

A Toolkit for Local Authorities on Supporting Family-Friendly Local Government

**ENABLING AND SUPPORTING WOMEN,
PARENTS AND CARERS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT**



**An Roinn Tithíochta,
Pleanála agus Rialtais Áitiúil**
Department of Housing,
Planning and Local Government

nwlc
National Women's Council

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Foreword

I am delighted to welcome this family friendly toolkit commissioned by the National Women's Council of Ireland. I have long since advocated for more balanced local government in our communities as we know how important it is for our council chambers to reflect the society that they serve. We must ensure that we provide the supports and structures to ensure the role of the councillor is accessible to all and attracts the diversity we see in our communities.

My Department and I have worked closely with the NWCI for a number of years, and I am delighted to have been able to fund such an excellent resource such as this toolkit. This toolkit illustrates the crucial part stakeholders have to play in the advancement of gender balance, diversity and inclusion in local government, and offers recommendations geared towards assisting both officials and councillors in making the role of local authority member more manageable and sustainable. Simple recommendations contained within include scheduling meetings well in advance and the use of plain English in summarised council documents. These actions should provide a springboard for change, inspiring conversations and ideas between officials and councillors which will assist local authorities in supporting women's participation more effectively.

This toolkit recognises that, while the issue of care disproportionately affects women, it also impacts all people who have caring responsibilities. Therefore, the toolkit is relevant to all Councillors– who are caring for children or for an older, ill or disabled person. As a former councillor with a young family, I can appreciate the time pressures involved and how often my councillor role impacted on family time. These caring responsibilities can significantly affect multiple aspects of people's lives, presenting a barrier to women's participation in political life in particular. We know this is often the primary contributing factor in the underrepresentation of women at local government level.

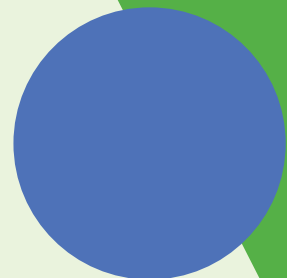
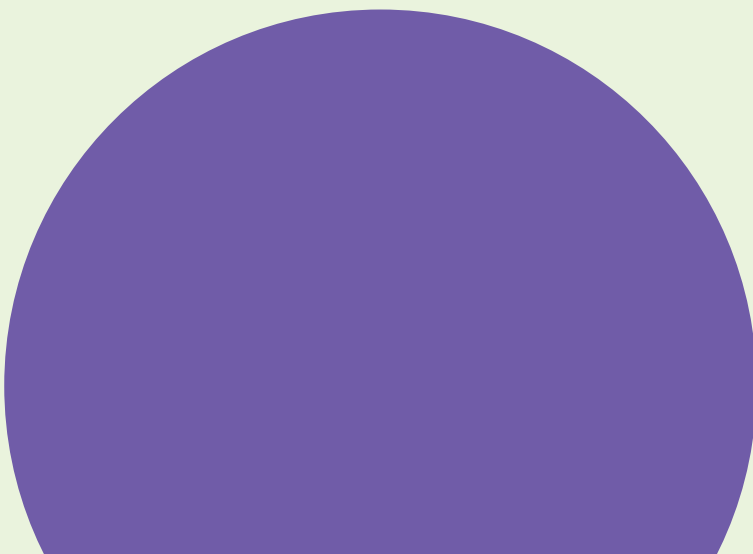
My Department has already undertaken a wide variety of initiatives aimed at promoting the participation of women, inclusion and diversity in local government, including annual calls for funding geared towards both local authorities and political parties. These calls provide investment for innovative and forward-thinking projects which support wider inclusivity and diversity in local government decision-making structures. My Department also provides funding to local authorities for the establishment of local level women's caucuses, which provide an apolitical space within councils for female councillors to explore issues that affect them directly. This funding provision is aimed at supporting the retention of existing councillors.

Furthermore, recognising the obstacle posed by the lack of a statutory framework in relation to maternity leave for councillors, my Department and I developed a comprehensive package of maternity related benefits, which was recently approved by Government. The approved proposals recognise the unique and demanding role of the councillor and acknowledge that it can be difficult to step away from the role for a lengthy absence, such as a maternity related absence would require. The proposals therefore allow elected members the option to nominate an individual as a temporary substitute for the duration of their absence, and also provides for the option of additional administrative support for the duration of maternity leave. These proposals followed

a lengthy engagement process with key stakeholders to ensure a comprehensive and workable outcome was achieved. I thank all those who were involved in this process as this consultation really shaped the elements contained in the proposals approved by Government. Legislation is currently being prepared and I hope to bring this through the Oireachtas in the coming session.

To conclude, I think it is opportune to commend the local authorities who strive to create a more inclusive local government structure through the timing of meetings, the provision of hybrid facilities for such meetings and the provision of training and comprehensive administrative supports for their councillors. These arrangements are only possible through the agreement of members who have supported their colleagues over the pandemic, become more flexible with their time and adapted to significant change. This toolkit along with the recommendations set out will provide a roadmap for local authorities and councillors to work together. I urge council officials and councillors to start a conversation both internally in their own local authorities but also across other local authorities to include the sharing of best practice and experiences. The aforementioned calls for funding provided by my Department should be fully utilised in tandem with this toolkit to deliver key recommendations. Finally, I can assure you all that you continue to have the full support of myself and my officials in all your undertakings and we continue to operate an open door policy when it comes to queries and suggestions.

— **Peter Burke TD**, Minister of State at the Department
of Housing, Local Government and Heritage



About the National Women's Council

Founded in 1973, the National Women's Council (NWC) is the leading national women's membership organisation. We represent and derive our mandate from our membership, which includes over 190 groups and organisations from a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and locations across Ireland. Guided by our Strategic Plan 2021-2024, No Woman Left Behind, our mission is to lead and to be a catalyst for change in the achievement of equality for women. Our vision is of an Ireland and of a world where women can achieve their full potential and where there is full equality for women.

In 2019, we were supported to undertake research into the underrepresentation of women in Local Government as elected officials, "Women Beyond the Dáil". We are now proceeding with a work programme to deliver on the recommendations from the research with support from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. This project was initiated to examine the current issues for councillors with caring and family responsibilities and inform practical recommendations and guidance on how to address these barriers in a toolkit.

Acknowledgements

The National Women's Council commissioned Sinéad Doody, Doody Facilitation and Consulting Limited, to develop this toolkit. Our sincere thanks to her for her work.

Development of this toolkit was a collaborative process. We also want to gratefully acknowledge the project steering group¹ for their generosity and expertise in supporting and informing this toolkit.

We would also like to thank the all the stakeholders who contributed their time and views to the development of this important resource.

¹ Membership included National Traveller Women's Forum; Women for Election; Association of Irish Local Government; Limerick Women Collective; See Her Elected; Immigrant Council of Ireland; CCMA Corporate Committee and Meetings Administrator Network Group and Wicklow County Council.

About this Toolkit

In 2021 the National Women's Council received funding from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to develop a family-friendly toolkit to support greater diversity and inclusion in local government. In announcing the funding, Mr Peter Burke TD, Minister of State for Local Government and Planning highlighted, that the NWC would “work with local authorities and relevant stakeholders to develop a toolkit to support local authorities introduce measures which make the role of councillor more manageable for individuals with family and caring commitments”.

This toolkit is the culmination of that process. It is one of a range of initiatives across the country which aim to promote greater participation by women in local government. These include the establishment of local and regional women's caucuses, research to inform the development of good practice, and initiatives which build the capacity of women to enter and remain in politics.

Public servants play a key role in promoting greater diversity and inclusion in Ireland. Recognising the demands and complexities of public service, this toolkit is designed as a practical resource to assist public servants in their day-to-day work. While it is intended for use by officials, much of its content may also be useful to Councillors.

This toolkit is not intended to be prescriptive, nor a comprehensive list of what local authorities can or should do. Instead, it is designed to provide options and to spark ideas. It builds on good practice evident in local authorities and highlights efforts at local level to promote greater inclusion and diversity in local government. It recognises that, while the issue of care disproportionately affects women, it also impacts all people who have caring responsibilities. Therefore, the toolkit is relevant to all Councillors— who are caring for children or for an older, ill or disabled person.

It is hoped that this toolkit will play a small part in enabling more women, parents and carers to take office and to assume leadership roles within their Councils. Local authorities have a key role to play in achieving this aim by ensuring that their policies and practice contribute to an environment where Councillors are supported to engage effectively in their role while achieving a balance with their lives outside the Council chamber. In this regard, the toolkit challenges local authorities to strengthen their efforts to help make local political representation more attractive and accessible to both women, men and all those with caring responsibilities.

Methodology

The production of this toolkit was informed by interviews and focus groups undertaken with Councillors, staff and representative bodies. The aim was to identify practical and useful measures which, on the one hand, would make a real difference to Councillors' work-life balance and, on the other hand, would be realistic and achievable in the context of local authority resources. In total, 27 people participated in the focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

The primary research was informed by secondary research on the topic of women in local politics, and on the role and function of local government. These included:

- *Independent Review of the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members.* Sarah Moorhead SC. 2020. (“Moorhead Report”)
- *Women Beyond the Dáil: More Women in Local Government.* National Women’s Council. 2019.
- *Strength in Diversity. The Experiences of Migrant Candidates in the 2019 Local Election.* Immigrant Council of Ireland, 2020.
- *Different Paths, Shared Experiences: Ethnic Minority Women and Local Politics in Ireland.* Maynooth University, National Traveller Women’s Forum and AkiDwa. 2022.
- *Submission on Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament.* National Traveller Women’s Forum, 2021
- *The Role of Video-Conferencing in Supporting Local Government.* AILG and zoom. 2021

How to Use this Toolkit

Whatever your role, we encourage you to use this toolkit as a starting point to help you to embed practices which support greater inclusion and diversity in local government. Using the 10-step plan set out on page 26 this toolkit can help your local authority to map out the direction it wishes to take over the coming years to achieve this aim. Each local authority’s journey will vary, depending on its starting point, resources, leadership and circumstances. Your local authority may already have implemented some of the suggested measures, and it may struggle to implement others. But, by taking a systematic and strategic approach, by building your understanding of the issues, and by learning from what other local authorities are doing (see page 30), your local authority can play its part in helping to build a local government in Ireland that better reflects the society it represents.



“We had an 8-hour long meeting for the County Development Plan”

“Maternity leave is badly needed”

“Special meetings of the Council – these are very problematic for childcare – there are four or five every year”.

“Councils should develop a toolkit for citizens to help them to interact with local politics”

“It’s so important to have clear communication systems in place between staff and Councillors. A good staff directory is needed – with clear titles and roles”

“I would love for childcare to be included as an eligible expense; it would make such a difference”

“Proper funding for Caucuses is needed to help them to support women Councillors and to highlight the barriers they face”

“A part-time Councillor assistant would really help, like the TDs have”

“Corporate Service are very co-operative. I find them very easy to approach”

Section 1

Why is this important?

Women in Local Government – The Current Situation

Women continue to be underrepresented in local government, currently holding only 25% of Council seats. This is a marginal increase from 21% after the 2014 local elections. Only 10 Councils have 30% or more women councillors. There is also a significant urban and rural disparity in women's representation, with many rural Councils having less than five women Councillors.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is the term used to describe how other factors such as gender, age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation and social class intersect to compound and increase women's experience of inequality. In the context of this toolkit, an intersectional approach to addressing inequality is essential, as women from minority backgrounds are even more underrepresented in local government. These include women from ethnic minority communities, including Traveller and Roma women, women with disabilities, women on low incomes, women parenting alone, and women in the LGBTQI+ community. Therefore, the challenge is not only to increase the number of women in local government, but also to improve the diversity of women's representation by targeting, supporting and encouraging more women from minority groups to run and be elected.

For example:

- migrant women are likely to have smaller social networks and lack support systems for free childcare to enable them to attend meetings or training.
- Traveller women are almost twice as likely to be looking after home and family compared to women in the general population, with the result that childcare and financial independence are a particular barrier to them.
- disabled women may need additional supports, such as extra personal assistance hours or Irish Sign Language interpreters, to participate in meetings, events or other engagements.

It is important that local authorities identify the additional supports needed at local level to address intersectional factors which intensify the barriers experienced by women to participation in local government.

The table below lists female representation in each local authority after the 2019 local elections.

Table: Number and percentage of seats held by women after the 2019 local elections

Local Authority	No of seats	No of female Councillors	% female
Carlow County Council	18	2	11%
Cavan County Council	18	6	33%
Clare County Council	28	4	14%
Cork County Council	55	15	27%
Donegal County Council	37	4	11%
Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	40	19	48%
Fingal County Council	40	11	28%
Galway County Council	39	7	18%
Kerry County Council	33	4	12%
Kildare County Council	40	17	41%
Kilkenny County Council	24	3	13%
Laois County Council	19	5	26%
Leitrim County Council	18	3	17%
Longford County Council	18	1	6%
Louth County Council	29	9	31%
Mayo County Council	30	3	10%
Meath County Council	40	12	31%
Monaghan County Council	18	3	18%
Offaly County Council	19	2	11%
Roscommon County Council	18	3	17%
Sligo County Council	18	3	17%
Tipperary County Council	40	7	18%
West Meath County Council	20	4	20%
Wexford County Council	34	6	18%
Wicklow County Council	32	13	34%
Cork City County Council	31	6	19%
Dublin City Council	63	26	41%
Galway City Council	18	5	28%
Limerick City and County Council	40	8	20%
Waterford City and County Council	32	2	6%
South Dublin County Council	40	13	33%
Totals	949	226	24%

Did you know?

The recommendations from the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality call for **urgent and transformative actions** to diversify political institutions, change the wider culture of politics and provide family-friendly and inclusive policies

While a record number of **562 women** contested the 2019 local elections (up from 440 in 2014), they only made up 28% of all of the candidates

In 2019, urban areas overall were considerably more gender-balanced than rural Ireland. Women accounted for **35% of candidates** in urban areas and **23% of candidates** in the more rural constituencies

The gender imbalance in local government has significant implications for **candidate selection processes for general elections** as local government is a key pipeline for national office

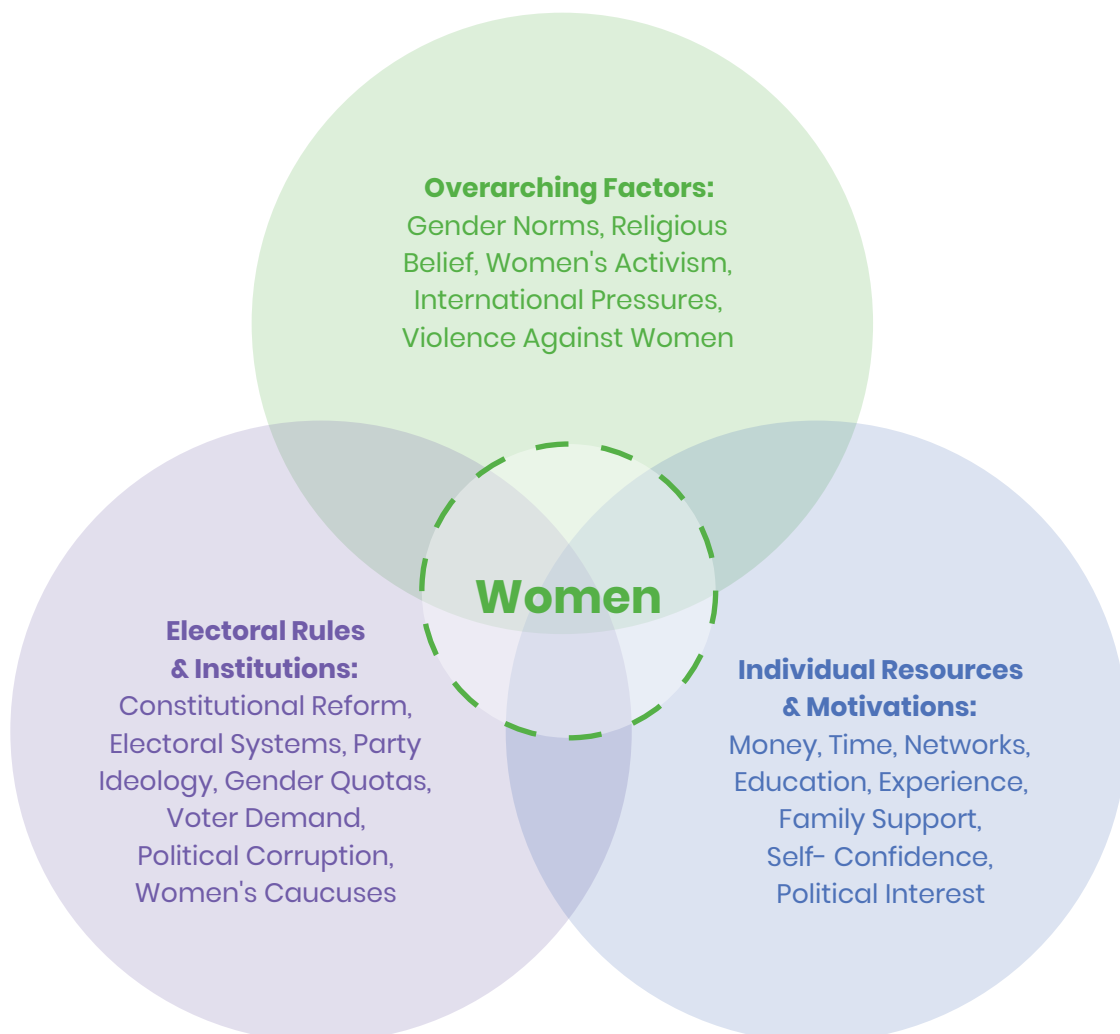
Research has made the link between low levels of female representation in decision-making and **poor outcomes for women's interests in policy-making**

Women councillors are often working a '**triple shift**' combining paid work, unpaid care work and their council duties

Factors Affecting Women's Access to Political Office

There is a complex set of factors which shape women's access to political office. These are both enabling and constraining factors which combine over time to support, encourage or derail women's path towards election. In *Women Beyond the Dáil*, these factors are set out under three headings:

Overarching Factors; Electoral Rules and Institutions; Individual Resources and Motivations.



The Role of Care Responsibilities

Studies show that care responsibilities are a significant factor influencing women's opportunity to enter politics.² Ireland still has a deeply gendered division of care, as well as a lack of affordable, accessible childcare. These factors combine to act as a significant obstacle to women's equal participation in political life. It is important to note that, while the issue of care disproportionately affects women, the experience of men Councillors and all those with caring responsibilities also influences their participation in political life. It is important to note that, while the issue of care disproportionately affects women, the experience of men Councillors and all those with caring.

Facts about Women and Caring Responsibilities

- Women continue to provide the majority of unpaid care work and household work. In 2019, nearly all people (94%) who were looking after the home or family were women.
- Traveller women are almost twice as likely to be looking after home and family as the general population.
- Cost and accessibility of childcare are more acute for women without further educational qualifications and women on low incomes. It disadvantages those who do not have the means to put themselves forward because of care responsibilities, including lone parents, 86% of whom are women.
- Women from a migrant background do not have the same access to informal family supports to facilitate their participation.
- The gaps in rural infrastructure, lack of services, long distances and lack of public transport means that women in rural communities experience a very significant additional burden of care and time spent organising and 'delivering' care.
- Currently care expenses cannot be claimed as part of Councillors' expenses.

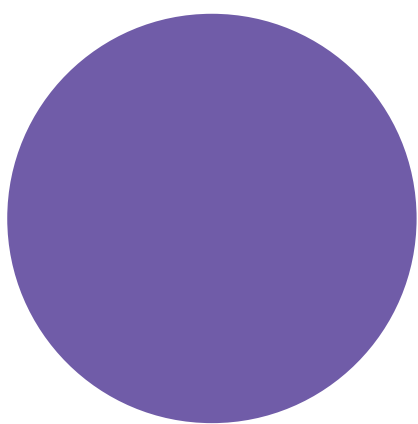
The Wider Benefits of Equality and Diversity in Local Government

Local government provides essential services such as housing, roads, libraries, planning, environment and economic development, as well as being a key part of the functioning of our democratic system. When local government does not fully reflect the society it represents, our local decision-making processes miss out on valuable insights on the needs, circumstances and experiences of a variety of service-users.

Measures to promote a more inclusive and diverse local government do not only have the benefit of making local politics more attractive and accessible to people with caring responsibilities. They can also enhance the local democratic process for all Councillors and citizens and have positive impacts in the context of ever-changing societal and demographic factors.

- Where women have greater representation societies are more equitable, have higher standards of living and positive development in education, health and infrastructure. Due to Ireland's aging population, the reality is that Councillors are increasingly likely to have caring responsibilities.³
- Hybrid working facilitates better family, personal, work or study balance for all Councillors.
- Men increasingly want to be able to incorporate caring responsibilities into their lives.
- Remote working reduces the level of car travel by Councillors and officials. This has a positive impact on the environment.
- Remote working arrangements take pressure off local authority resources in terms of meeting and parking infrastructure.

³ <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/ten-things-to-know-about-gender-equality>



Section 2

The Voice of Councillors

“All Councils should have an Active Citizenship Officer and a Family-Friendly Officer”

“I also think that if it’s a part-time and essentially only partially paid role, surely it needs to look more like that in terms of hours”

“There should be a dedicated Councillor support team. And a guidebook with tailored information, showing how the Council works and breaking down the jargon.”

“It would be great if Councils did awareness-raising campaigns, using infographics to help people to understand the system, what services they provide, who does what”

“There needs to be training for council staff and Councillors on gender bias, there are so many things that were developed with men in mind and that adversely affect women, training would help to open people’s eyes to issues that they didn’t know are problems.”

“Put very clear measures in place for hybrid working and review them regularly. We have to adapt to accommodate both physical and remote attendance – mics done properly, proper projecting onto the screen, proper screen sharing, standing orders to allow for virtual voting. Also, a staff member needs to be watching out for yellow hand – the Chair doesn’t always see it”.

“Councils should take a zero-tolerance approach to harassment. They need to show leadership and produce a step-by-step procedure that Councillors can follow when they come across poor practice”

“There was no formal induction for co-optees when I was co-opted. I was thrown in at the deep end.

“Women often go from minding their children to minding their parents”

“There’s a lack of information on the process: where to start, who to talk to, what’s expected of me in practice, what a working week as a Councillor actually looks like in real time.”

“Childcare costs are a real challenge. Flexible, sessional childcare is needed so there’s an equal playing field”

“Sometimes the agenda, minutes and documents go out 2 -3 days in advance. This makes it impossible to prepare as I have a full-time job and am tied up with the kids in the evening. I can’t just drop everything at short notice”

“If you’re a migrant, you don’t necessarily have established networks – this adds to childcare challenges. So, paid childcare becomes the main option, but these fees are not recoupable if you’re a Councillor”

“It’s very difficult to get involved in the political sphere if you’re a carer – particularly if you’re caring for an elderly person or for children with special needs”

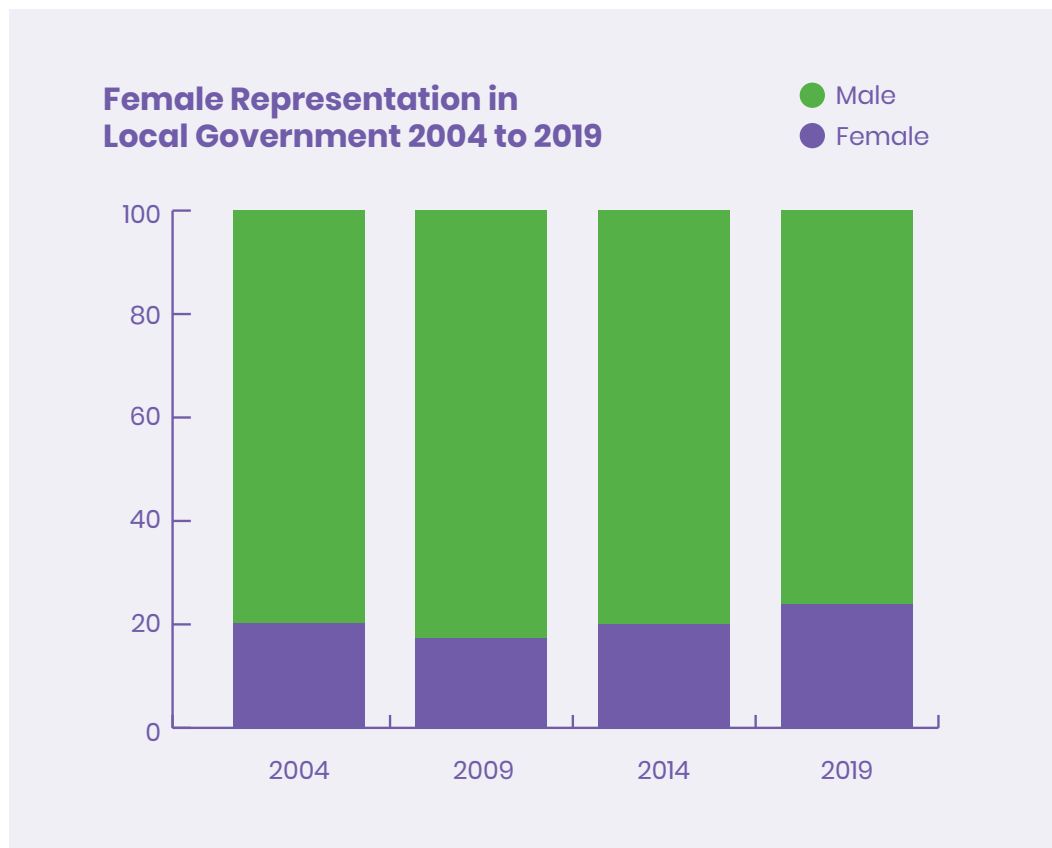
“Hybrid meetings make the world of a difference”

“Meetings should stop when they are scheduled to stop, and not allowed to run over”

“Train Council staff on how to do consultation better – to minimize the feeling of disempowerment by citizens”

Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable Development Goal 5 is to “Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls”. Under this goal, Target 5.5 aims to “ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.” The indicator for this target is the proportion of seats held by women, with equal numbers of women and men in parliament giving an indicator value of 50 percent.



Ireland’s progress towards reaching this target has been slow. The introduction of gender quotas before the 2016 General Elections produced an increase in female representation from 15.7% to 22.2%. However, the gender quota legislation did not apply in local elections, where men significantly out-number women in local government, with four times as many men than women.

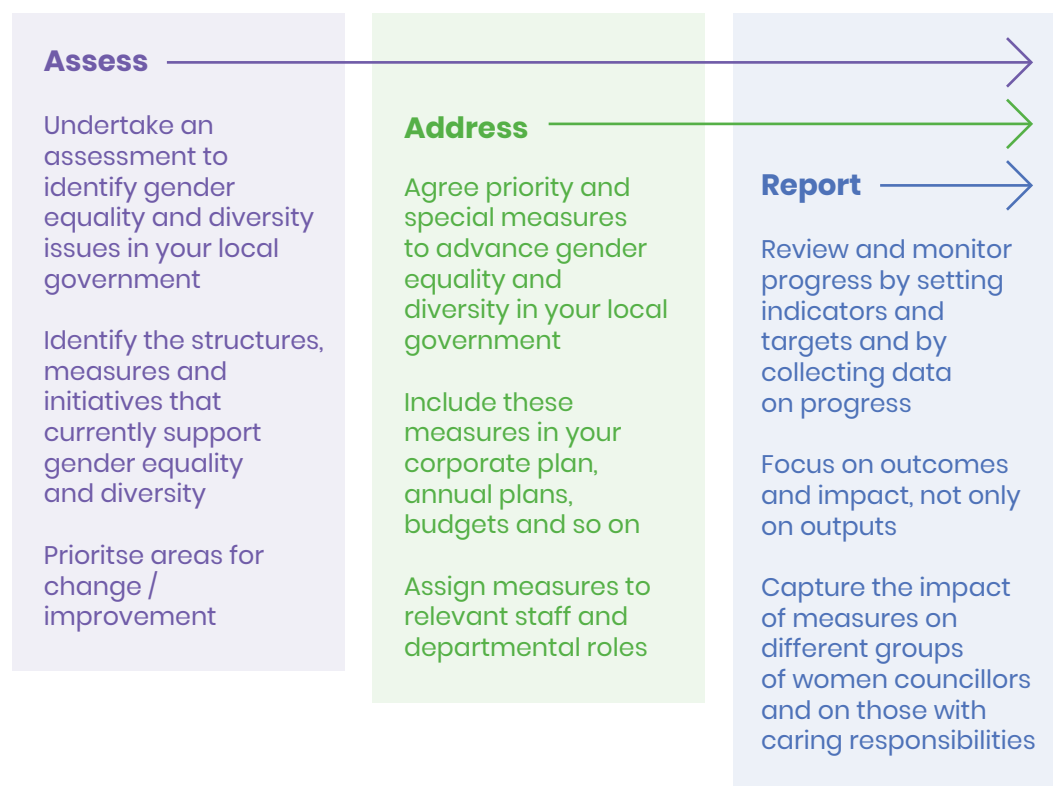
There has been very little change in female representation between 2004 and 2019. One in five (20.2%) local government seats were held by women in 2004, but this dropped to 17.3% in the 2009 elections before rising to 20.1% in 2014 and to 23.9% in 2019.

Public Sector Duty

“Local authorities play a critical role in ensuring that policies, practices and service delivery reflect the diversity of the communities which they serve. The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty can support them in this role.”⁴

Under the **Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty** all public bodies have responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their policies and plans. It acts as a framework for local authorities to strengthen their existing efforts and to improve the way they work. Its implementation is important not only because it is a statutory duty, but also because “it is the right course of action for local authorities to follow in order to achieve their vision of connected and inclusive communities”.⁵

The Public Sector Duty guidance document, **Implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty**, sets out a practical three-step approach to assessing and addressing human rights and equality issues. The Public Sector Duty Team in the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission provide training and support on this process.



⁴ <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2020/01/Implementing-PSD-in-Local-Authorities.pdf>

⁵ *ibid*

Independent Review of the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members (Moorhead Report)

While there is no comprehensive data available on the numbers of Councillors who have caring responsibilities, findings in the Moorhead report provides interesting insights into the experiences and views of the 400 Councillors that completed a survey as part of the research for the report.⁶

Employment Status

- 25% of Councillors that responded were in full-time employment
- 23% were self-employed
- 23% were not in employment
- 14% were in part-time employment
 - 9% were retired
 - 1% were in part-time education or training

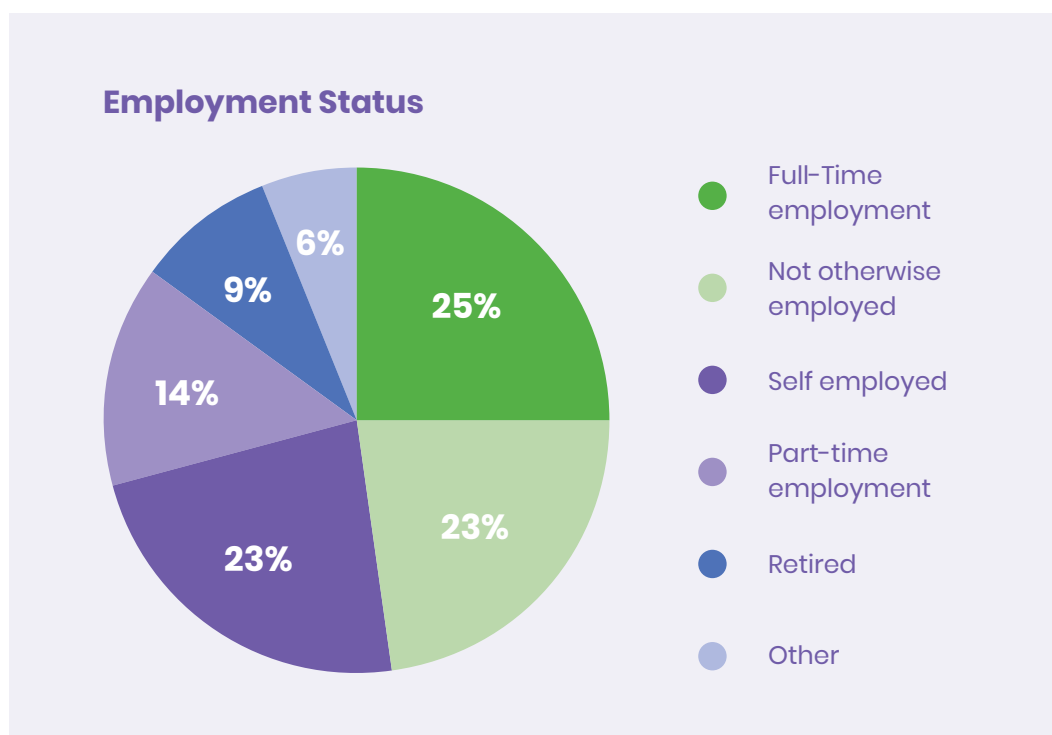


Figure: Employment status of Councillors that participated in the Moorhead survey.

Nature of Local Authority Supports Provided to Councillors

86% of respondents were provided with equipment

66% received IT supports

23% had an allocated staff contact

20% received administrative support

18% were provided with hot-desks

17% were provided with other supports

7% received no supports

6% received secretarial supports

Councillors were asked to describe the supports that are provided to them by their local authority

83% of Councillors that responded to Moorhead agreed that there are ways their local authority could provide enhanced or extra support to them. 68% agreed that additional supports are required specifically for Councillors with parenting or caring responsibilities.

Councillors identified a range of non-financial measures that could be undertaken to encourage existing Councillors to stand for re-election and new candidates to stand for election, including:

- More administrative and secretarial supports
- More efficient conducting of council business
- Flexibility in terms of meeting times
- A mentoring programme by serving councillors
- Allocation of workspaces and meeting rooms
- An allocated official as a point of contact to provide support and consult with other officials throughout the local authority
- An independent legal advice service
- Summaries of technical documents to facilitate decision-making



Women Beyond the Dáil

As part of the National Women's Council research for *Women Beyond the Dail: More Women in Local Government*, almost 200 Councillors participated in an online survey regarding their circumstances and lived experiences.

Care Responsibilities

In relation to the care responsibilities of Councillors, the survey found the following:

- Over half of the men surveyed reported having no care responsibilities compared to 40% of the women (this may reflect the younger profile of women respondents)
- 37% of women and 34% of men were caring for a child
- 13% of women and 10% of men were caring for an older, ill or disabled person
- 13% of women were looking after the home on a full-time basis, compared to 2% of men
- 46% of men were working full-time in addition to Council duties, compared to 19% of women
- 20% of women were working part-time alongside their Council role, compared to 13% of men
- Three times the proportion of women than men reported bringing their children canvassing
- All women candidates interviewed indicated that childbearing was a significant factor in their decision-making to stand for election. For some, having young children had stopped them from running, while others had decided to run when their children were older and less dependent on them.

Time and Money

Many interviewees remarked on the financial difficulties for low-paid women or lone parents in seeking local office and/or in acting as a local representative.

Many also outlined their reliance on personal and family funds for the campaign, and on partners'/spouses' salary to compensate for time taken off work to campaign.

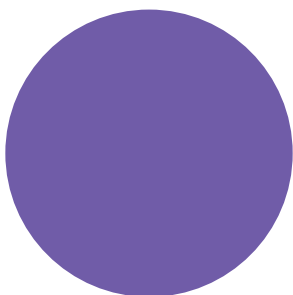
All indicated that, if elected, they would have to continue in paid employment alongside their Council duties in order to meet their financial commitments.

Many reflected on the demands of the role including evening meetings, attendance at social events, funerals etc.

Association of Irish Local Government: The Role of Video Conferencing in Supporting Local Government

The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) in collaboration with Zoom invited all Councillors to respond to a survey on their experience of using video conferencing as part of Council engagements. The subsequent report provides an overview of the survey findings and outlines how video conferencing supported the continuation of council work throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, the challenges faced in adapting to an online model and the desire to retain a hybrid model for conducting future council business.

- 81% of respondents believe a hybrid environment facilitates better family, personal, work or study balance for them within their role as an elected representative
- 51% believe that a hybrid environment will encourage more participation in Local Government from underrepresented groups
- 56% believe additional training on functionality would help improve the experience of using video conferencing in their role
- 60% Navigating platform functionality
- 60% Technical set-up (i.e. connection / audio / video)
- 40% On screen ethics
- 37% Maintaining privacy & confidentiality
- 24% Eliminating distractions
- 22% Establishing an appropriate background / room set-up

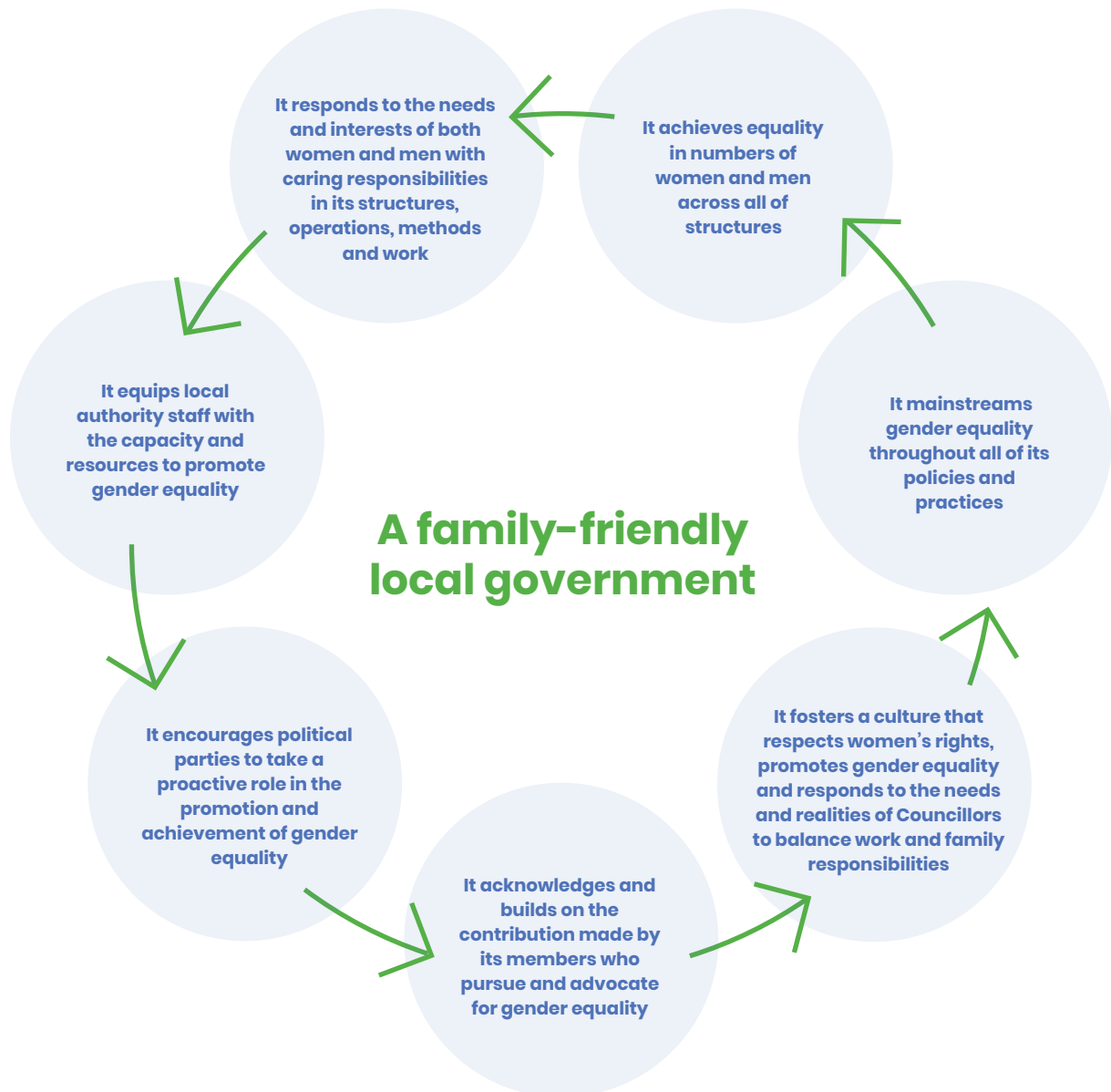


Section 3

Getting started

Start at the End: Imagine What Family-Friendly Local Government Looks Like!

The first step is to build a shared vision of what family-friendly local government looks like. This vision should be built in collaboration with all stakeholders, both internal and external. It is essential to hear a wide range of women's voices in this process, from diverse backgrounds, ethnicity and circumstances. Once your local authority has developed an ambitious and inclusive vision for family-friendly local government, publish the vision along with a 10-step plan (see page 25) for how it will be achieved.



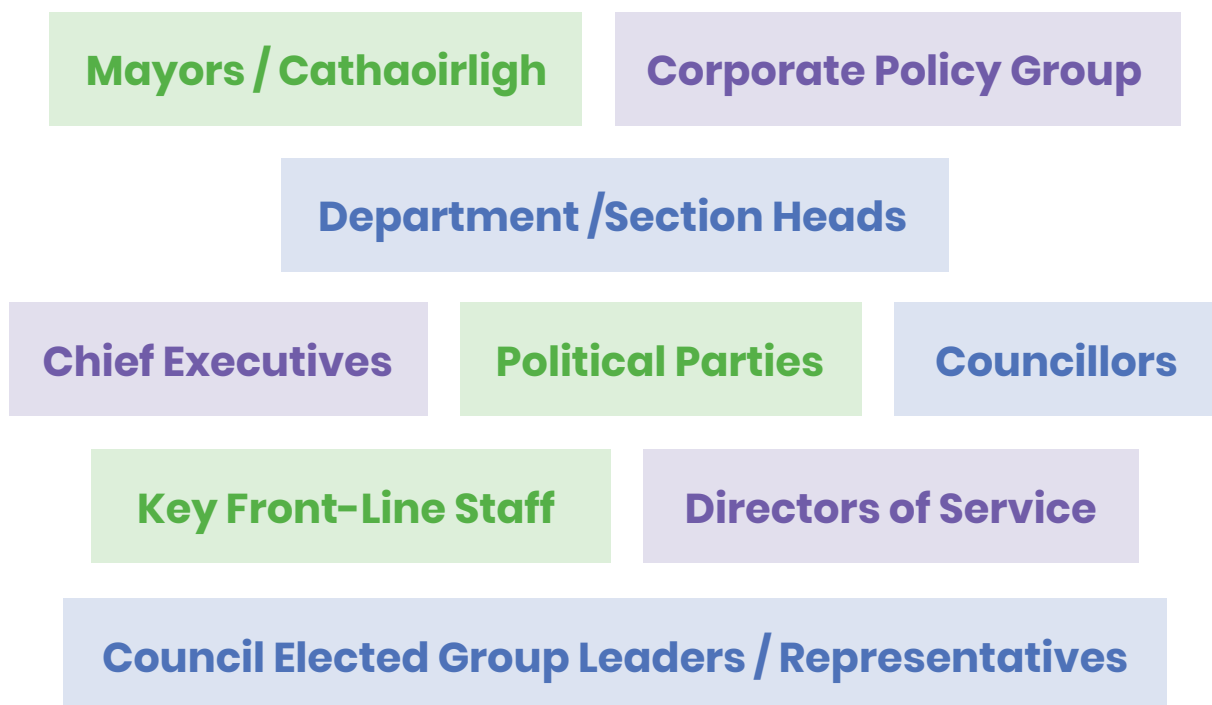
The Process is as Important as the Task

When building a shared vision, cast a wide net. Bring stakeholders together in workshops and focus groups to hear their views. Use surveys and interviews to elicit input and feedback. Use an experienced facilitator to support the process and to enable all participants to engage in the process on an equal footing. Consider local demographics to ensure that the agreed vision reflects the diversity of the local community. Facilitate hard-to-reach stakeholders to have their say by using a creative engagement process. Remember to factor-in “intersectionality” (page 9) by reaching out to women from minority groups, such as Travellers, migrant women, or disabled women, to hear their views on what family-friendly local government looks like.

The Importance of Leadership

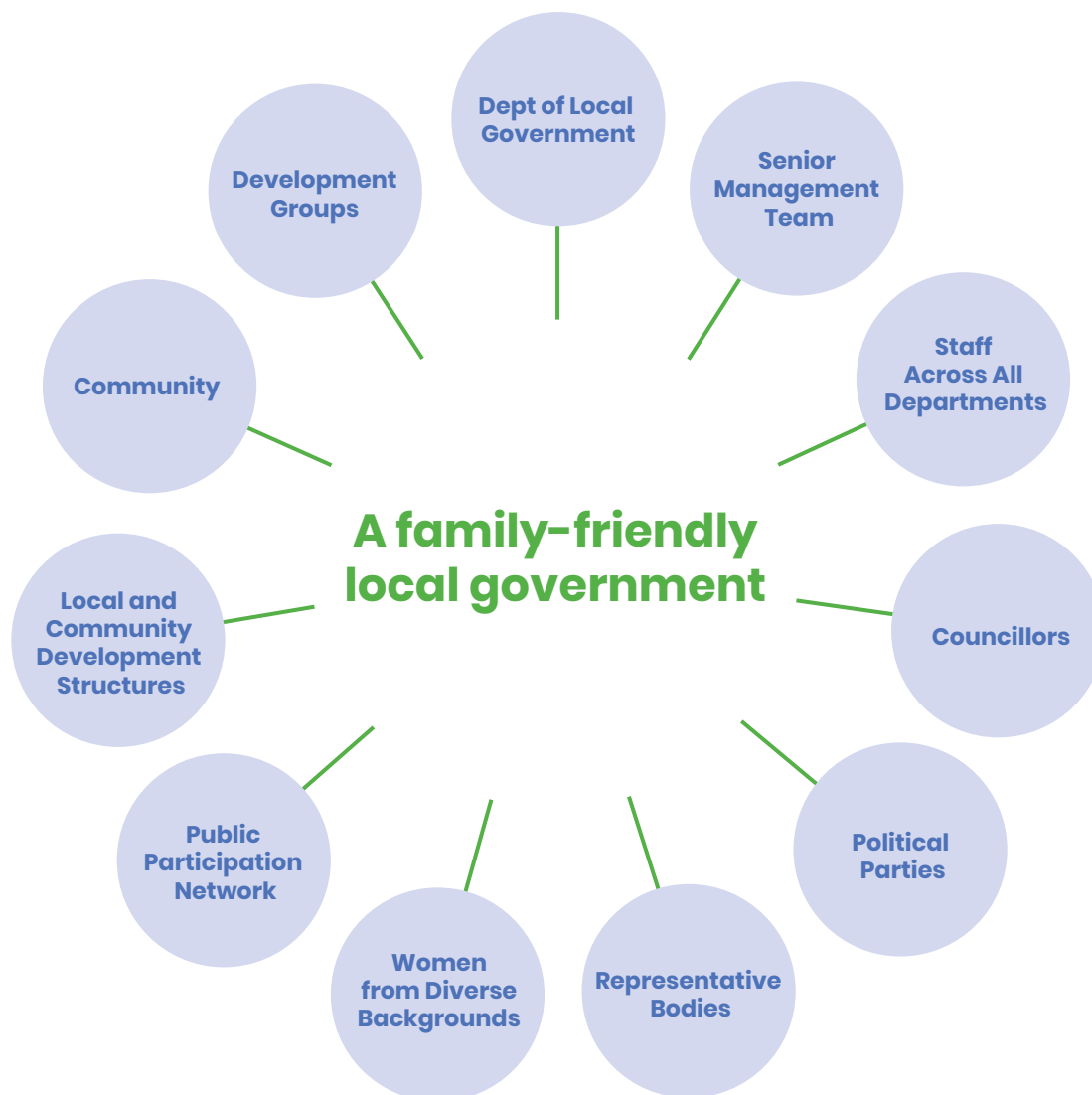
The profile of local government means that it can have enormous influence through its formal powers, its democratic legitimacy and its leadership role. Leadership, commitment and innovation are crucial to generating buy-in and to building a shared vision of what progress looks like.

Effective leadership needs a clear vision and a strong strategy for implementing change. Leaders at all levels – executive and political - play a key role in advancing gender equality and diversity. Leadership can come from the top down and from the bottom up: councillors, party leaders, Chief Executives, Directors of Service, meeting administrators, department heads, section managers, front-line staff. Each can become a champion for gender equality and diversity and, in their day-to-day role, lead the way in delivering meaningful progress.



Identify Key Stakeholders

A systematic analysis of all the stakeholders involved in driving and implementing change will help your local authority to understand your starting point, as well as the strengths, opportunities and challenges at play. Some of the key stakeholders are set out below, but this is not an exhaustive list. Each local authority area differs, so take time to consider who has a stake in the process in your area.



Bear in mind that all stakeholders will not necessarily be involved at all stages of the journey. However, make sure you know who they are, what their role is, how they can influence the journey and how they can be supported in the process.

Using a stakeholder analysis template will help you to build a picture of your stakeholders.

- An understanding of stakeholder strengths, will help you to take a strengths-based approach
- An understanding of the range and depth of challenges across stakeholders will assist you to develop successful strategies to address these challenges
- An understanding of opportunities will assist you to position your local authority to harness these opportunities as they arise

Innovation and Organisational Change

To drive innovation in local government, a culture of creativity and change is needed. Good practice in family-friendly local government can be achieved by applying the following principles on your journey towards gender equality and diversity.

Leadership

This comes from the top down and the bottom up. Management and councillors are key to charting the strategic direction, and to setting a positive and ambitious tone. Equally, staff are essential to implementing improvements and bringing their own skills and expertise to bear

Shared Ownership

Shared ownership of the process is critical. This is achieved by communicating, listening, involving and respecting. Take time to identify stakeholders and systematically engage them in a meaningful way. Assign clear roles and responsibilities to get the job done!

Understand and Plan for Change

Remember that everyone in an organisation is affected by change. Understand the impact, benefits and challenges of change and put a plan in place to involve, communicate, evidence and support

Value-Based Public Service

Set out your public service values and ensure that your goals and objectives are consistent with these. This requires leaders, at all levels, to model behaviours which lead by example

Focus on Outcomes

Always keep an eye on the outcomes you are aiming to achieve. Constantly ask yourself “how will this step help us to achieve gender equality and diversity in local government?”.

An Evidence-Informed Approach

Use reliable data from diverse sources to make evidence-informed decisions on the actions your local authority can take to promote gender equality and diversity

Measure Outcomes

Put in place an outcomes framework which enables your local authority to capture learning and measure success. Remember to build-in an assessment process which measures gender-specific qualitative and quantitative outcomes

A Strengths-Based Approach

A strengths-based approach enables local authorities to harness current resources and assets. It means focusing on strengths rather than problems, and assets rather than deficits, to identify improvements and enhance outcomes

Build a 10-Step Plan!

The figure below sets out a 10-step plan to help your local authority to take a systematic and strategic approach to delivering on family-friendly local government.

Be realistic about what you can achieve, while at the same time setting ambitious goals and keeping a determined focus.

Remember the power of small and early wins – these are key to motivating your team and boosting moral. The more frequently people experience a sense of progress, the more likely they are in the long term to stick with the process and to be motivated about change and innovation.



1. Matters

The lack of gender equality and diversity in local government is problematic for society. Women comprise over 50% of the population, yet only 25% of Councillors are women. This means that local government does not reflect the population it represents. A more diverse local government, representing women and men from different backgrounds and circumstances will enable a healthier and more robust democracy.

2. Understand the Equality Context

Gender equality is achieved when women and men enjoy the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, and when the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men are equally valued. Where gender inequality exists, it is generally women who are excluded or disadvantaged in relation to decision-making and access to economic and social resources. A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on redressing power imbalances.

3. Understand the National Strategy Context

Gender equality is advanced in Ireland under a whole-of-government policy framework provided by the National Strategy for Women and Girls, 2017-2020. The Strategy reflects the priorities of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The 2020 Programme for Government commits to developing a new Strategy for Women and Girls. Other relevant strategies include the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, the Migrant Integration Strategy, and the National Disability Strategy Inclusion Strategy, all of which commit to supporting the participation of their respective target groups in local and national politics and other representative roles.

4. Establish a Project Leadership Team and Working Group

Your project leadership team and working group may be two separate structures or one combined structure. Either way, these will be critical to providing leadership, setting the strategic direction, driving the process of improvement and monitoring outcomes. They should comprise key personnel who are essential to achieving meaningful progress within the local authority, as well as those who understand the day-to-day challenges of service delivery and the importance of supporting staff at the coalface who are implementing agreed measures.

5. Agree the Project Scope

It is important to ensure that there is a cohesive understanding of the project scope. Sometimes deciding what is not included in the project parameters is as important as deciding what is included. When agreeing the project scope, it is important to consult with key stakeholders. Consider who these are (see page 23) and seek their input on the project parameters. Take time to put clear terms of reference in place using a collaborative process and to scope out project roles, responsibilities, lines of accountability and timeframes.

6. Consult, Consult, Consult

Consulting with a broad range of stakeholders, both internally and externally, will enable your local authority to have strengths-based conversations, listen to a wide range of perspectives and gather the information needed to make well-informed decisions on what will work in your area.

7. Consider Your Resources and Capacity

Set your project scope and, ultimately, your action plan in the context of resources and organisational capacity. Consider how to develop staff capacity through Continuous Professional Development, staff support and supervision. Identify where additional resources may be required and how these can be secured through national funding schemes or other sources.

8. Devise an Achievable Action Plan

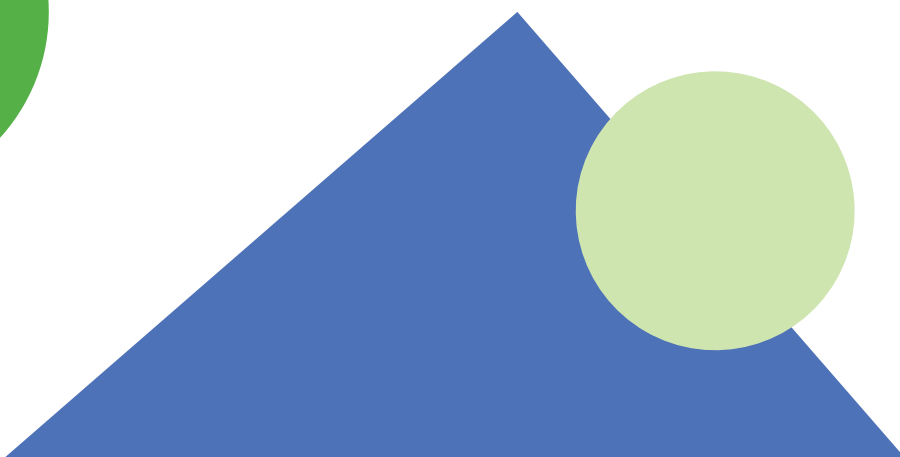
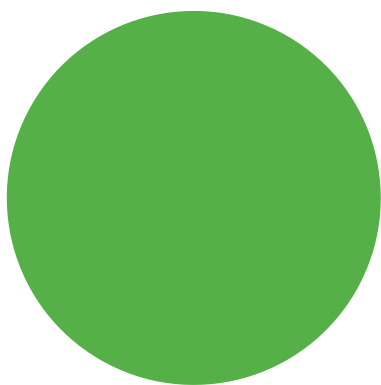
Develop an organisational action plan with clear goals, objectives and actions. Include targets, timeframes and clear lines of responsibility.

9. Implement Actions

Embed actions into your local authority's existing strategies and plans in order to ensure that actions are implemented as part of your annual programme of work. These include corporate plans, annual operational plans, service plans, annual budgets and so on.

10. Measure Progress and Implement Improvements

To measure progress, your local authority should understand where it currently stands and set targets based on this. These targets help to concentrate effort and encourage collaboration across the organisation. Measuring progress towards these targets will enable your local authority to stay on track and to identify and celebrate achievements.



Section 4

Measures to Promote Family-Friendly Local Government

Examples of Local Authority Measures and Initiatives

As part of the process to develop this toolkit, local authorities were asked to submit examples of measures which support family-friendly local government. Some of these examples, below, show how local authorities are contributing to creating a family-friendly environment, while others show broader measures which enhance citizens engagement and support the pipeline of women into politics.

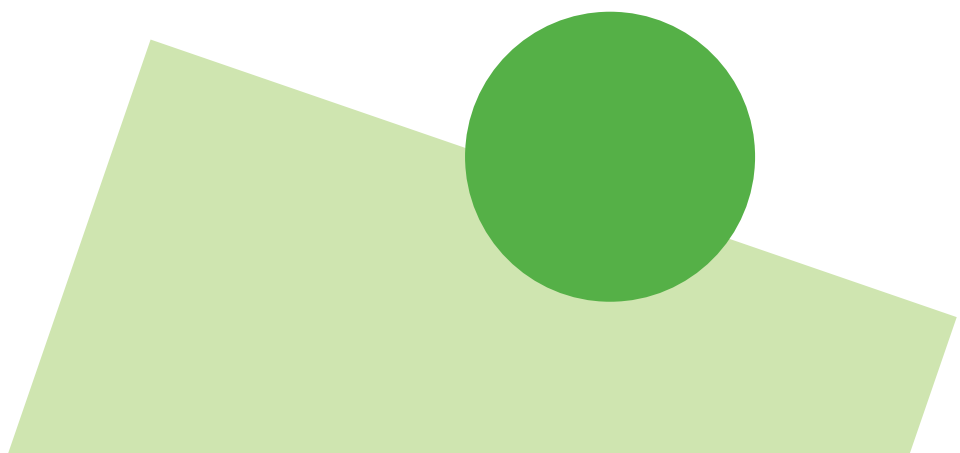
Most local authorities now have arrangements in place to support hybrid meetings, including policies, procedures, training for staff and Councillors, and high-spec equipment in Council chambers and Municipal District offices. Some have sophisticated CRM systems which support efficient representations, and others provide dedicated office space which enable Councillors to optimise productivity. Others again have appointed dedicated staff to support Councillors in their role and/or have taken steps to improve meeting efficiency. In addition, women's caucuses have been established in many local governments in recent years.

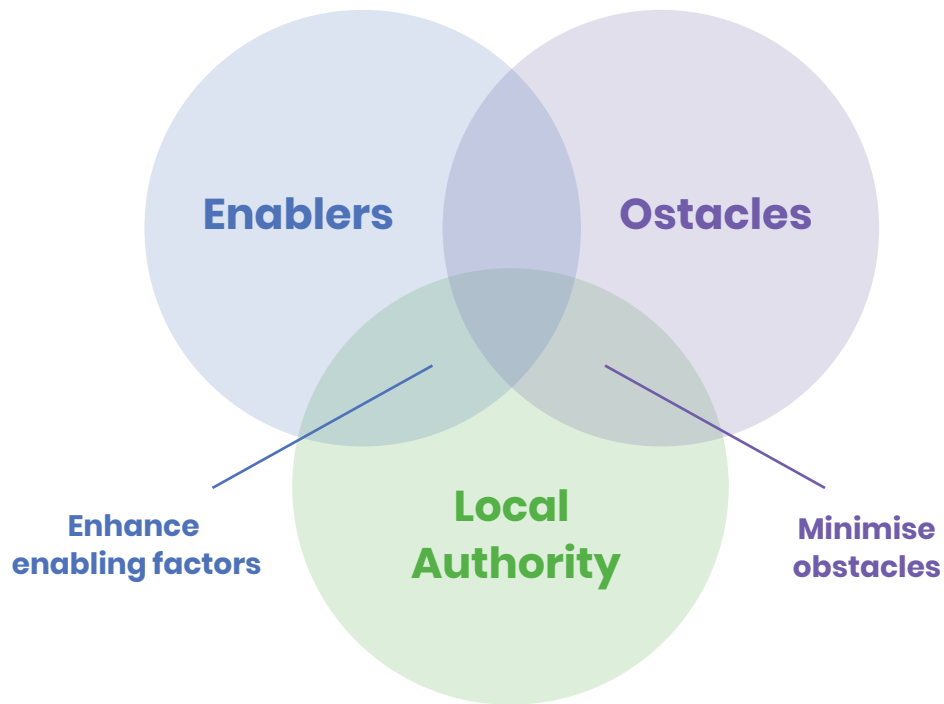
- **Clare County Council:** ran an in-person conference in collaboration with She Her Elected entitled “Promoting Gender Equality and Diversity in Local Government”. This was followed by a free online training programme delivered by See Her Elected on “Introduction to Politics”.
- **Dublin City Council’s** guide *Knowing Dublin, Knowing Your City Council* is an introduction to the work of Dublin City Council and the role of Councillors. It is told in plain language and is designed to inform people with limited knowledge of the services that the Council provides. DCC has also produced the ‘Women in Politics Video Series’ featuring 15 Councillors who discuss their roles, motivations, challenges and changes, and why more women should become involved in politics.
- **Fingal County Council** webcasts its Council meetings to enable citizens to view meetings live online. In addition, the webcast archive enables people to view past meetings.
- **Galway City Council:** Galway City Council currently facilitates hybrid meetings for all Council and committee meetings. It also facilitates meetings outside working hours for staff in recognition of the fact that many Councillors are not available until after 5pm. Each Department has an assigned Councillor Liaison Person to help direct and expedite Councillor queries. Councillors are provided with a laptop, access to the local authority intranet and ICT support as required.
- **Galway County Council:** provides dedicated meeting rooms for Councillors to enable them to work efficiently while in County Hall. It has developed a general information and Staff Point of Contact Protocol to assist Councillors in their engagement with Council Staff. It has also installed a Conference Management System to facilitate the holding of hybrid Council meetings and the live streaming of such meetings.
- **Longford County Council,** in partnership with See Her Elected, Longford Women’s Link and Longford Public Participation Network has produced a booklet, *Connecting Women to Local Government*. This provides clear information on the structures and services of Longford County Council and sets out how women can best participate in local government structures. The booklet has been translated into five languages: Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Slovak, Brazilian Portuguese
- **Limerick City and County Council:** uses Sugar CRM to capture all Councillors’ representations via various channels. One of these channels, My Limerick, enables Councillors to log and track cases to completion, when they receive a resolution email setting out the final decision. LCCC also has a dedicated Senior Staff Officer to support Councillors with representations. The SSO co-ordinates a team of Customer Services Staff who are assigned as Account Managers to two Councillors each as part of their duties. LCCC also funds Limerick Women’s Network to run an annual training programme for women on local politics, the public service and policy influencing.
- **Kildare County Council:** has a members’ services team in place with dedicated resources for each Municipal District and committee. In 2021, to support women and diversity in local politics, KCC offered a free 8-week online course in *Community Development and Active Citizenship* and ran an online panel discussion “Women and Diversity in Local Government”.

- **Monaghan County Council and Cork City Council** are participating in a pilot project to implement the Public Sector Equality and Human Right Duty by taking a proactive approach to assessing and addressing equality and human rights issues for employees, service users and other stakeholder.
- **South Dublin County Council**’s “Women in Politics” initiative supports women currently serving as Councillors and those considering standing for the local election in 2024. Initiatives include: a period poverty initiative which provides free sanitary products in public toilets at council offices; a dedicated breastfeeding areas for council staff and Councillors in council buildings; a Safety and Inclusivity Study for Public Spaces in Clondalkin; a Women in Politics Promotional Video; research on women’s experiences in local elections and as serving Councillors.
- **Westmeath County Council:** In collaboration with See Her Elected, WCC has produced an information booklet (*A More Inclusive Politics for Westmeath*) and a promotional video (*Making a Difference Through Local Politics*) to support the participation of women and people from diverse backgrounds in local government and decision-making structures.
- **Wicklow County Council:** has a Customer Care Innovation Hub which enables citizens to engage directly with the Council and also helps to make the process of Councillor representation more efficient, accountable and transparent. Its draft Customer Service Strategy commits to using Plain English in all its communication channels and to deliver equality awareness training to all staff.

Taking the Next Steps

While there is much good practice evident above, there is, nonetheless, some way to go before family-friendly local government is achieved. The next step is for local authorities to take a strategic, whole-organisational approach as part of a wider gender equality strategy and policy framework. Section 3, Getting Started, sets out a ten-step plan to help your local authority take this strategic approach, working collaboratively with all stakeholders – internal and external – towards a shared vision.





In this section, we set out a range of practical measures to address some of the factors which affect the equal participation of Councillors with caring responsibilities in local government. These measures are designed to either maximise “Enablers” or to minimise “Obstacles”

- Enablers are the policies and practices that support the role of Councillors with caring responsibilities
- Obstacles are the policies and practices that impede the involvement and retention of Councillors with caring responsibilities

When putting together your 10-step plan, take time to reflect on the following questions:

Q1

What are the factors that enable women and people with caring responsibilities to enter and remain in local government in your area, i.e. what are the enablers?

Q2

What are the factors that act as barriers to women and people with caring responsibilities entering and remaining in local government in your area, i.e. what are the obstacles?

Q3

Where measures can your local authority take to enhance the enablers and minimize the obstacles?

Policies and Procedures

Your 10-step plan should contain a combination of practical measures that have an immediate or speedy impact, as well as more nuanced, indirect measures that impact over the longer term. These should be underpinned by policies which reflect your local authority's position on the many interconnected factors which support a family-friendly local government. These include policies on:

- Equality, diversity and inclusion
- Maternity, paternity, adoption and parental leave
- Childcare and caring costs
- Breastfeeding
- Hybrid meetings
- Councillor induction and training
- Staff training and capacity building
- Sexual harassment and bullying
- Social media

Overview of Measures

The measures in this section are set out under the following headings:

1 Efficient and Effective Meetings

2 Using “Plain English”

3 Induction, Training and Development

4 Citizen Engagement, Communication, Customer Service

5 Other Measures

Support Efficient and Effective Meetings

Moorhead states that “the timing and conduct of meetings [does] nothing to encourage women’s participation”. Indeed, poorly organised or run meetings are a particular source of frustration, and even stress, for many Councillors, not just those with caring responsibilities. However, it can be challenging to ensure that Council meetings are both efficient and effective, with packed agenda and complex discussion items requiring robust democratic debate. Some of the key challenges reported by Councillors and staff that participated in the research for this toolkit are set out below.

Meeting times: Finding a time that suits everyone is tricky and there is no simple solution:

- Afternoon meetings can be problematic for parents who are doing school pick-up, homework and activity runs
- Evening meetings can be problematic for parents putting young children to bed
- Morning meetings often suit stay-at-home parents with school-aged children however, these do not always suit Councillors in part- or full-time employment

Short notice: When meetings are scheduled at short notice (i.e. less than one week), Councillors are afforded very little time to organise the necessary child and other care

Preparing for meetings: Councillors often require considerable time to prepare for meetings. It can be challenging for them to prepare adequately if agenda and documentation are circulated at short notice.

Meetings running over schedule: Meetings that run over time can be a particular source of stress for Councillors with caring responsibilities, as they often rely on carers, babysitters, relatives or friends to provide cover. These arrangements cannot always be extended at short notice.

What Can Help?

Well organized and run meetings are key to enabling a healthy and effective local democracy. There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach, but through trial and error your local authority will figure out what works locally for your Councillors and staff.

The measures set out below will not only help to create a more family-friendly work environment for Councillors, but they will also help to boost efficiency, facilitate engagement and, ultimately, make local government stronger. These measures can be successfully applied to all meetings, from plenary meetings to briefing meetings or community meetings.

As it is a matter for Elected Members of each local authority to make standing orders which regulate Council meetings, they may wish to consider these measures when producing standing orders.

Meeting Times

- a. Try to ensure that meetings dates are notified well in advance. At least one week's notice – ideally two - will give Councillors adequate time to put care arrangements in place.
- b. At the commencement of the Council term, consult with Councillors regarding work-life balance. For example, use an online survey, focus group or meeting to gather information of Councillors' external commitments, preferred meeting times and any other barriers to their participation. This information will help you to plan and organise meetings using a family-friendly lens.
- c. If the availability of supporting documentation and materials is delaying the notification of meeting dates, why not issue a "Save the Date" email to give Councillors time to put in place appropriate care arrangements?
- d. Bear in mind that "majority rule" is not always the best rule of thumb as, by definition, it means that those in the minority are regularly left disadvantaged by majority decisions. Instead, try different approaches to build consensus and to facilitate more inclusive meetings, such as:
 - When deciding on meeting times, use tools such as Doodle Poll or Survey Monkey to enable all Councillors to indicate their preferred day / time
 - Rotate meeting times between morning, afternoon and evening so that all Councillors have equal opportunity to participate at different times

Hybrid Meetings

- e. Elected Members may wish to amend standing orders to include provision for Councillors to attend meetings remotely
- f. Issue online meeting guidelines to support effective hybrid meetings
- g. Provide training for Cathaorligh, Chairpersons, Councillors and staff on managing hybrid meetings effectively
- h. Access Departmental funding to undertake capital works to accommodate hybrid meetings, such as in the Council Chamber and Municipal District offices

Meeting Preparation

- i. Circulate agendas and documents at least one, but ideally two, weeks in advance of meetings to ensure Councillors have adequate time to prepare
- j. Circulate documents electronically, in a searchable format, to facilitate Councillors to find and parse information easily
- k. Provide summaries of documents or briefing documents setting out key information, using Plain English (see Measure 2, below)

Meeting Efficiency

- l.** Set an agenda with time slots - assigning an allotted time for each item will help the meeting to stay on schedule
- m.** If more discussion is necessary, consider assigning it to a sub-committee or working group, where appropriate, to enable greater discussion, iron-out issues and bring back a recommendation or update to the next meeting
- n.** Making training available to Councillors and staff on both meeting skills and on facilitation skills. Facilitation skills can be particularly useful in managing debate and discussion in an inclusive, respectful and focused way. Other useful training options are set out below – see Measure 3, below.

Meeting Facilities

- o.** Less than 20% of local authorities provide hot-desk facilities for Councillors. The provision of dedicated office and meetings spaces helps to enhance Councillors efficiency and effectiveness.
- p.** Include childcare and family room facilities

Strengthen Induction, Training and Development

One of the best ways to strengthen family-friendly approaches is to provide adequate induction, training and capacity-building supports to both staff and Councillors.

Induction

New Councillors require a comprehensive induction when they are first elected or co-opted. This helps them to settle in, to understand their role and expectations, to forge strong relationships with staff, and to build confidence and competence.

There are a range of induction and training supports available to new Councillors, including from Corporate Services, AILG and LAMA. These should be complemented with in-house supports and resources which help new Councillors to “find their feet” quickly and learn how to navigate the system with relative ease. Try implementing some of the following measures in your local authority, if not already in place:

- a.** Produce a comprehensive information pack, in Plain English, on the workings and services of your local authority, and including a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section
- b.** Produce a user-friendly staff directory containing an organisation chart for each department, with clear titles, role profiles, contact details and up-to-date photos
- c.** Set up introductory meetings with heads of sections and other key staff

- d. Allocate dedicated staff to engage directly with new Councillors, to help them to get to know the system and to act as a point of contact as they are building their knowledge and capacity
- e. Establish a buddy or mentoring system, with existing or former Councillors paired with new Councillors to “show them the ropes”. Put in place clear mentoring guidelines and resources for mentors and mentees.

Training and Development

A fundamental aspect of building inclusive environments is ensuring that all stakeholders have the knowledge and awareness they need to foster a supportive, inclusive culture. Therefore, training and development for staff and Councillors is essential to embedding family-friendly policies and practices that genuinely support Councillors with caring responsibilities.

For maximum impact, all staff and Councillors should be provided training and development at two levels:

- Broad training on equality, diversity and inclusion to help build an understanding of gender inequality and of the gender impact of Council decisions, policies and practices.
- Skills-based training which provides practical tools and skills to enable staff and Councillors to embed family-friendly approaches into the day-to-day functioning of local government.

As part of your Local Authority’s Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) process, incorporate some of the suggested training outlined below into Personal Development Plans and Team Development Plans. Likewise, offer some of the suggested training to Councillors as part of their professional development programmes. Be sure all Councillors are made aware of their training budget and that these budgets are fully utilised annually.

Training to Enhance Equality, Inclusion, Diversity and Family-Friendly Approaches in Local Government	
Gender Equality / Gender Matters	Unconscious Bias
Gender Proofing	Respectful Workplaces
Diversity and Inclusion	Effective Meeting Skills
Intercultural Awareness	Hybrid Meeting Skills
Traveller Cultural Awareness	Chairing Skills
Disability Awareness Training	Facilitation Skills
Inclusive Leadership Practice	Plain English
Equality and Human Rights in the Public Service*	

**provided by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission*

Use Plain English

The National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform have produced a Plain English Style Guide for the Public Service - A Resource to Improve the Quality and Consistency of our Communications. The aims to help develop a more consistent approach to writing across the public service.

As part of their role, Councillors receive a constant flow of information that they must read, understand, communicate to others, and make decisions on - often within demanding timeframes. Sometimes, this information is overly long and complicated and includes jargon and technical terms which makes it difficult to review and analyse quickly.

Plain English is a style of presenting information that helps a person to understand it the first time they read or hear it. It is a more efficient way of writing that allows people to access, understand and use information quickly and effectively.

Using Plain English means that you:

- write in clear language
- keep things simple
- use short sentences and paragraphs
- give relevant information in the right order, and
- help people to find information quickly

The adoption of Plain English by staff and Councillors alike will contribute to promoting a more family-friendly local government by improving communications, making services more accessible and increasing overall efficiency.

Plain English takes a bit of practice, but it becomes the norm after a while. Try the following measures in your local authority:

- make Plain English training available to staff and Councillors
- use NALA's (the National Adult Literacy Association) editing service to help make documents clearer for the intended reader
- encourage staff and Councillors to use the Plain English style guide referenced above
- appoint Plain English champions to every Directorate or Department to support staff in the day-to-day use of Plain English

Measure 4

Encourage and Support the Development of Local Women's Caucuses

Encourage and support women councillors to establish a women's caucus or to join a regional caucus. A key aim of women's caucuses is to advance issues relating to women in local government, including advocating for improvements in policy and practice to make local government more family-friendly, diverse and inclusive. While there have been many caucuses established across the country in recent years, they require resources and support to enable them to operate more effectively and to have meaningful impact.

Other Measures

- a. Provide a dedicated point of contact or Account Manager for Councillors as part of your Customer Service Team.
- b. Enhance citizenship engagement, communication, and customer services. Effective citizen engagement enhances and complements representative democracy. By ensuring that your communication, customer service and community consultation processes are designed and delivered to best practice standards, your local authority helps to strengthen civic capacity and empowers citizens to make informed decisions regarding their rights and responsibilities. Consider how your local authority can strengthen citizen engagement: Run public information campaigns on the role of the Councillors, local government and local authorities. This helps to demystifying the function of local government and to build knowledge, trust and confidence in the system.
- c. Identify the additional supports needed at local level to address intersectional factors which intensify the barriers experienced by women to participation in local government

Measure 5

Over to You!

Investing in family-friendly approaches means implementing measures across a range of interconnected spheres - both strategic and operational. It takes a long-term commitment to embedding change and improvements at every level in the organisation.

As is evident from the examples set out on page 30 local authorities are already working to promote gender equality and diversity in local government – many in response to recent national funding opportunities and the issues highlighted in the Moorhead and other reports (see Section 2).

As a result of the Covid pandemic, hybrid meetings have become a reality in most – if not all - local authorities. The impossible has become possible by virtue of the necessities brought on by lockdown and socially distancing. The determination, innovation and energy that enabled this change must now be applied to other areas of policy and practice which impact diversity and inclusion in local government. It means providing leadership, investing in change, and ensuring a supportive environment for staff who are at the coalface of implementing the measures set in Section 4 of this toolkit.

It also means that all stakeholders must play their part in supporting progress. While this toolkit has been developed in the context of the remit of local authorities and, so, focuses on the role of the executive, many of the identified measures can also be implemented by politicians and political parties. Indeed, the onus is on politicians, political parties and national government to play their part in ensuring that local government better reflects the society it represents. Local authorities are but one part of the solution and, so, the National Women's Council calls on all stakeholders to consider their respective roles and to take the steps necessary to ensure a more equal, inclusive and diverse local government for all citizens.

