

International Women's Day debate

5 and 10 March 2020



Key messages

- The first women won the right to vote in local elections in 1869 and the first female councillors were elected in 1907ⁱ. Despite the franchise being extended to women over 100 years ago, the Fawcett Society found that only 35 per cent councillors are womenⁱⁱ.
- Our members tell us that a lack of pension contributions and parental leave, and the severity of the abuse and intimidation directed at those at in public life, act as barriers to standing as a councillor or taking on responsibilities as a cabinet member.
- We are committed to helping members improve their diversity and inclusion across all areas and we are working with central government to encourage more women to enter politics.
- While more women than ever before are choosing to become councillors, there is still more work to do. As part of our sector-led improvement offerⁱⁱⁱ, we have formulated a series of programmes, campaigns and toolkits to help our members encourage and support women, and those from other underrepresented groups, to run for political office.
- The LGA's *Be a Councillor* campaign is at the heart of our work in ensuring that local government reflects the communities it represents. This campaign aims to encourage more people to stand as a councillor and includes focus on encouraging women and under-represented groups to engage with, and enter, politics.^{iv}
- Last year we launched a toolkit to help councils create underlying policies, procedures, ethos and environment that encourages and empowers women, parents and carers to become local councillors and take on leadership positions.^v
- In response to growing concerns about the impact of the increasing level of public intimidation and toxicity of debate on our country's democratic processes, particularly at a local level, we published a 'civility in public life' report which sets out our programme of work in this area.^{vi}
- Councils have a positive impact on the lives of their female residents. As well as encouraging them to enter public life, councils provide a range of services that improve the lives of women. This includes providing support services to new mothers, protecting domestic abuse victims, and tackling Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Briefing

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FURTHER INFORMATION

The equal participation of women and men in local politics, as our elected councillors and as our leaders, is an important condition for effective democracy and good governance. Representative councils are best able to speak to, and for, their communities and to support the effective business of local government. Democracy and decision-making are strengthened when councillors reflect the people they seek to serve and represent.

Be a Councillor

The LGA's *Be a Councillor* campaign aims to help councils encourage a more diverse range of people consider standing for election. Councils are encouraged to think about holding prospective councillor events, creating short films to showcase the role of the councillor or sharing our e-Learning to educate on what local government does. Our resources also provide case studies of councillors from a range of backgrounds. A variety of councils across the country have launched their own *Be a Councillor* campaigns, including Lancashire, Nuneaton and Bedworth, Stroud and West Sussex.

The LGA will also be supporting Parliament Project at three upcoming events focused on encouraging more women to stand for election. The Parliament Project is an organisation aimed at inspiring, empowering and encouraging women to run for political office in the UK.

Twenty-first century councils

To mark International Women's Day last year, the LGA published a toolkit *Twenty-first century councils*, backed by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, aimed at helping those who have other responsibilities, such as looking after children, including those with special needs, caring for an older relative or who want to start a family, to be councillors and represent their communities. It also provides support to women councillors and their families, some of whom have faced intimidation, particularly online, and to encourage and empower them to stand for election again in future.^{vii}

Civility in public life

Across the UK, there are growing concerns about the impact an increasing level of public intimidation and toxicity of debate is having on our country's democratic processes. Reports from our members indicate that there is not a consistent response from the police across the country and that there is confusion about reporting, support, legislation and impacts for our society and democracy. In response, the LGA is working closely with WLGA, COSLA and NILGA to coordinate a programme of work entitled *Civility in public life*.

The purpose of the programme is to address the intimidation of local government members and officers; to address standards of public discourse; to address standards of political discourse and behaviour in public office; and to provide support and advice to councils and councillors. The body of work also includes the review of the model code of conduct, which is being conducted in response to rising local government concern about the increasing incidence of public, member-to-member and officer/member intimidation and abuse and overall behavioural standards and expectations in public debate, decision making and engagement.^{viii}

Services for women

Councils have a significant and positive impact on the lives of their female residents. As well as encouraging them to enter public life, councils provide a range of services that improve the lives of women. Providing support services to new mothers, preventing domestic abuse, and tackling Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) are just a few examples of the range of good work councils do to improve the lives of women.

- Support to new mothers

Councils must secure early childhood services for the benefit of parents, prospective parents and young children, taking reasonable steps to involve parents, early years providers and other relevant people in those arrangements. There are also duties on councils with regard to the availability of childcare services, and the promotion of these services to parents.

Since 2012, when councils took on responsibility for delivering public health programmes, including the Healthy Child Programme, the number of children judged as 'school ready' has increased from 52 to 70 per cent. The LGA's publication, *Improving Outcomes for children and families in the early years* highlights some of the different ways that councils are supporting new mothers and their wider families.^{ix}

- Domestic abuse

Addressing all forms of domestic abuse is a high priority for councils. Domestic abuse can have a long-term and devastating impact on families and particularly children. Our ultimate aim is to prevent domestic abuse from occurring in the first place, which is why early intervention and prevention must be at the heart of forthcoming legislation.

We support the proposed Domestic Abuse Bill's objectives of ensuring that people feel able to report abuse and are confident that organisations will do everything possible to support them and their families and pursue their abusers. There needs to be a greater focus on prevention and early intervention measures to tackle the root causes of domestic abuse and support more victims. This should include funding and investment for evidence-based perpetrator programmes and for key learning and best practice from Domestic Homicide Reviews to be shared on a national level.

An example of preventative work is Kent County Council's project to improve the referral and response rate to Victim Support services, when police are called to a domestic abuse incident. The LGA helped Kent run a controlled trial to assess whether there is an improvement in the response rate from victims of domestic abuse when police provide them with a card letting the victim know a support officer will call them. This has been developed jointly with the Kent Police, Victim Support and Kent County Council. The trial was a success and we found an increase in the take up of victim support services from those who received cards.

- Eradicating FGM

Councils are on the frontline of identifying and tackling harmful practices against women and girls, including FGM. The National FGM Centre is an initiative jointly run by the LGA and Barnardo's which is working to help fulfil the Government's pledge to end FGM in the UK by 2030. Sadly, there have now been more than 20,000 new cases of FGM identified over the past four years, and in 2018/2019 there were 4,120 newly recorded cases of FGM in the NHS dataset. This

highlights the size of the challenge facing all agencies seeking an end to this form of abuse. ^x

The work of the centre is crucial if the Government is to fulfil its pledge to end FGM in the UK by 2030. Between September 2015 and January 2020, there have been 612 cases referred to the Centre. It has supported the application of 37 FGM Protection Orders over that time and is also working to support victims of breast flattening, child abuse linked to faith or belief and other honour-based abuse.

ⁱ <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/RP13-14>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/new-fawcett-data-reveals-that-womens-representation-in-local-government-at-a-standstill>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/our-improvement-offer/what-sector-led-improvement>

^{iv} <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/be-councillor>

^v <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-launches-twenty-first-century-toolkit-support-women-parents-and-carers>

^{vi} <https://local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-and-review-model-code-conduct>

^{vii} <http://www.parliamentproject.co.uk/>

^{viii} <https://local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-and-review-model-code-conduct>

^{ix} <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/improving-outcomes-childr-bf1.pdf>

^x <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/clinical-audits-and-registries/female-genital-mutilation-datasets>