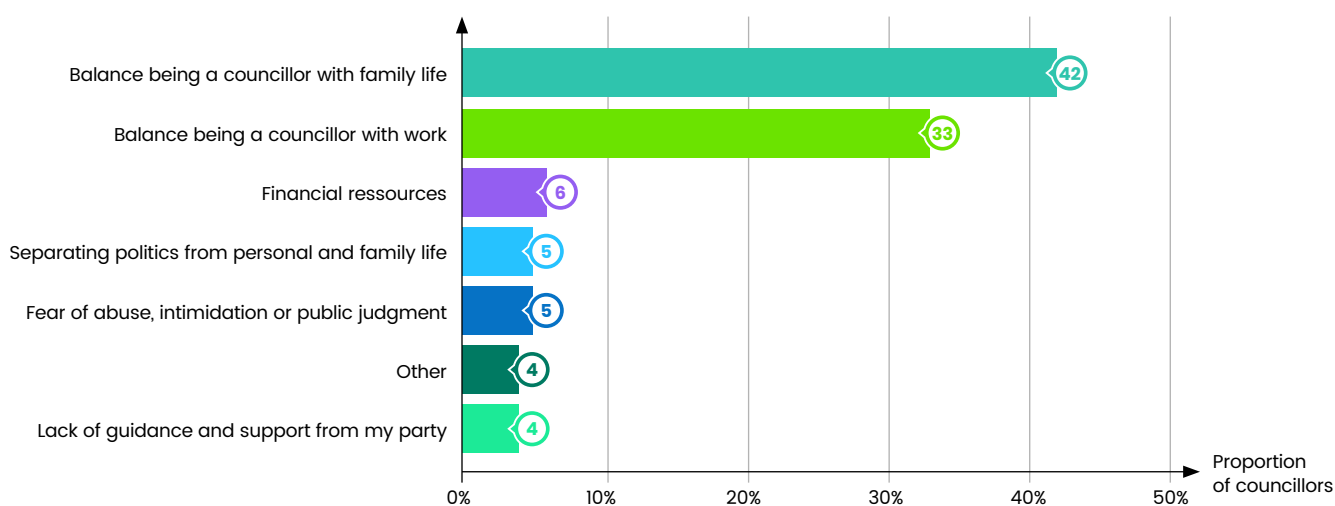


FIGURE 3

CHALLENGES OF BEING A COUNCILLOR

Next, we set out to understand what the main challenges for individuals are in their experience as councillors. As reported in Figure 3, we found that the two most common options are finding a “balance between being a councillor with family life” (42%) and “balance being a councillor with work” (33%), suggesting that the commitment required from the job poses an important personal challenge for the individuals involved, especially given that most councillors take on their role as only a part-time job. Additionally, other challenges seem to matter for councillors, with 5% reporting “fear of abuse, intimidation or public judgement”, an important issue worth addressing to ensure citizens are not discouraged from participating actively in the political process, thus reducing the diversity and representativeness of the political class, as reported in 2024 by the [Jo Cox Civility Commission](#).

Figure 3: Biggest challenges as councillor



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

Emily was interested in politics from a young age; as a child, she recalls, she watched Have I Got News For You with her parents. Studying politics in sixth form, her school was visited by a number of speakers from the major parties. This inspired Emily to join the Young Liberals and get involved in local campaigning. She stood for election as an MP in 2017, in her then home of Brighton Kemptown, although she noted that the party held little hope of winning that seat. Four years after settling full-time in London, she was asked by an incumbent councillor if she would run in the next local election. Ever a practical person, Emily set about learning all she could about the role. Shadowing councillors and attending mobile surgeries – thanks to the assistance of already established local Liberal Democrats in her area – she felt she had a good understanding of what her role involved before election.

“The baton gets handed along.”

Nevertheless, the sheer volume of casework surprised Emily. Elected at the peak of the cost of living crisis, residents in her ward (as elsewhere) were really struggling and some of the issues brought to her were highly complex. The amount of knowledge expected from the start is immense. Fortunately, weekly officer sessions are held to introduce councillors to key case officers, and the Liberal Democrats have compiled a directory of who to contact for which issues – something which Emily has suggested the council as a whole might wish to do.

Praising how active groups are in her community, Emily says there is never a quiet moment in her work. With productive sub-committees and a collegiate atmosphere, Emily has thoroughly enjoyed her work in planning and scrutiny. However, not all meetings have been a positive experience. Full council meetings, she notes, can be a bit unpleasant. As decision making can occur in meetings taking place beforehand, full council, public meetings can become opportunities for party politics. It can be frustrating, Emily admits, when motions proposed by her party are voted down despite many Labour councillors agreeing in principle. At times, she says, it can even get a bit personal.

Despite some sour notes, Emily is proud of her achievements as a councillor. She is particularly proud of working with Arch Co and local artists to make a start on improvements to the Beer Mile, making it a nicer and safer place to be.

“I don't know where I'll be in six years time...”

Affected by housing insecurity and instability in the rental market, Emily worries that she won't be able to remain in the ward long-term. Combined with a struggle to balance building her career, her personal life, and her council work, Emily tells us she will not stand again in the next election. Working in the housing sector since her graduation, Emily shared that she is pursuing a Masters in Town Planning, and hopes to affect positive change as a private citizen whilst she takes a break from politics.

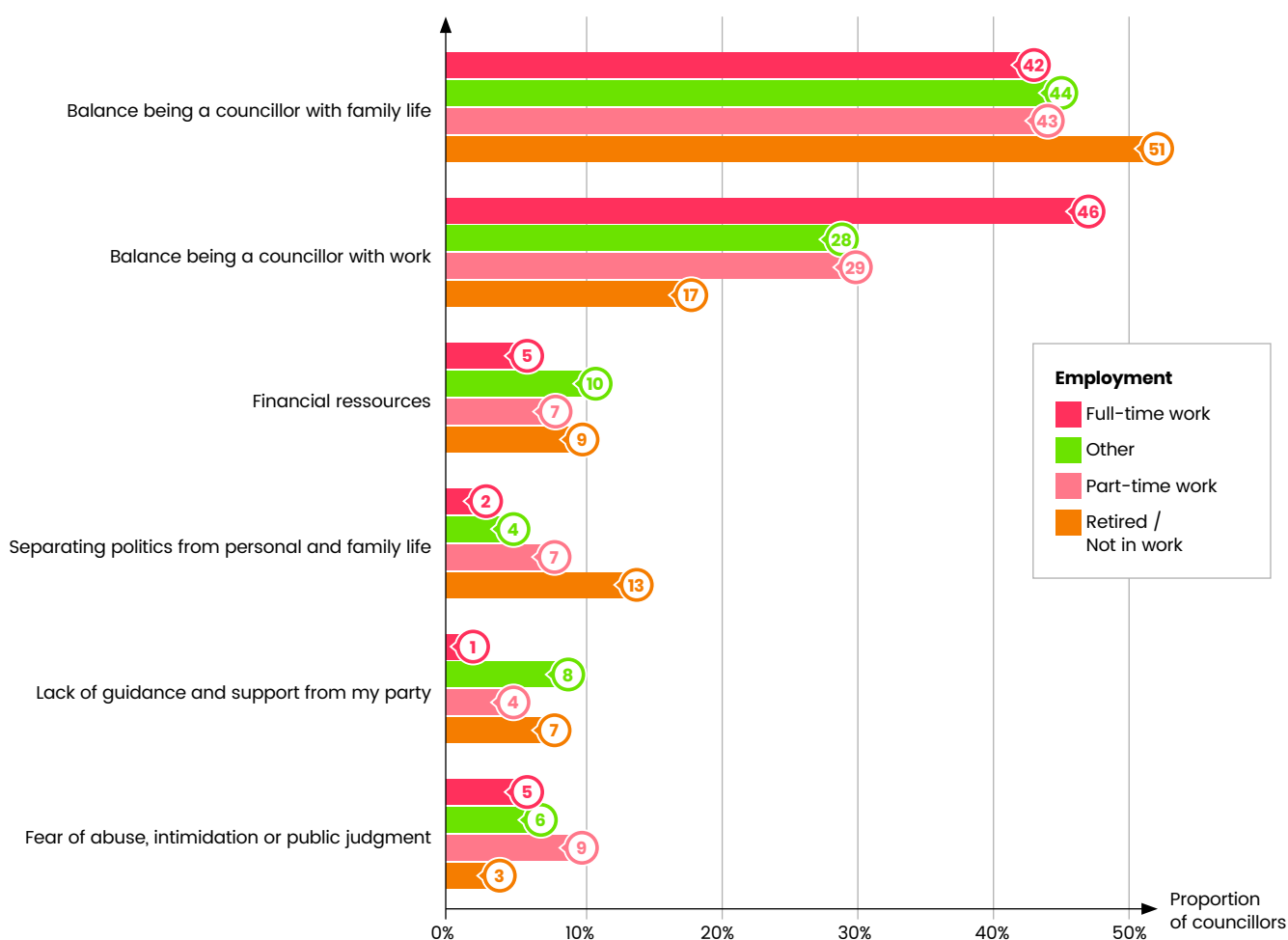


FIGURE 4

CHALLENGES OF COUNCILLOR BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Interested in understanding how challenges vary for different groups of councillors, in Figure 4 we report the challenges councillors face in their positions as elected officials, disaggregated by their type of employment. Figure 4 shows how, for those individuals who are retired or not in work, balancing being a councillor with family life is the biggest challenge (51%). However, and more tellingly, the biggest gap between categories is the one for people in full-time work, who find it challenging to balance their position as councillors with their full-time employment (46%). The part-time nature of the councillor position does clearly represent an important challenge for many individuals, especially for those with demanding full-time jobs.

Figure 4: Biggest challenges as councillor



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

CASE STUDY

COUNCILLOR ANTHONY KELLY

Born in Ealing, Anthony is the son of two Irish immigrants. He studied in local Catholic schools until age 16, when he left to join the workforce. He was always interested in national politics. In 2006, he spoke with an experienced Labour activist who told him Labour was going to lose the local elections. Sure enough, they lost in Hammersmith and Fulham that year. He then decided to join the party. In 2010 he stood for a ward which Labour were not expected to win, and he subsequently focused on becoming a candidate in 2014. His work paid off as he was elected that year. When asked why local and not national politics, Anthony said it's the sense of agency he gets from making decisions that affect his local area.

During committee meetings, Anthony is happy to offer his opinion and help reach the best outcome. Full council meetings are more managed, he tells us, with who speaks directed by the leadership. On average Anthony will speak once a year in full council meetings, on issues where he feels he can add a unique perspective.

I want to speak about things that I want, that I think I can add value to or lived experience.

Balancing his personal life and his duties as a councillor has been challenging. When his father became ill, he made the decision to move to working part time to balance his caring responsibilities alongside his duties as a councillor. He now works with a community transport service for wheelchair users, which has been incredibly rewarding.

His work has given Anthony an understanding of the challenges in his community. Often, there are hidden reasons why following council procedure is not a priority for residents. Other cases fall through the cracks, with a lack of clarity on who has the power to help. Often unable to overturn decisions made by experts, Anthony stresses that contacting your local councillor is not a shortcut.

Despite these difficulties, Anthony is proud of serving his community. He was happy to see a Controlled Parking Zone implemented, after he had pushed for it at the behest of residents across the political spectrum. Seeing pedestrians and cyclists take routes that had recently been restored has been fulfilling. One woman, he remembers, came out to vote for him because he had managed to get her boiler fixed.

Those moments are precious.

Anthony acknowledges the serious issues facing his ward, with high rates of anti-social behaviour and homelessness. Despite meeting housing targets, there is still a need across the borough to provide more sustainable and affordable homes. Whilst the council tries to negotiate with land-owners for fair rents, the project has to be economically viable. Solving this problem, in Anthony's opinion, must be one of the strategic aims of the council.

Though the work can be tough and funding is a perpetual issue, Anthony plans to continue helping his community through the local council and he is optimistic about the future.



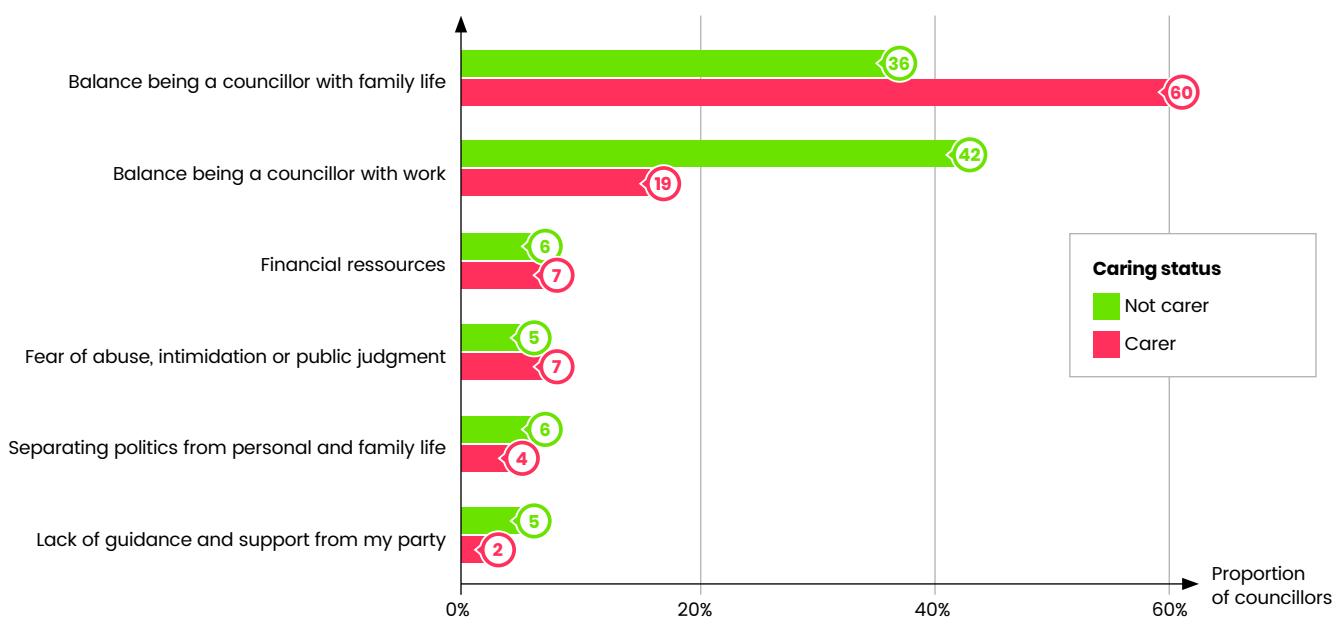
FIGURE 5

CHALLENGES OF COUNCILLOR BY CARING STATUS

We conducted an additional sub-group analysis, looking at the challenges councillors face, disaggregating between those who have adult or child care responsibilities and those who do not. Unsurprisingly, for those councillors who have caring responsibilities, balancing their position with family life is by far the biggest challenge, selected by 60% of them.

Those councillors who have caring responsibilities also feel significantly less hopeful about being able to take on the challenges of being a councillor. When asked to rate their agreement with the statement: "I feel hopeful about taking on the challenges of being a councillor", less than 1% of councillors with caring responsibilities agreed with this, compared to 7% of councillors without caring responsibilities.

Figure 5: Biggest challenges as councillor by carer status



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

CASE STUDY

COUNCILLOR VALERIE BOSSMAN-QUARSHIE

Valerie's start into local politics began with a powerful commitment for community activism. Though she had been a strong advocate for Labour-related causes, she had not officially joined the Labour Party until a coincidental encounter with Jeremy Corbyn on a rainy day. When Corbyn asked if she was a Labour member, Valerie realised she was not, and quickly joined the party that same day.

As a councillor, Valerie has made an impact, particularly on the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee. She became a staunch advocate for free school meals, educational reforms, and celebrating Black History Month. "Schools often depict the history of Black people as homogeneous," Valerie explains. "But there are so many nuances to the Black experience." This perspective drives her commitment to ensuring that Black history is taught in a way that reflects the importance of diversity.

Valerie is deeply committed to her community, always ensuring her constituents receive the support they need. She also takes time to mentor students interested in local politics, allowing them to shadow her and gain firsthand experience. On top of her demanding council schedule, Valerie balances her roles as a councillor and a mother: "I will do the normal school afternoon pick-up, then give dinner, do homework, and go back to council chambers or attend a meeting online."

You hot desk from your real job to your local government job to being a parent.

Valerie's work as a councillor is diverse and ever-changing. Some days are spent in scrutiny committees, where her preparation is crucial for discussing complex issues. "It takes a lot of preparation," she notes, emphasising the importance of staying informed. On other days, she engages directly with the community, listening to residents' concerns, attending planning meetings, or holding her monthly surgery to address specific issues. She ensures multiple avenues for residents to reach out, valuing both formal and informal communication.

Advocacy is what drives Valerie. She sees herself as a community protector, always looking for ways to resolve issues. Whether it is fighting for a child to get into a school or ensuring a disabled child receives necessary accommodations, Valerie is dedicated in her pursuit of justice for her constituents.

Despite her intense workload, Valerie sees the difference between her role and that of an MP. **"An MP has a team of people, and while I do have some support, I have to do the majority of tasks alone,"** she says. This challenge, however, does not stop her; she always finds a way to make it work.

Valerie also emphasises the importance of representation in local politics. She believes that those affected by policies, particularly people of colour, should be involved in the decision-making process. "Especially in cases involving young people's futures, there are few to no young people in local politics," she states. Valerie makes sure her voice is heard in meetings, knowing that visibility is essential to making an impact.

For those interested in local politics, Valerie offers this advice:

You need to have politics because if you don't, there's no point going in there. You've got to have a cause. For me, having a cause is what gives me the grit and determination to continue.

Her journey from activist to councillor is an important reminder that change can happen in local politics.



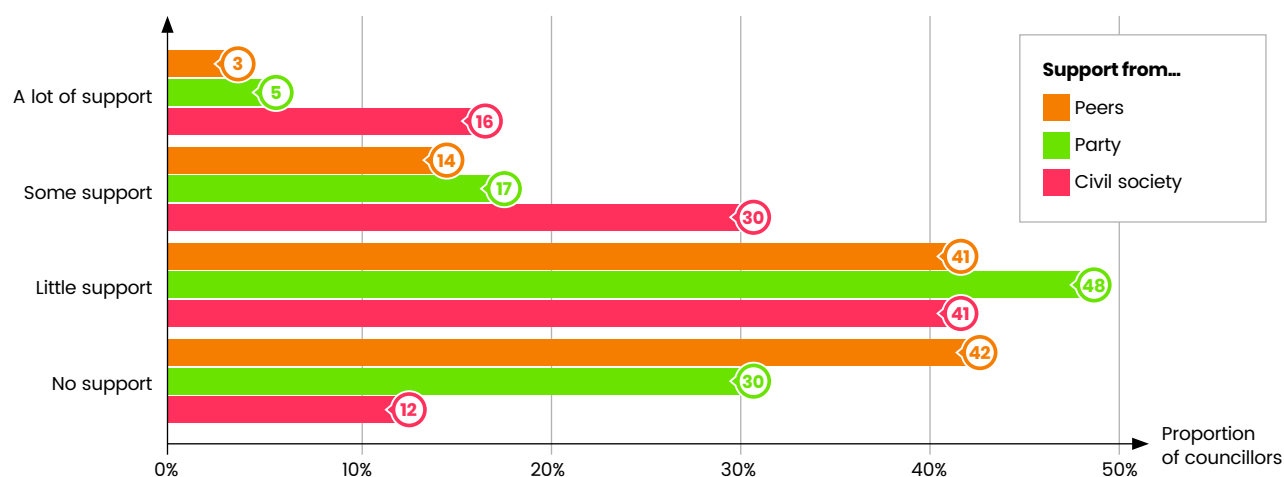
FIGURE 6

FEELINGS OF SUPPORT

As reported in Figure 6, Councillors generally do not feel well supported in their careers and current roles. Overall perceptions of support both from their party, peers and civil society are low, with the majority of councillors indicating that they feel there is little or no support from these groups.

However, there are differences between how supported councillors feel from different organisations – feelings of support are lowest in regards to peer support, followed by party and then civil society organisations. This highlights the positive role that civil society organisations play in providing the highest perceived support among these three different potential sources of help for councillors.

Figure 6: Perception of support



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

It started with an interest in national politics, Jamie told us. In 2019, he took Labour's defeat hard, and it pushed him to get more involved. After two years of work with the Labour Party, another member suggested – in idle chatter, as Jamie puts it – that he stands for local election. Having noticed a few things around Wandsworth that he thought could be improved and wanting to make a difference to local people, Jamie set about doing his research. Going to one of Labour's online briefings dispelled Jamie's concerns that he may be too young.

Jamie's road to election was not smooth. As he had only moved to Wandsworth in 2019, The Selection Committee wanted to see more evidence of his connection to the community. The appeals process was long, but Jamie took their concerns to heart and used this time to strengthen this connection through volunteer work before finally being able to stand.

I don't think there's anything that can really prepare you for being a councillor.

With just a few introductory talks, you are thrown in at the deep end as a new councillor. Quickly, Jamie learnt to lean on more experienced councillors as he adjusted to the role.

The high volumes of emails, casework, and committee meetings, leaves little time for the inquisitive aspect of the job: those moments of organically spotting areas for improvement and building projects around them. A dream of his is to turn a little patch of concrete in his ward into a pocket park for community use.

Nevertheless, Jamie is dedicated to advancing the interests of his community. He is particularly proud of the installation of safety measures on a local riverside pathway which had been a major concern for local residents. As the Chair of the environmental committee, he is also working on the Clean Air Initiative. Despite setbacks when the previous government scrapped a particular grant scheme, Jamie and the committee have managed to acquire a free trial of air quality monitors. He hopes this will lead to better air quality in the area.

Jamie is also working with the Democracy Review to improve the council's political process. Adjournment debates, he observed, are often used for the purpose of political point scoring rather than the development of good policy, which is something he'd like to address.

It's absolutely worth doing, but make sure that you're ready to make that commitment, because it's the residents that will miss out if you're not.

Over the five years he has made his home in Wandsworth, Jamie has been inspired by how his community came together during COVID-19. He is proud to be part of his Labour family – as he refers to his colleagues – and to participate in the revival of the party. To new or prospective councillors his advice is: be stubborn, be persistent, and make sure you have a good support network. The work is tough, he notes, but it has been some of the most fulfilling work of his life.



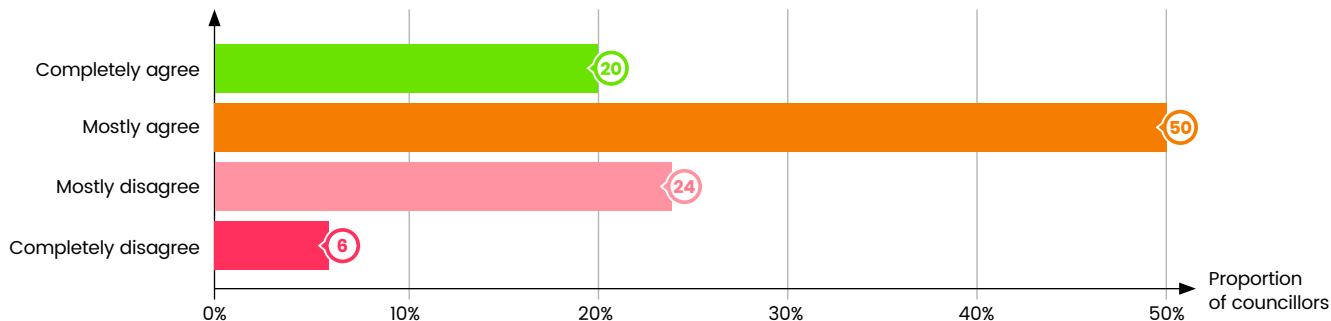
COPING WITH CHALLENGES

Additionally, we asked councillors about their feelings related to the challenges they face as councillors. As Figure 7 shows, 70% completely or mostly agree with the sentence “I feel alone with the challenges of being a councillor”, suggesting a worrying level of individualism and lack of collegiality between elected officials with likely negative effects on the conduct of their duties as councillors, as well as on their wellbeing.

When asked whether they agree with the sentence “I feel hopeful that I can take on the challenges of being a councillor”, 94% of councillors completely or mostly disagree with that statement. These findings suggest a very high degree of hopelessness that should worry both political parties and the wider public about how little politicians seem to feel able to achieve at the local level.

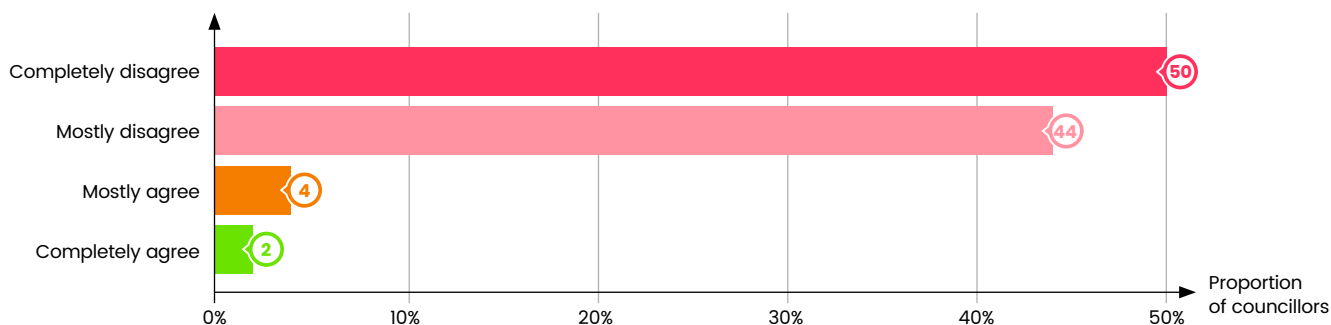
Finally, for this section about how councillors feel about their positions as elected officials, when councillors are asked to agree or disagree with the following statement “When I feel stressed about being a councillor, I know there are other people I can talk to”, 81% of councillors either mostly or completely disagree with it. Again, these results suggest a very low degree of collegiality, with potential negative effects both on councillors’ work as well as their own mental health.

Figure 7: I feel alone with the challenges of being councillor



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

Figure 8: I feel hopeful that I can take on the challenges of being councillor



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

CASE STUDY

COUNCILLOR GILL SARGEANT

For over three decades, Councillor Gill Sargeant has been a dedicated advocate for her community, a journey rooted in her early passion for politics. She joined the Labour Party at 15 and was politically active throughout her university years, driven by a desire to make a difference. Interestingly, despite her 30 years of service as a councillor, including once serving as mayor, her path into local politics wasn't immediate. When first approached by the community to become a councillor, she decided to focus on her young family, believing it wasn't the right time. Meanwhile, her late husband took on the role, allowing her to stay involved in community work while balancing her new responsibilities at home.

When she eventually took up the role of councillor herself, she did so with a strong sense of purpose and understanding, having seen firsthand the demands of the position through her husband's experiences. "I was involved for a long time so I had no illusions" she recalls, underscoring her long-standing commitment to community work.

Over the years, she has witnessed significant changes in both her ward and the role of a councillor. Colindale South, now one of the fastest-growing areas in London after Stratford, has seen an influx of new residents, making it an incredibly diverse and unique place to represent. "There's never a dull moment", she says, noting how her work brings her into contact with people from different communities, an aspect of her role that she finds fascinating.

One of the biggest challenges she faces is the lack of funding in local government. "We're working with very stressed organisations," she notes, highlighting how the financial constraints can make it difficult to access funds and meet the needs of the community. Housing, in particular, is the most pressing issue that constituents bring to her. "It's only gotten worse over the years," she says, reflecting on the growing demand for affordable housing in her ward.

Despite these challenges, she finds the work incredibly rewarding. Her role as Age Champion for Barnet and current project with Age UK is especially meaningful to her, involving efforts such as digital inclusion programmes in care homes. **"Age is the issue that nobody has the answers to"** she explains, emphasising the importance of supporting the elderly in a rapidly changing society.

The role of a councillor has also evolved over the past three decades. "There's much more expectation now," she observes. The rise of digital communication has transformed how councillors interact with their constituents, with the volume of correspondence growing substantially.

You'd get a few letters a week and you'd answer, it was much more leisurely. Now it's much more fast paced, there's social media, people feel they can have access to you much more quickly.

While this has made the role more "dynamic and exciting", it has also introduced new pressures and concerns. Online exposure was one concern that has partly led to her decision to limit her engagement with social media, preferring instead to maintain a balanced approach to her responsibilities. That being said, throughout her career, she has always felt supported, valuing the strong relationships she has built with both her local branch ward party and her fellow councillors.

I've always been very clear. As far as I'm concerned it's a part time role.

Although she once considered running for MP, she ultimately decided to prioritise her family, choosing to maintain a balance that allowed her to be both an effective community worker and a dedicated mother. "Other people can do both of course, it just didn't suit me". Her story is a testament to her belief that real change begins at the local level, where her commitment to her constituents and passion for community work have always been her driving force.



INTEREST IN STANDING FOR RE-ELECTION

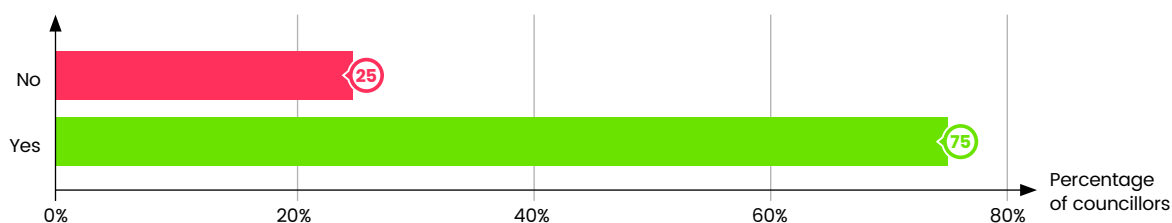
Next we turn to interest in standing for re-election as a councillor. Most councillors in our sample are interested in running again, despite the challenges noted. However, there are clear disparities in terms of who wants to stay in local politics as a councillor. As Figure 11 shows, women are more likely than men to say they do not want to stand for re-election. This holds even when accounting for caring responsibility, education and employment status.

As Figure 12 also makes clear, those who are currently renting or in social housing are also more likely to say they want to leave their councillor role (39%), than those who have a mortgage or own their house. These findings are worrying because – as the Report “Mind the (Representation) Gap” illustrates using the same councillor survey data – the gaps between those who want to stay in politics reproduce or worsen existing representation gaps. Men and homeowners are already overrepresented in local politics, and yet women and renters are more likely to want to drop out, even after they have gone through all the selection and campaign stages of getting into a councillor position. Additionally, as Figure 13 shows, re-election intention also varies by ethnic group, with those identifying with the “Other” category much less likely to report being interested in seeking re-election.

Our findings are concerning and show that political parties, councils and civil society need to find ways to address why certain already underrepresented groups of councillors (e.g. women and those renting or in social housing) are also more likely to want to leave local politics.

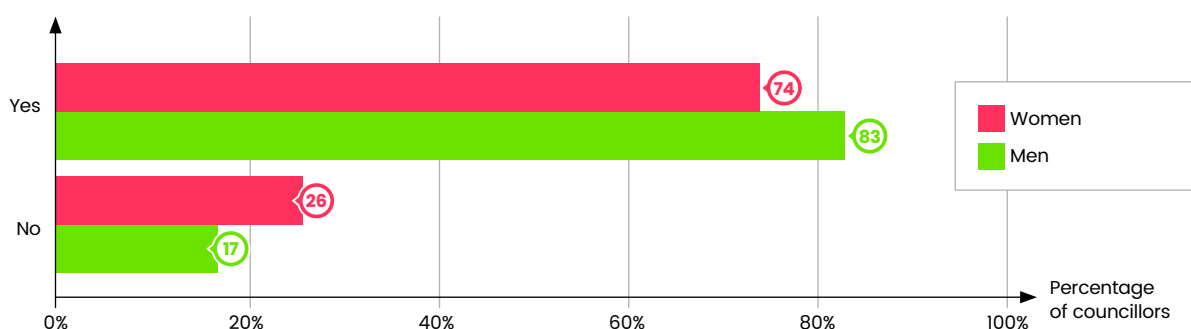
Moreover, there are no significant differences in re-election interest between councillors according to disability or sexual orientation.

Figure 10: Interest in re-election



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

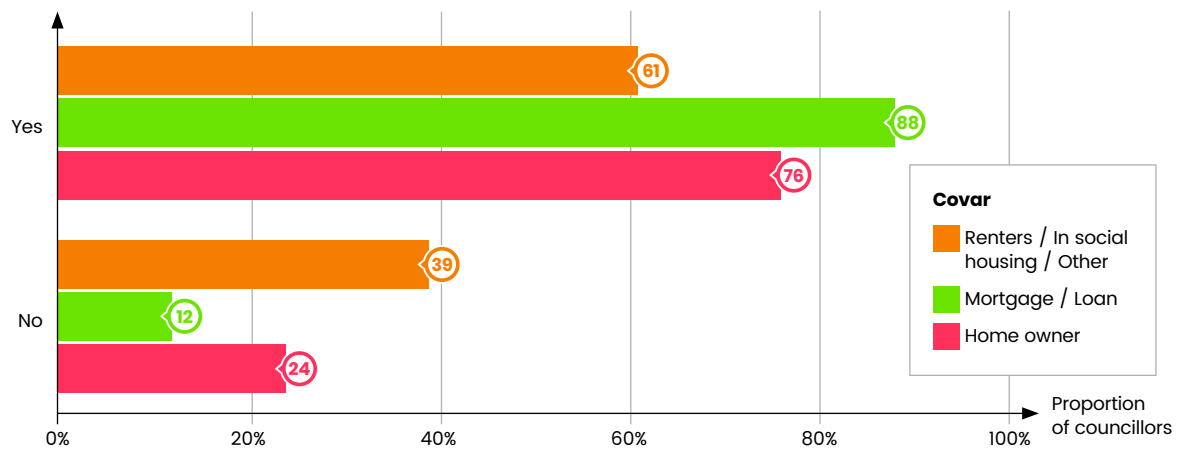
Figure 11: Interest in standing for re-election as councillor



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

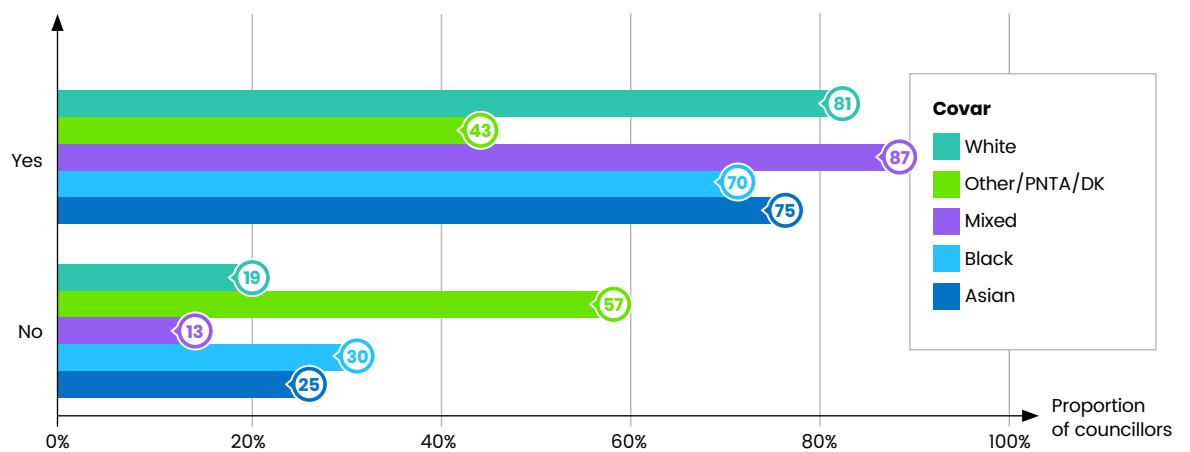
FIGURES 10-15

Figure 12: Interest in standing for re-election as councillor



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

Figure 13: Interest in standing for re-election as councillor

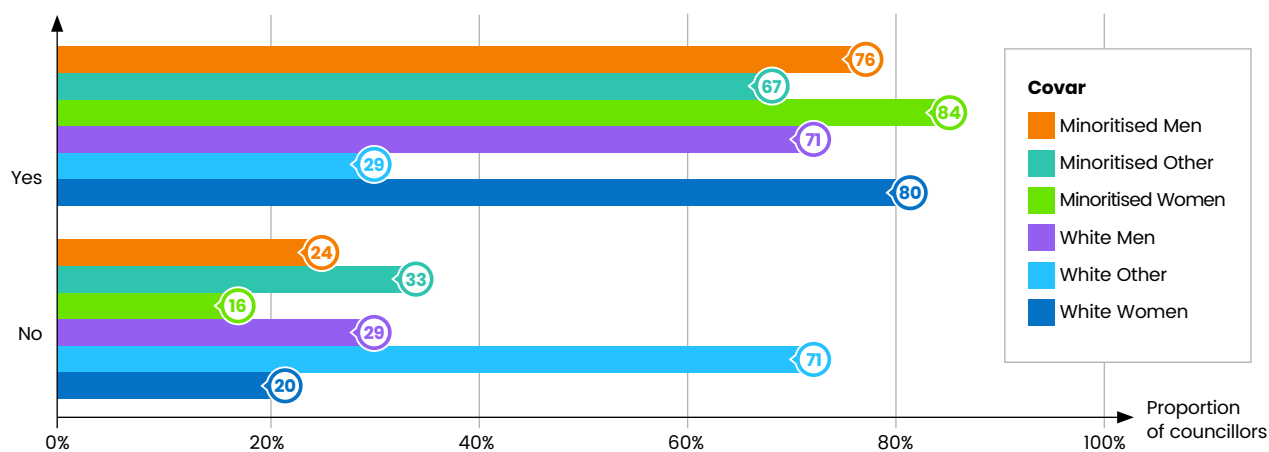


Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

FIGURES 10-15

Breaking this further down into gender and ethnicity, we can see in Figure 13A that women from ethnically minoritised backgrounds are less likely than white women, white men or men from ethnically minoritised backgrounds to say they want to stand again as a councillor. Engaging in active retention efforts among women councillors, and specifically women from ethnic minority backgrounds, is therefore important.

Figure 13a: Interest in standing for re-election as councillor



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

Born in the same city as the pop star Shakira, Rosa Gomez fled Colombia because of political violence. She arrived in the UK as a teen in the early 1970s. Living in Jeremy Corbyn's constituency, she was inspired by him to join the Labour Party. 'I learned a lot from him as he was very instrumental to not just my family, but my community.', she recalls. Later on, Rosa started supporting migrant groups by working as a translator for immigration lawyers and visiting asylum seekers detained by the Home Office.

This passion for advocacy and community service naturally progressed into a political career. However, in 1993, her first attempt to become a city councillor in Hackney was unsuccessful. "I was very sad about it...I decided to go back to Colombia to rest", Rosa confessed. It was during this trip that she was the victim of a violent incident that left her blind. "This is how I lost my sight", Rosa explains calmly. "They never arrested anyone". After recovering from the incident, she decided to return to England.

In 2018, Rosa stood again for local elections, but in Redbridge this time. Despite the challenges of her disability, she was elected as a Labour candidate for Churchfields, marking the beginning of her career as a local Labour councillor. **"Frankly, I didn't believe I would win considering I lost in 1993."**

Despite her physical disability, Rosa dedicates most of her time to her work as a London Borough councillor.

"Not every councillor can do this. I don't have a nine-to-five [job]."

With the help of two assistants, Rosa makes sure that issues important to the constituents are known and answered quickly.

When asked about the most difficult part of her job, Rosa admits that being a disabled councillor is very difficult. Fortunately, she found a governmental programme supporting disabled persons to access and remain in work. It was through this programme that she was able to hire her personal assistants who help her with daily tasks, including communicating with residents, doing some research and visiting the ward regularly.

Another challenge for the councillor was the struggles within party politics. She found herself at odds with other Labour politicians' positions on issues such as foreign policy. The councillor highlights difficulties in bringing motions to council when those might not be aligned with the party's policy at that time. This can lead to feelings of isolation. In the case of Rosa, she decided to serve her residents as an Independent after resigning from the party over its position on Palestine.

On local matters, one of her most significant achievements is her work in improving traffic safety around a school. Rosa led a successful campaign to address the dangerous traffic conditions that endangered children. Additionally, Rosa secured free car parking for parents during school drop-off and pick-up times, further easing the traffic congestion and ensuring children's safety.

Nonetheless, she recognises that local councillors do not always have the power to change what is important for their residents. She gave the example of housing which is a major issue in the ward following the austerity programme in the country.

"Some residents, young people, women, have nowhere to go. I can offer them a listening ear."

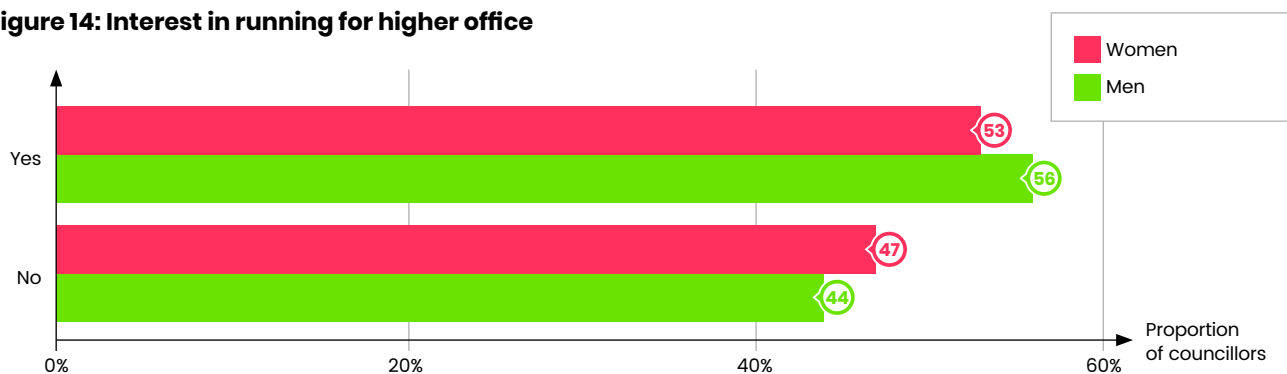
To prospective councillors, Rosa gives this advice: "You've got to have it in your heart to do this job. Sometimes it can be hard. Sometimes it can be emotional. You can only cry with your constituents you know. Because there's nothing you can do even if you want to assist them."



FIGURES 10-15

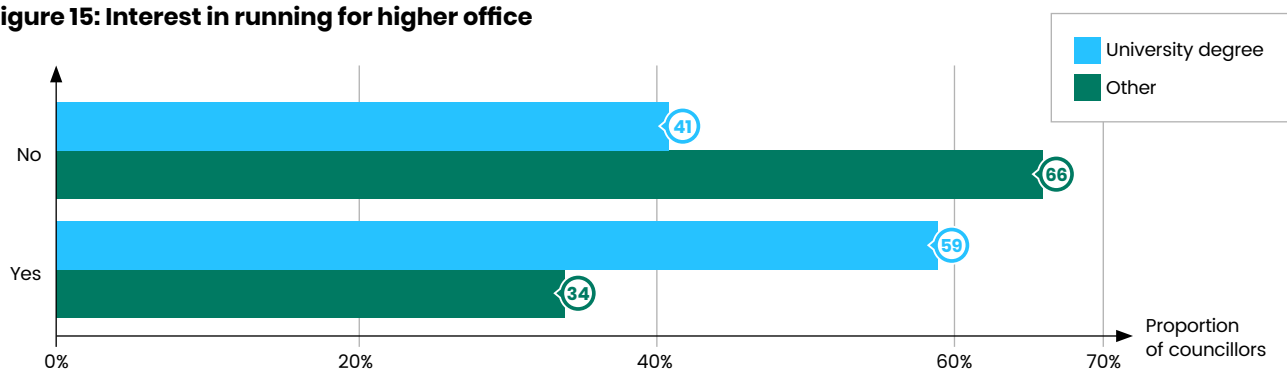
Additionally, we asked about councillors' interest in running for higher political office (as a Mayor or MP for instance). As Figure 14 shows, men are more likely to report being interested in running for elected office (56% for men vs 53% for women). Finally, as shown in Figure 15, councillors with a university degree - who as reported in the above cited report already make up 79% of elected councillors in London - are much more likely to say that they are interested in running for higher office (59%), compared to only 34% of those without a university-level degree. Again and again, these results confirm that the gaps in representation of politicians at the national level - a phenomenon recently reconfirmed by the [Sutton Trust](#) in 2024 - can often be traced back to the lack of diversity at the local level.

Figure 14: Interest in running for higher office



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

Figure 15: Interest in running for higher office



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

CASE STUDY

COUNCILLOR ANTON GEORGIOU

Anton's journey into politics began very early. At just 17 years old, he was already campaigning for the Liberal Democrats, inspired by a local councillor who had stepped in to help his mother with a pressing issue. This experience sparked a deep interest in politics, leading Anton to run for local office as soon as he turned 18. Though he didn't win that first race, it did not stop him from staying involved in his community and with the Liberal Democrats. With a lot of dedication, he was elected as a councillor in 2020.

Life as a councillor, Anton has found, is a blend of the mundane and the far from ordinary. Some days are filled with minor issues, like sorting out the miscollection of rubbish bins. But the real challenges lie in the ever so common issue every borough faces, the severe shortage of affordable housing. "The last five years as a councillor have been quite a bumpy ride," Anton reflects.

"It's both exciting and frustrating because, as councillors, we're on the ground. We see the real needs of local people, and it's hard when they can't get the help they need at a good time."

His drive to support his residents, especially the most vulnerable, is what keeps him going, even when the obstacles seem overwhelming.

Anton has become known for his dedication to housing, particularly in handling the most severe cases. He has earned a reputation for pressuring housing officers to find accommodations quickly, standing up for those vulnerable families. This reputation has even led people from outside his ward to seek his help. However, Anton is all too aware of the challenges. **"It's frustrating because tasks often take too long to resolve,"** he admits, pointing to budget cuts and misallocated funds as significant barriers. "That's why scrutiny and effective scrutiny is really important. When decisions are made by the political arm of a local authority, you need others to scrutinise effectively. I think not enough scrutiny happens, and that's why sometimes bad decisions are made."

When Anton first entered office, he was the lone Liberal Democrat among his peers, an intimidating position given the opposition's less-than-welcoming stance. But he quickly adapted, and eventually developed many relationships with other councillors. By 2024, the Liberal Democrats had grown to include two more members, strengthening his position and the party's voice in local government.

Despite his early ambitions of becoming an MP by 35, Anton's perspective on higher office has changed. The current political climate, with its racism and xenophobia, has made him reconsider this path. Yet, he is still committed to his work. "I'm proud of always fighting for Alperton," he says. "And I will continue to do that for as long as I can."

For those considering a role as a local councillor, Anton offers both encouragement and a warning. "It's challenging," he says, especially in areas like housing, where the cases can be daunting. But the rewards are worth it.

"Don't get sucked into the political nature of local government. It's not about who makes the best speech; it's about doing the hard work, the casework."

Anton's journey is a demonstration to the impact dedicated local politicians can have, even when the road is tough.

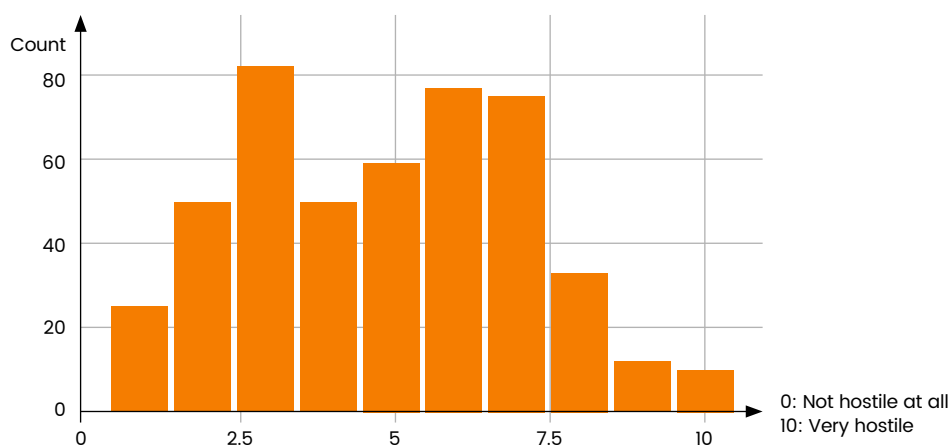


HOSTILITY AND DISCRIMINATION

We also wanted to understand how councillors perceive council and committee meetings, the public places where councillors are most visible and where decisions are taken. To measure such perceptions, we asked councillors to evaluate on a scale from 0 (not hostile at all) to 10 (very hostile), how they perceive council and committee meetings. As Figure 16 makes evident, there is a two-peaked distribution, although most responses fall in the more hostile category (above 5).

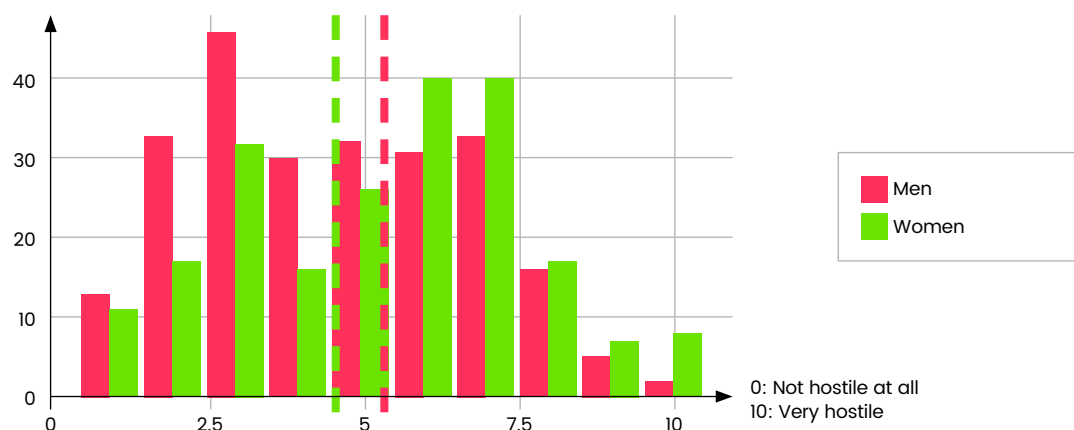
However, once we disaggregate responses by gender, as done in Figure 17, we find an important result: women perceive committee and council meetings as much more hostile than men. These results can have many implications, but one potential consequence is that the current atmosphere of meetings discourages the participation of women councillors in the actual deliberations of council and committee meetings. To ensure that all elected members of Councils across London can equally contribute to important debates that have a direct impact on the lives of Londoners, councils should evaluate how different groups of councillors feel during committee and council meetings, and review rules to moderate debates. Council meetings should provide a space that feels welcoming to all and gives all elected members the ability to contribute equally.

Figure 16: How hostile would you say that council and committee meetings feel?



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

Figure 17: How hostile would you say that council and committee meetings feel?



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

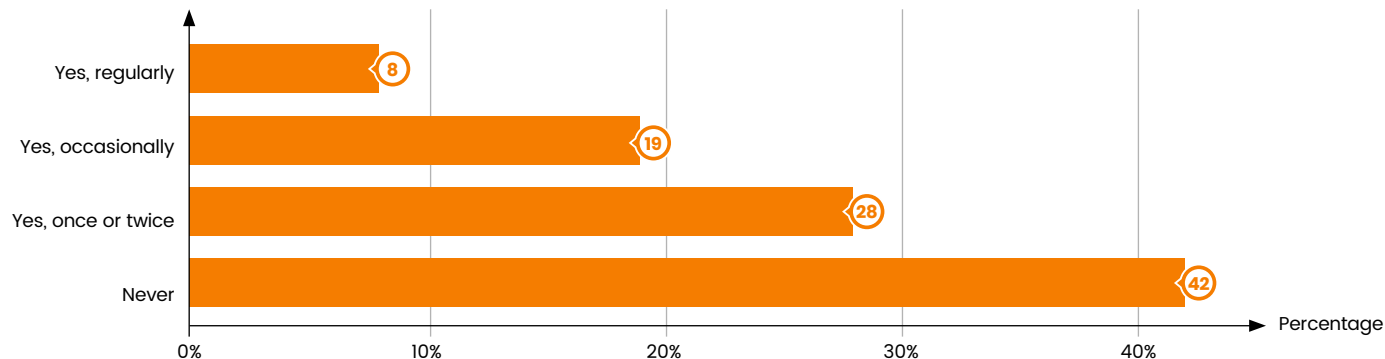
FIGURES 16-22

Finally, we also asked councillors about their experience being treated unfairly or disrespectfully because of their background while doing their jobs as elected officials. As Figure 18 shows, over half of all elected councillors report having been treated unfairly or disrespectfully at least once because of their background while doing their jobs as elected officials, with more than a quarter of all elected London councillors reporting that this type of discrimination takes place occasionally or even regularly.

More worryingly, as Figure 19 shows, when disaggregated by gender, we find that over 70% of women report having suffered from discrimination, compared to 45% of men. We also find – as shown in Figure 20 – that 76% of councillors who have a disability say they have suffered some form of discrimination because of their background. Figure 21 shows a similar issue for LGBTQ+ councillors, 65% of whom say they have been discriminated against because of their background.

Finally, when disaggregated by ethnicity, we find some stark differences. While 50% of white councillors say they've been discriminated against, this increases to 66% for councillors who identify as Asian, 68% for those with a mixed background, and a staggering 86% for Black councillors.

Figure 18: Have you ever been treated unfairly or disrespectfully because of your background while doing your job as an elected official?



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

Figure 19: Treated unfairly or disrespectfully because of your background while doing your job as an elected official?

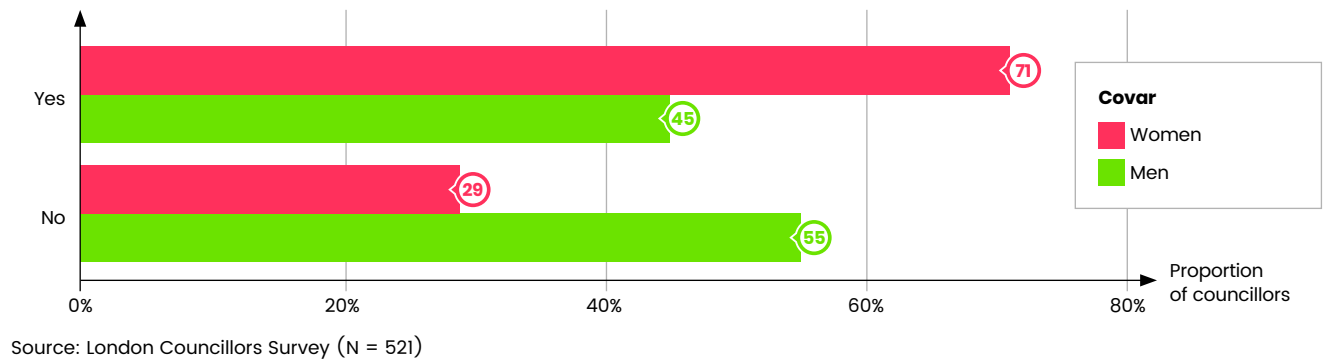


Figure 20: Treated unfairly or disrespectfully because of your background while doing your job as an elected official?

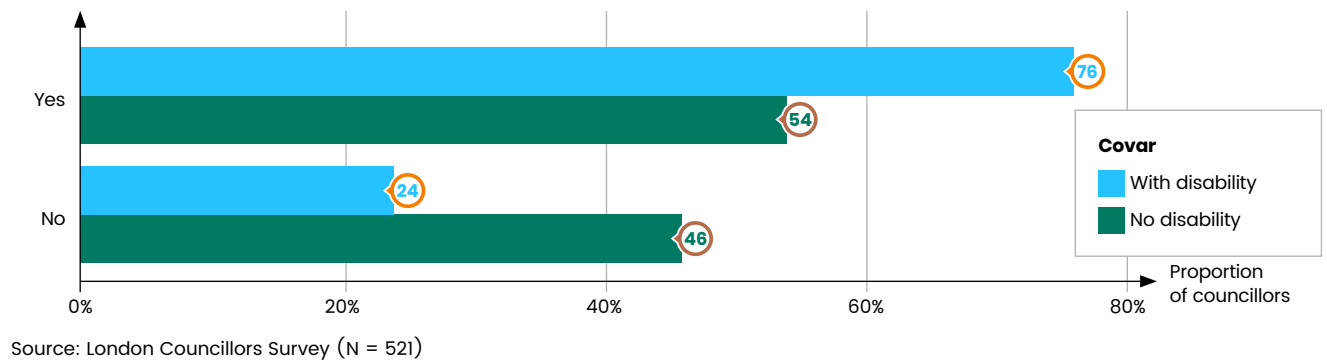


Figure 21: Treated unfairly or disrespectfully because of your background while doing your job as an elected official?

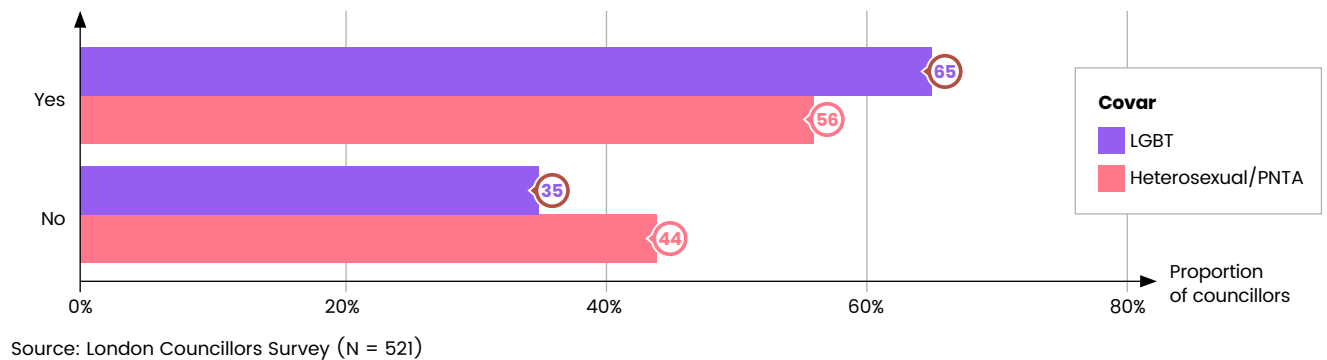
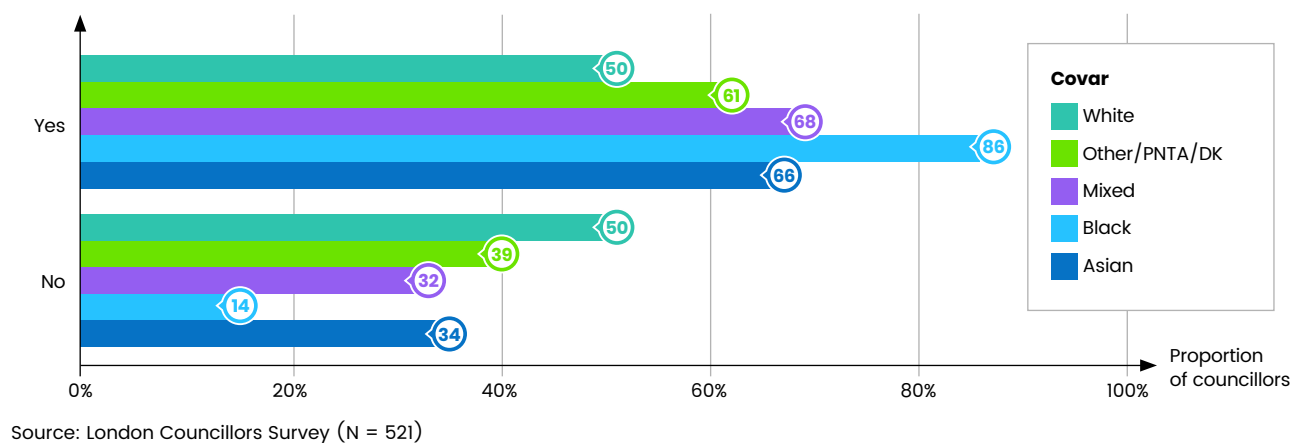


Figure 22: Treated unfairly or disrespectfully because of your background while doing your job as an elected official?



Initially, when Mufeedah Bustin moved to London, she was not involved in local politics. She found it easy to avoid engaging in local politics, especially in such an extensive city. However, living in Island Gardens, she began to love the city and her locale, inspiring her to engage with and contribute to her community. She joined the Labour Party in 2015 and, with some support from a female councillor, decided to interview for the role and got selected. This was the first time she had done significant canvassing in her area, and she began knocking on people's doors and engaging with her community. She loved this experience, and this is when her career in local politics began.

Mufeedah cares deeply about her community and supporting those within it, guiding her experience as a councillor. She is most proud of working with the local elementary school to install safer crossings at the entrance. Notably, she places pride in how she worked with the students and their concerns, as well as the communal nature of the work, where they could see how their engagement in local politics paid off. However, Mufeedah notes that change is slow, and becoming a councillor does not give you immediate power or ability to make changes. Instead, it allows you "the privilege to have those discussions and interact with people who can make a difference."

That is what makes me really proud. It's not necessary for me to do stuff. But it's when I'm able to support other people in the community to get things done... when people can say we did it.

Being a councillor itself has also been challenging at points. As a mother, she must balance her time parenting with extra councillor duties. Balancing these multiple priorities can take a lot of work. She also acknowledges the unique challenges faced by women, especially those from minoritised groups, in politics. This includes a higher likelihood of facing abuse, particularly on social media, compared to their white male counterparts. She mentions the importance of not taking such abuse personally, though she recognises how difficult it can be. Mufeedah also highlights problems in the candidate selection process within her party. Sometimes, candidates are selected not based on merit or reputation in the community but because they have a network of supporters within the party. This can hinder the election of more diverse and capable candidates, particularly women and those from minoritised backgrounds.

It is such a privilege to be able to serve your community; people come to you when they are at their lowest... there's an element of responsibility that comes with that."

Despite challenges, Mufeedah finds the experience of being a councillor incredibly rewarding. She values being able to help improve the lives of those in her community and supporting other women and minoritised councillors to stand for office. Furthermore, she hopes that more women and people from different backgrounds will also run. Diversity is a priority to her, and she emphasises its value and the importance of supporting others in local government. If you're considering the councillor role, Mufeedah advises: **"Definitely do it."**



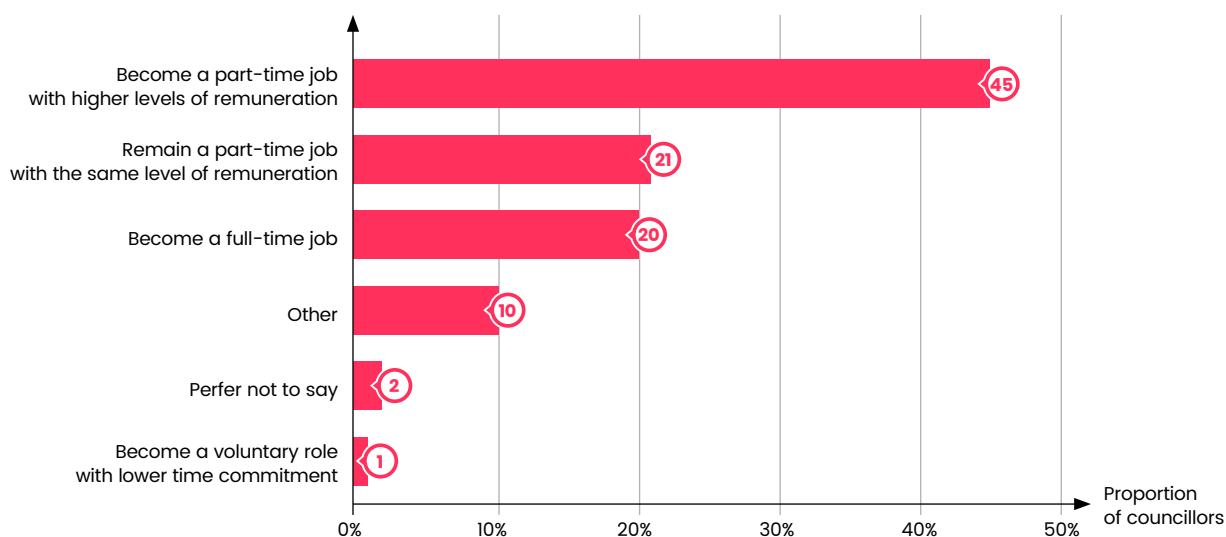
FIGURE 23

COUNCILLOR REMUNERATION

To conclude the survey, we asked councillors about their opinion regarding their working arrangement, and specifically what they thought about possible changes to the role of councillors. The biggest single choice (45%) was for the role of councillors to remain part-time, but with higher levels of remuneration. This suggestion sits in line with a recent recommendation made by London Councils to increase the basic allowance for councillors in London to £15,960.

An additional 21% of councillors believe that the current remuneration and type of role are adequate, with a similar amount (20%) preferring for it to become a full-time employment position.

Do you think that the job of a Councillor should



Source: London Councillors Survey (N = 521)

Anthony Molloy has been a member of the Labour Party since he was just 16 years old, but it was not until later in life that he decided to delve into local politics as a councillor. Like many, Anthony was hesitant when asked to become a local council member. While he had always enjoyed the intricacies of policymaking, the thought of handling casework and dealing directly with residents seemed like a “nightmare.” However, his perspective soon changed. Today, Anthony proudly reflects on those tasks, admitting that what he once dreaded has become “one of the best bits of the job.” He even wishes he had started this journey sooner.

Anthony’s commitment to his role is routine—he works around six days a week, committing around 4–5 hours each day to his councillor duties. His routine typically involves responding to emails in the morning and attending meetings in the afternoon. Recently retired, Anthony now has even more time for serving his community.

Navigating the responsibilities of a councillor has been a learning experience for Anthony. One of the toughest lessons has been figuring out who to talk to within the system. **With so many tasks that can drag on due to the lack of passion from other councillors, Anthony has had to identify, through trial and error, the people who are truly effective at getting things done.**

One of Anthony’s most significant contributions has been his involvement in the “One Kilburn” initiative. His ward, Kilburn, is uniquely divided across three boroughs—Camden, Brent, and Westminster—each with its own local council. Coordinating efforts across these independent boroughs could be challenging, but Anthony has played a key role in ensuring that they work together to keep Kilburn running smoothly. He regularly attends public meetings to listen to residents’ concerns and discuss ways to improve the area. This has improved many residents’ lives as they have expressed the division made everything complicated.

When it comes to his political future, Anthony has no interest in seeking higher office. He feels content in his current role and is frustrated by councillors who aspire to become MPs, believing that their ambition can sometimes “compromise their work” as local representatives.

For those considering a career as a local councillor, Anthony has some practical advice: write everything down. The demands of the job can be overwhelming, and keeping meticulous records is crucial to staying on top of everything. Anthony’s experience serves as a reminder that while the role of a councillor can be challenging, it helps the community.



DISCUSSION

Overall, this report has found that councillors from all demographics feel a lack of support in their role. With a substantial – and at times overwhelming – workload and no standardised training procedure, it is easy to become daunted by the challenges the role presents. These problems are compounded for marginalised individuals, as councillors who are female, LGBTQ+, disabled or BAME report a higher experience of discrimination based on their backgrounds. Women in particular report a higher level of felt hostility in council meetings. Such experiences are reflected in the fact that women and those who register their ethnic group as “other” are less likely to seek re-election. This higher rate of stepping down may contribute to the disproportionately low percentage of women and BAME councillors when compared to census statistics for their areas.

The heavy demands placed on councillors may also be contributing to the marginalisation of women and young people in the role. Balancing being a councillor with employment and caring duties have both been highlighted as significant struggles for councillors. With women disproportionately bearing caring duties ([TUC 2023](#)), and young people still building their careers, this is likely to be a factor in discouraging their participation. Also making up the largest proportion of renters ([English Housing Survey 2020](#)), young people may be discouraged from committing to long-term party service due to the risk of displacement from their ward. This is despite the evident interest young people have in politics.

Another issue found is that both women and those without university degrees are less likely to seek higher office. This may be contributing to these groups being underrepresented at the national level ([Uberoi 2020](#); [Holt-White 2024](#)).



RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the insights from the “Mind the (Representation) Gap” 2024 report, this study sheds light on the experiences of underrepresented councillors, including women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, those without higher education degrees, and ethnic minorities, in political office. To encourage potential candidates from these communities to run for office—or to motivate those already serving to seek re-election or pursue higher positions—we recommend that political parties enhance and expand their mentoring and development programmes. These initiatives should focus on identifying and nurturing talent within these demographics, helping individuals understand the responsibilities of higher political office, and equipping them with the skills and confidence needed to advance in their political careers.

Where those programmes already exist, such as Labour’s Jo Cox Women in Leadership programme, Conservative Women’s Organisation events, the Green Party Women Group or Liberal Democrat Women group activities, amongst others, training organisers should be mindful of intersectional barriers to getting elected and then to staying in office. Our survey shows that civil society organisations provide an important source of support to councillors, and that councillors perceive higher support from civil society than their peers or their party. Civil society organisations can thus fill important gaps in the network and support provision to politicians. Non-partisan organisations like Elect Her’s work with women politicians or the Migrant Democracy Project’s MPower programme provide an important addition to party training programmes and networks. While a lot of training programmes provide advice on campaigning and selection, a clear challenge that this report has highlighted is the higher drop-out rates and interest in higher political office among underrepresented groups.

Training programmes need to provide support to underrepresented groups not just at the start, but at all stages of their journey in politics. Getting underrepresented groups to run is important but only a first step. Training programmes should place greater emphasis on supporting those who are already elected: getting underrepresented groups to run, but also to stay in politics is vital for reducing gaps in representation.

Finally, training programmes that target politicians at later career stages could also allow more space for advocacy and organising. Our results show that some of the most pertinent challenges that councillors from underrepresented groups face are systemic issues like making the councillor role more compatible with care work or employment, or the tone and culture of council meetings. Training programmes or networks should provide space where these systemic issues can be openly discussed and recommendations drafted on how to address these barriers to staying in office.

To address the difficulties of marginalised and underrepresented communities, similar mentoring and development programmes could be instituted to recruit people from these communities into local government. As part of this, we suggest parties reach out to specific individuals from these communities to request they stand and prepare them for this. Further, we also suggest that – as well as clear codes of conduct to address sexism, racism, ableism and queerphobia – procedures are developed (where they are not in place), implemented and monitored to ensure participation in meetings is directed with an eye to the equitable participation of all councillors from marginalised communities. Although this may result in council meeting discussions being more managed, this is important as studies have shown that, when unmanaged, women speak significantly less proportionate to their presence (Bauer & Trudghill, 1998). Procedures should also be put in place to request and receive reasonable adjustments for disabled councillors. Finally, political parties can strengthen the relationship between their officers for underrepresented groups – such as Women’s Officers and Youth Officers, where they are in place – and local councillors as well as future candidate training and selection.

Regarding gender disparities specifically, we reiterate the call for local governments to implement the policies recommended by the Fawcett Society in their report, Data Following The 2019 Local Government Elections. We also suggest that all parties adopt the best practice policies developed by the Labour Women's Taskforce to encourage the participation of women.

We also recommend that London Councils undertake three key investigations to better support their councillors. First, for councillors experiencing housing insecurity, councils should collaborate with affected individuals to explore how best to support their continued political engagement. Second, for councillors struggling to balance caring responsibilities or career development with their duties, councils should work closely with them to develop flexible arrangements that could ease these burdens. Third, we advise a thorough review of the current support systems within each political party, with the goal of creating a more collegial environment. This would enable councillors to build a robust support network, allowing them to seek assistance from colleagues when facing both professional and personal challenges.

To improve the conditions for local councillors, we suggest the introduction of a political welfare officer who would provide support to all councillors, regardless of political affiliation, ensuring that independent councillors also have access to necessary resources. Additionally, we recommend to panels reviewing councillor allowances to collaborate with NGOs representing marginalised communities as well as research in this area. We are mindful that this research focuses on London and there is a wide range of councillor allowances across the UK, with each council having relevant independent panels to review these allowances. Considering an England-wide review of allowances and considering the challenges faced by underrepresented groups would particularly benefit those with families or insecure housing situations, allowing them to fully engage in their political roles.

Moreover, we propose enhancing training for councillors, which could include pairing new councillors with experienced mentors and developing a database of contacts for addressing common issues. This training should be conducted as an apolitical programme, involving all parties, to ensure the inclusion of independent councillors and to foster greater collegiality across party lines. Such an approach would encourage more cooperative policymaking and reduce the perception that full council meetings are merely exercises in party politics.

Finally, as highlighted in both this report and the "Mind the (Representation) Gap" 2024 report, there is a significant lack of detailed information about local representatives across the United Kingdom, including how councillors from diverse communities experience their roles. We recommend that London Councils and the Local Government Association invest substantial resources to develop a systematic approach to data collection. This initiative, supported by all political parties, should aim to routinely gather data on the composition and experiences of elected councillors in London and ideally across the entire United Kingdom.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, it's important to recognize the self-selection bias inherent in voluntary survey studies. Research shows that more affluent and educated individuals are more likely to participate in surveys (Curtin, Presser, and Singer, 2000; Goyder, Warriner, & Miller, 2002; Singer, van Hoewyk, & Maher, 2000). This may partially explain the discrepancy between the report's findings and census data, though it is unlikely to account for the full disparity.

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. Despite the 29% overall response rate, Conservatives responded at notably lower rates than other councillors. There were also concerns among some councillors that the data collection was too personal, and a mistaken belief that such data was already available, which it is not.

This bias may be even more pronounced in the interview portion of the study. These interviews were voluntary and public, potentially leading councillors to worry about the impact on their careers if they spoke out against party policies. We invited 60 councillors from all political parties and London boroughs who had expressed interest in being interviewed after completing the survey. Although we aimed for proportional representation in the case studies, most did not respond despite multiple follow-up emails and calls. The case studies presented in this report are based on those who agreed to interviews with our research team, and as a result, the findings are limited in scope.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite these limitations, we believe this study offers invaluable insights into the composition of our local councils. There are several avenues for expanding this research. We recommend extending this project beyond London to compare representation levels across different regions of the country, as well as conducting it every 4-5 years to track changes over time. Additionally, it would be beneficial to compare these findings with representation levels and governance challenges in national politics. Investigating similarities and differences across various geographic regions, time periods, and levels of governance would provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of political participation and representation gaps in England and the broader United Kingdom.

To combat the issues in data gathering, we recommend that future projects work closely with political parties and council leaders. A council ambassador in each party could be appointed to raise awareness of the goals, methods, and importance of the survey. In any case, support from prominent local councillors would be invaluable to continuing this work and ensuring high response rates. We also recommend careful messaging and timing the study to avoid the data collection taking part during or close to elections where possible, to further distance the work from the perception of carrying a political agenda. This would also allow for more time to collect survey answers, as respondents consistently came in through the run of the survey.

Another critical area for further study is the de-aggregation of data to examine variations in councillor representation and experiences between councils. Understanding the specific mechanisms leading to reported differences in treatment and experience among groups—such as women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, people without higher education degrees and carer councillors—is essential. Additionally, researching the factors contributing to more positive experiences among councillors would be valuable. Understanding the challenges and barriers faced by individual councillors and broader identity groups is crucial for developing effective policies to overcome these obstacles and improve councillor representation in the future.

This report highlights the diverse experiences of councillors across London Boroughs. Many councillors, particularly those from marginalised groups, face significant challenges in fulfilling their duties due to a lack of support and higher rates of discrimination, among others, which may contribute to their underrepresentation in local government. Addressing these issues through targeted support, mentoring programmes, improved working conditions, and further research is essential to creating a more inclusive and effective political landscape for all Londoners.

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