



National Women's Council

# Women Beyond the Dáil:

## Access, Representation and Retention in Irish Local Government

NWC Survey of Irish Women Councillors (2024)



An Roinn Tithíochta,  
Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta  
Department of Housing,  
Local Government and Heritage



**Report produced by Pauline Cullen and Claire McGing.**

**Commissioned by the National Women's Council (NWC).**

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# Introduction

*The NWC Survey of Irish Women Councillors* was designed and administered by researchers at Maynooth University (Pauline Cullen and Claire McGing) on behalf of the National Women's Council (NWC).

Building on the NWC's 2019 research report, *Women beyond the Dáil: More Women in Local Government*,<sup>1</sup> the survey examines the personal experiences and perspectives of women who have served in local government since the 2019 local election. This includes individuals co-opted to fill casual vacancies arising in the membership of elected councils<sup>1</sup>, a cohort not covered in the 2019 study. With a heightened political and public focus on the retention and attrition rates of women councillors in advance of the 2024 local elections<sup>2</sup>, the survey also identified the factors that motivated or deterred women incumbents from running for re-election in June 2024. Additionally, the report includes a preliminary gendered assessment of the 2024 local elections with a focus on retention, attrition and turnover, with reference to candidate selection strategies and electoral competition in shaping the outcomes for the representation of women in local government in all their diversity. This is a unique perspective that allows us to reflect on the challenges and opportunities for women's local representation, examining how these have evolved over the past five years in response to changes in the political landscape (e.g., the introduction of hybrid/remote meetings, funding for women's caucuses, maternity leave entitlements for councillors, increasing levels of online and in-person abuse, etc.). The analysis reveals stagnation in women's political representation at the local level, indicating that structural reforms are required to meaningfully advance gender parity in local authorities.

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- 1 Casual vacancies arising in the membership of elected local authorities are filled by co-optation by the authority concerned. The co-opted member holds the seat until the next election under the same conditions as elected councillors.
  - 2 See data compiled by Women for Election (WFE) <https://www.womenforelection.ie/> and See Her Elected (SHE) <https://www.seeherelected.ie/local-elections-2024/>

# Gender inequality in Irish local government

**Table 1** illustrates the historical gender imbalances in Irish local government. Relative to their share of the wider population, the reality is that women have been grossly under-represented in local politics, especially women from minority and marginalised backgrounds. This mirrors the situation at the national level, where women TDs currently hold only 23% of Dáil seats.

Before the 2024 local elections, women occupied 26% of council seats (246 seats out of 949).<sup>3</sup> Co-option processes were an important entry route for women councillors following the 2019 local election, especially after the 2020 general election, with women accounting for 52% (75) of co-opted members.<sup>4</sup> The 2024 local elections did not advance women’s political representation to any significant degree – compared to the outgoing council figures, the number of seats secured by women candidates increased by only one to 247 seats, which represents 26% of all councillors.<sup>5</sup> This percentage places Ireland well below the EU27 average of 35% in the share of women holding office at the local/municipal level.<sup>6</sup>

	% Women candidates	% Women councillors
1991	14	12
1999	16	15
2004	18	19
2009	17	17
2014	22	21
2019	28	24
2024	31	26

**Table 1: Women candidates and elected councillors in Irish local elections, 1991–2024 (%)**

The lack of progress in women’s seat-holding is set against a record number of women contesting the 2024 local elections, with 677 women (31% of all candidates) running for local office.<sup>7</sup> This compares to 28% women candidates in 2019, 22% in 2014 and 17% in 2009 (**Table 1**). Regarding retention and attrition, an analysis by Dr Adrian Kavanagh (Maynooth University) reveals that 132 councillors opted not to

<sup>3</sup> WFE data 2024

<sup>4</sup> Kavanagh 2024 <https://adriankavanaghelections.org/2019/09/02/city-and-county-council-members-co-options-and-changes-since-the-2019-local-elections/>

<sup>5</sup> SHE data 2024

<sup>6</sup> European Parliament 2024 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_BRI\(2024\)760348](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)760348)

<sup>7</sup> Data collated by SHE shows that while the names of 681 women candidates appeared on ballot papers, 3 women ran in multiple local electoral areas, so the number of women candidates in real terms was 677. <https://www.seeherelected.ie/see-her-elected-launch-live-local-election-tracker-record-number-of-women-677-set-to-contest-local-elections/>

contest the 2024 local elections.<sup>8</sup> Among them, 39 were women (30%), representing 17% of the number of women councillors elected at the 2019 local elections and 16% of the outgoing cohort of women councillors (factoring in resignations and co-options in the period between the 2019 local elections and early 2024). These percentages are higher than those for men (13% in both categories), showing that women councillors had a lower retention rate in 2024.

Despite a higher number of women running in the 2024 local elections, including over 50 women from migrant backgrounds, trends are evident by political affiliation, group membership and geographical context. Significantly, there was no Traveller woman candidate. In two local electoral areas, no woman appeared on the ballot paper at all. The largest parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, with the most significant seat share, failed to select at least 30% women candidates (25% and 29%), electing 21% and 27% women councillors in 2024.<sup>9</sup> These parties did not run enough women candidates to effect any substantive change in the over-representation of men in local government. Other political parties that ran significantly more women candidates, including Sinn Féin and the Green Party, secured a smaller share of seats, which had implications for women's political representation. Outside party politics, reflecting trends from previous local and national elections, women accounted for one-fifth of independent candidates and elected members. This is significant given the increase in the total number of independents in this election, the complexity of devising measures to address the under-representation of women among independent candidates (since gender quotas are not easily applicable to this group), and the additional barriers to running independently as a woman.<sup>10</sup>

The 2024 local elections also reinforced the urban-rural divide in gender representation, with councils in urban and suburban areas considerably more balanced than many rural councils.<sup>11</sup> Preliminary assessment indicates that women candidates attracted fewer first-preference votes, suggesting that some were recruited by larger parties to act as 'sweepers' for male running mates. Other indications suggest that incumbency (which disproportionately advantages men) maintains its grip in local election contests, with new women candidates facing significant odds at the polls. The electoral challenges for new women candidates from a migrant background running as independents were particularly acute in rural Ireland, with none of the 13 women candidates in this category winning seats. The low voter turnout is also notable, recorded as the lowest since the state's founding.<sup>12</sup>

Ensuring that women, in all their diversity, are adequately represented in local politics is crucial for many reasons. It is to be welcomed that 52% of the newly elected councillors of a migrant background are women. However, as noted above,

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8 Kavanagh 2024 <https://adriankavanaghelections.org/2024/02/20/for-those-not-about-to-rock-we-salute-you-county-and-city-councillors-who-will-be-stepping-down-at-the-2024-local-elections/#more-20716>

9 WFE data 2024 <https://www.womenforelection.ie/>

10 See Buckley 2020 for a detailed analysis of the emergence and election of independent women in Irish politics.

11 SHE data 2024 <https://www.seeherelected.ie/local-elections-2024/>

12 Kavanagh 2024 <https://twitter.com/AdrianKavanagh/status/1800220043063750871>

Traveller women remain excluded from local politics. The over-representation of men in local government is consequential because it is closely connected to women's daily lives and uniquely positioned to enhance women's leadership and participation and better represent their interests.<sup>13</sup> Political science research has established the connection between a greater presence of women representatives and enhanced gender responsiveness in local government, particularly in the areas of good governance, policy outputs and decision-making.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, gender imbalances among local councillors significantly affect the candidate selection processes for Dáil elections. Historically, local government has served as a critical pipeline to national office and is statistically more significant for women candidates than men.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, advancing women's representation in local government is critical not only for the health and quality of Irish local democracy, and as an indicator of gender equality in its own right, but also for potentially improving gender representation in national politics.

## Retention and attrition: Women candidates and politicians

Commonsense explanations about the over-representation of men in local politics often emphasise a lack of supply (too few women who put themselves forward to stand for office), a lack of good local candidates, and harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI). Yet such reasoning infers that the problem lies with women with less focus on recruitment procedures or wider political institutions and processes.<sup>16</sup> This tends to drive solutions that aim to 'fix' women to become more politically ambitious, work harder to get involved, and be more resilient. Extensive research has established that it is rules, procedures, practices and cultures of politics that negatively affect the diversity of candidates.<sup>17</sup> These factors also influence the retention of women politicians and the persistence of women candidates to re-contest for election when they are unsuccessful.

A focus on why women do or do not seek political office must examine the conditions under which participation in electoral politics occurs, and how different political parties recruit candidates. Studies of women's political ambition indicate that they assess candidacy differently than men and in relational terms that include an assessment of the viability of making a difference for their families and communities.<sup>18</sup> The modest increase in the percentage of candidates from 28% to 31% in the 2024 local elections is to be acknowledged, as is how those running benefitted from the support of initiatives that have raised the profile of women's under-representation.<sup>19</sup> 677 women contested the recent election – 21% more than last time. Given the imaginative ways that training initiatives in Ireland have worked to support women's recruitment (including mentoring,

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13 Cullen and McGing (NWC) 2019

14 Holman 2017

15 Buckley et al 2015

16 Collignon 2024

17 For example, Buckley and Keenan (WFE) 2021; McGing (WFE) 2024; Piscopo 2019

18 Cullen and Gough 2022; Cullen and McGing (NWC) 2019; Piscopo 2019

19 See Her Elected, Women for Election, and Women's Collective Ireland are examples of inventive approaches to increasing women's political representation.



training and networking opportunities for aspiring women candidates), continued poor progress in some parties to reach gender parity in candidacy and the lack of gender parity overall in candidates, indicates that structural reforms are also required. In other words, relying solely on mentoring, training and networking alone cannot break the cycle of men's dominance in local government.

## What political parties do matters

The 'supply' and 'demand' sides of political recruitment operate in a reciprocal relationship: supply increases and decreases in response to party demand for women candidates, with party selectorates either granting or declining access.<sup>20</sup> The absence of any women candidates from the Traveller community is a testament a lack of demand from parties for such candidates.<sup>21</sup>

Research in Ireland on gendered candidacy confirms international analyses that has established how parties maintain a pattern of recruitment aligned with male characteristics and male networks. This includes parties' preferences for a strong local connection to the constituency.<sup>22</sup> This later preference is often cited as a reason not to run a lesser-known woman candidate. Lacking the 'right' kind of local visibility is often seen as damaging to women's chances of being selected. Yet, 'If the excessive focus on candidates with local ties diminishes the quality and diversity of candidates, because the supply pool is already skewed in men's favour, then parties must reflect on the prior causes of that skewedness, how they organise, function and mobilise women and men on the ground.'<sup>23</sup>

The rationale used is that voters prefer local candidates because they are more responsive and accountable than non-locals because they know their neighbours and communities. Many women who run for local office are indeed 'local' in the sense that they may already work in the community, but they may not hold what is perceived by parties as visible and valuable local capital.<sup>24</sup> Women are over-represented in the community and voluntary sector in Ireland, providing them with invaluable knowledge and lived experience of the needs of their communities, especially for marginalised and disadvantaged groups. However, these spaces do not feature in a significant way as contexts where most political parties search for potential candidates.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, many women currently experience a 'broken pathway' from grassroots community work, including feminist community development, to formally standing as a candidate for local office.<sup>26</sup> This is in spite of the inherent links between the community and voluntary sector and local government, including in the areas of local planning and decision making.<sup>27</sup> The preoccupation with who can be seen as a local and how this aligns with masculinist ideals can also narrow recruitment pools in ways that especially

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20 Collignon 2024

21 Cullen and Gough 2022

22 Buckley and Keenan (WFE) 2021; Piscopo 2019

23 Collignon 2004, p.6

24 Collignon 2024

25 Cullen and McGing (NWC) 2019

26 Jakimow et al 2023, p.336

27 Department of Rural and Community Development 2023 <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/bcc24-a-guide-for-inclusive-community-engagement-in-local-planning-and-decision-making/>

disadvantage migrant and other ethnic minority women aspirants. Expectations that local candidates will provide free labour to the local party before getting selected also place women—whether local or not— at a disadvantage, as it assumes an extra layer of labour and time commitment that may not always be feasible or manageable for many women with caring responsibilities.<sup>28</sup> If localness is still desired, electoral cycles create opportunities for political parties to creatively recruit within constituencies, and transform local party practices and expectations in ways that diversify the candidate pool, but the political will must exist.<sup>29</sup>

## Doing politics: Work–life conflict

Analysis has confirmed that the working conditions of local government are largely incompatible with family life and care responsibilities.<sup>30</sup> An investigation into women’s political representation on Dublin City Council found that challenges associated with balancing care and the demands of local elected office were key factors in deciding not to run for a second term.<sup>31</sup> Formal leave arrangements such as maternity or parental leave are still rare in most parliamentary democracies, with research in Ireland suggesting that even when arrangements are in place<sup>32</sup>, resistance towards elected representatives taking maternity leave is evident. Informal expectations regarding the availability of politicians to their constituents also impact their ability to take maternity and/or parental leave.<sup>33</sup> This includes pressure to continue working during a period of maternity leave, with evidence that parties and voters often expect women on leave to undertake constituency-based work and attend events. This research concluded, “The pressure to carry out extensive constituency work as an elected representative is closely linked to the informal institutions of *personalism* and *localism* fostered by the electoral system of PR-STV, and disadvantages elected representatives and candidates who have given birth and/or have caring responsibilities.”<sup>34</sup> While women politicians who take maternity leave do have access to the provision of administrative assistance, the competitive nature of intra-party politics and the demands of constituents undermine women’s ability to experience quality and length of leave. Current maternity leave provisions do not insulate women well from these demands and/or address the disadvantage that taking such leave brings to their political careers. Such provisions are also met with resistance and ambivalence that, in turn, maintain men’s over-representation in elected office.<sup>35</sup> The gaps between policy and practice with regard to maternity leave for politicians reveal how informal rules can undermine formal rules within political institutions in ways that perpetuate gender inequality.<sup>36</sup>

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28 Cullen and McGing (NWC) 2019; Jakimow et al 2023

29 Collignon 2024; Jakimow and Henway 2023

30 Bernhard et al 2021; Donnellan, Creamer and O’Keeffe (AILG) 2024

31 Trantum 2024 <https://dublininquirer.com/2024/05/08/why-are-so-many-women-councillors-not-running-again/>

32 Houses of the Oireachtas 2022 <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/52/enacted/en/print#:~:text=An%20Act%20to%20amend%20the,of%20the%20local%20authority%20is>

33 McMahan 2023 <https://politicalreform.ie/2023/09/15/why-is-it-so-difficult-to-provide-maternity-leave-for-tds-and-senators/>

34 McMahan 2023

35 Celis and Lovenduski 2018; McMahan 2023

36 Tildesley et al 2021; McMahan 2023



## Low pay matters

The 2019 NWC study found that women councillors often work a ‘triple shift’ combining paid work, unpaid care work, and council duties.<sup>37</sup> While a higher proportion of men than women surveyed reported working full-time in addition to their elected role (46% compared to 19%), women councillors were more inclined to balance a part-time job with care responsibilities.<sup>38</sup> This corresponds with the Association of Irish Local Government’s (AILG) recent survey of local councillors indicating that many councillors compensate for low pay with additional employment.<sup>39</sup> The low pay of council work has disproportionate effects for younger women and those in general who lack assets such as housing, lone parents, working class people,<sup>40</sup> those with a disability, Traveller and migrant women.<sup>41</sup> Efforts to achieve gender parity and greater diversity in local government have failed to address the issue of low remuneration as a gendered, racialised and classed issue. Low pay is a factor deterring many ‘unseen’ candidates (people with nascent political ambition who decide not to contest).

Encouraging under-represented groups to contest for a place on councils without increasing the financial feasibility of the role fails to address a lack of diversity and puts too heavy a burden of representation on people least able to bear the costs. These include how low remuneration affects councillor well-being in financial, physical and social terms.<sup>42</sup> Committed women make sacrifices to become a councillor, bearing the burden of local representation despite these factors, yet they may leave or decide not to re-enter in the context of temporal and financial costs. The cumulative effects of strain associated with the boundarylessness of the gendered political workplace<sup>43</sup> that demands full-time work for part-time pay is incompatible with the desire to care and the costs of paid care when required.<sup>44</sup> Despite these challenges, women councillors maintain a deep commitment to public service and report satisfaction and fulfilment.<sup>45</sup>

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37 Cullen and McGing (NWC) 2019

38 Cullen and McGing (NWC) 2019

39 Donnellan, Creamer and O’Keeffe (AILG) 2024

40 Murray 2022; Jakimow and Henway 2023

41 Cullen and McGing (NWC) 2019; Evans and Reher 2024

42 Jakimov and Henway 2023; Donnellan, Creamer and O’Keeffe (AILG) 2024

43 Erikson and Josefsson 2022

44 Bernhard et al 2021

45 Buckley and Keenan (WFE) 2021; see also Bernhard and de Benedictis-Kessner 2024 for an assessment of women’s persistence after a narrow loss.

## Gendered political violence, harassment and intimidation

Much attention has also been placed on the discouraging effects of gendered political violence for the retiring and standing down of elected officials. Gendered political violence has been cited as a catalyst for women's exit from political office, and reports suggest a sharp increase in political violence and harassment in Ireland.<sup>46</sup> Women are disproportionately targeted, with ethnic and racial minority and migrant women experiencing significantly more abuse.<sup>47</sup> These forms of violence and intimidation often act as a tipping point in the context of other push factors, such as a lack of work-life balance that disproportionately disadvantages women<sup>48</sup> and low pay (despite recent improvements)<sup>49</sup> that necessitates additional employment.<sup>50</sup>

The experience of sustained gendered political violence constitutes, for some, an inflection point that, at a minimum, suppresses women's use of social media, delimiting their public presence. It also creates additional labour to manage safety and avoid or deflect abuse online and offline.<sup>51</sup> Despite recent efforts to provide information and advice,<sup>52</sup> women candidates and elected officials remain unsure or reluctant to report such abuse anticipating additional backlash and/or a loss of face.<sup>53</sup> At a maximum, these factors combine to shift women's calculus away from seeking re-election. These gendered (and racialised) forces interact to propel some women representatives to exit political life and most likely suppress political ambition for other women aspirants. A lack of wrap around supports for women candidates and politicians to process, insulate and recover from such abuse intensifies these effects.

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46 At least 36 incidents of politically motivated violence, intimidation, harassment, or threats in the lead up to the 2024 local and European elections, according to an analysis by two civil society groups, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and Hope and Courage Collective 2024 <https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2024/0608/1453647-surge-in-violence-and-intimidation-pre-election-analysis-shows/>

47 Buckley, Keenan and Mariani 2023; Houses of the Oireachtas 2024 [https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBusiness/other/2024-05-15\\_task-force-on-safe-participation-in-political-life\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBusiness/other/2024-05-15_task-force-on-safe-participation-in-political-life_en.pdf)

48 Cullen and Gough 2022; Begum and Sobolewska 2024

49 Moorhead 2020 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d928f-independent-review-of-the-role-and-remuneration-of-local-authority-elected-members-final-report/>

50 Cullen 2024; Cullen and McGing (NWC) 2019

51 Buckley, Keenan and Mariani 2023

52 SHE, WFE and An Garda Síochána 2024 <https://www.seeherelected.ie/safety-guidance-for-candidates-in-elections/>

53 Buckley, Keenan and Mariani 2023

# Methodological approach

The research team constructed a survey to understand the recruitment, representation, and retention of women councillors in Irish local government since the 2019 local election. The qualitative survey offers a snapshot in five thematic areas: participant's demographic characteristics, political profile, experiences of recruitment and retention, the role of the local councillor, and views on advancing women's representation in local government. It included a mix of closed and open questions. At the end, participants were given space to elaborate on their responses and/or provide additional comments.

All women councillors holding office (as of April 2024) were invited to participate in the study. The survey was distributed to this population by email, with a reminder email sent out before the closing date. An up-to-date national list of women councillors and their email addresses, categorised by political affiliation, was manually collated by searching the 31 local authority websites. In a few cases where email addresses were not publicly available on council websites, this information was retrieved from political party websites.

The survey was initially distributed on **April 24<sup>th</sup> 2024**, and remained open for over three weeks, closing on **May 20<sup>th</sup> 2024**.

The survey was reviewed and received ethical approval from the Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee (SRESC-2024-38322). Before launching the survey, all participants had to confirm their informed consent, or they could not proceed with the study. Participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet outlining the research's objectives and detailing the ethical considerations and data protection measures implemented.

In addition to the survey, this report's analysis and recommendations were enhanced by a preliminary gendered review of candidate data and election results from the 2024 local elections.

## Response rate

38 women councillors responded to the survey, resulting in a **16% response rate**. The low response rate can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, the survey was launched six weeks before the 2024 local elections, coinciding with an intense period of political campaigning for those seeking re-election. Three councillors emailed the researchers to advise that they could not complete the survey at such a busy time. Secondly, there may be an issue of ‘survey fatigue’ among women councillors in Ireland. At the end of the survey, one participant commented:

**“I understand that you have to collect data, but over the last 10 years, I have answered numerous surveys like this... They are extremely time-consuming, gathering the same information and geared towards the negative. In a way, it adds to our workload, and I am not sure it helps women entering the field when the headlines and reports are always about how bad it is.”**

Nevertheless, as a tool for driving equality and diversity in political life, it is important to collect data on the representation of women and minoritised people.<sup>54</sup> At the end of the survey, two participants noted the importance of research studies such as this one, expressing a keen interest in seeing the final results. While the overall number of responses to the survey was low, the research is indicative and provides valuable insights into the dynamics of women’s political representation in local government. In their own words, it provides a picture of why some women incumbents chose to run for re-election while others decided to leave politics, with common themes identified for each cohort. Additionally, the survey gathered critical information on these women’s experiences of holding elected office and, as a target group, their views on recent national initiatives to promote women’s equality in local government.

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<sup>54</sup> Centenary Action Group 2020; McGing 2024

# Profiling respondents

Women from most parties represented in local government responded to the survey, as did a number of independent councillors. Response rates to the survey varied compared to the actual population of women councillors by political affiliation.<sup>55</sup>

The majority (53%, 20 participants) had continuously served as a councillor for 5 years or less, while 29% (11) had served for between 6 and 10 years. The remaining participants were in office for over 11 years, with one councillor (3%) reporting more than 20 years of local service. Two participants (5%) had previously lost their council seat.

63% of participants (24) secured their seats in the 2019 local election. The other 37% (14) were co-opted to the council in the period following the election.

## Demographic profile

The survey asked about participants' demographic characteristics and their caring responsibilities. In line with research ethics, the researchers did not cross-tabulate these answers in any manner that could compromise the confidentiality or anonymity of an individual councillor.

**A summary of responses is provided below:**

- **Although the low response rate restricts the depth of intersectional analysis, it is important to note that 24% of participants (10) consider themselves part of an under-represented or disadvantaged group within Irish society, including but not limited to ethnicity, disability, class, nationality, sexual orientation or family status.**
- **In relation to ethnic or cultural background, 97% of participants identify as White Irish (36). 3% (1) selected prefer not to say (PNTS).**
- **Participant age distribution is: 3% are <30 (1), 16% are 30-39 (6), 37% are 40-49 (14), 32% are 50-59 (12) and 13% are 60-69 (5).**
- **21% of participants (8) consider themselves to have a disability, impairment, health condition (including mental health) or learning difference. 3% (1) selected PNTS.**
- **58% of participants (22) have children in their care. When asked to specify age ranges (note that this question allowed for multiple responses), most cases included children at least 14 years of age.**
- **Excluding childcare, 27% of participants (11) have other caring responsibilities (e.g., caring for an older adult, caring for someone with a disability or long-term illness, etc.).**

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<sup>55</sup> Some groups are statistically over-sampled (Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin, Social Democrats and the Green Party) and others under-sampled in the study (Fine Gael, the Labour Party and the Independent/Other category).

- **Apart from working as a local councillor, the survey asked participants to describe their current employment status. Table 2 shows an array of individual situations (note that this question allowed for multiple responses). The data further confirms the existence of a ‘triple shift’, as identified in the NWC’s 2019 research report<sup>56</sup>, where women councillors frequently juggle paid work, unpaid care work, and their council duties simultaneously.**

Table 2: Apart from your work as a local councillor, which of the following best describes your current employment status?

	Count	%
Full-time paid employment	11	29%
Part-time paid employment	6	16%
Self-employed/Freelancer	5	13%
Full-time public representative	10	26%
Working in the home	6	16%
Retired	4	11%
Unemployed/Looking for work	0	0%
In full-time or part-time education	1	3%
Other	1	3%
Prefer not to say	0	0%

<sup>56</sup> Cullen and McGing (NWC) 2019



# Selection, retention, attrition

## Experiences of the co-option process

As discussed above, co-options to fill casual vacancies on the council have emerged as a key entry route for women councillors. Since 2019, the majority of co-options have taken place because the incumbent councillor vacated their seat to enter national or European politics.<sup>57</sup> Because co-opted women councillors were not in office when the NWC distributed its 2019 survey, capturing their specific experiences in this follow-up study was important.

Almost all participants who had been co-opted since 2019 indicated a positive view of co-option procedures.

Interestingly, despite the higher proportion of women co-opted by parties compared to the percentage of women who ran in the 2019 local election, 36% of participants (7) disagreed with the statement that the co-option process placed a priority on nominating women candidates, while 43% (9) selected 'don't know' to this question. Participants made it clear that minority candidates had not been prioritised in the co-option process. 64% (9) disagreed with this statement, and 36% (5) answered 'don't know'.

Participants were asked to share more about their co-option experiences, of which four did. Given the lack of prior research on this subject, these responses offer some insights into the co-option process for women, particularly concerning gender dynamics at the micro level. The responses are presented below.

**"I felt my local party organisation and HQ were keen to identify young women in particular, and they were very strong in their encouragement of me where my initial reaction was to refuse the offer of the co-option, so I feel lucky in retrospect that they didn't initially take no for an answer."**

**"As the co-option process went through the local group, there were no minority members. The search and recruitment for those members would have happened before in the original selection process. There was no priority to select a woman as I announced pretty early that I would put myself forward. However, I was told I was at an advantage based on the fact that I was a woman. I didn't find this helpful rather frustrating."**

**"There were two candidates for the co-option and members of the Cumann were asked to elect their preferred choice. Both candidates were women."**

**"I was fortunate to be co-opted into a group of councillors from my party, but without their support, I don't know how I would have found my feet. I gather the induction process for new-minted councillors post-election is already very variable between local authorities, and there is even less hand-holding available for new members added during the term."**

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<sup>57</sup> AILG 2024 <https://ailg.ie/about/the-role-of-the-councillor/>

Responses suggest that co-option has worked to support women's candidacy and is valued as a pathway by some, if not all, women. Yet the final response highlights poor induction processes generally and specifically that while co-option may have statistically advanced women's representation since 2019, there are drawbacks to relying on this method for recruitment.

## Retention and attrition in the 2024 local election

Of the 38 councillors who responded to the survey, 82% (31) were running in the 2024 local election, while 18% (7) had decided not to stand again for office.

## Women who are running again

Participants were questioned about what influenced their decision to run for office, despite the challenges. Several key themes emerged, including the desire to maintain and advance women's representation in the council. Participants also spoke of a desire to act as a role model for their own children, contribute to the local community, and see projects to completion. Overall, those running characterised council work as satisfying, a source of personal fulfilment and confidence-building. Factors enabling women to run again included having a support system and the capacity to engage on issues they care about. Some incumbent candidates chose to run again to promote their political party and to prepare for the next general election.

A representative sample of responses is available below.

**"I understand the importance of women being at the table. Local government, while not perfect, is a significant influencer in what gets done and what doesn't at local level."**

**"There are not enough women as it is on local authorities. I decided to contest the 2024 election for one last time. I would hope that there will be a female candidate to replace me in 2029."**

**"I had decided in 2023 not to contest in these local elections as I was expecting my first child after two previous losses. During my maternity leave, I realised how much I loved my role as a Councillor and that I would not be setting the example I wanted for my child, I want them to know that doing what you love and being a parent do not have to be mutually exclusive. When my maternity leave finished, I announced my intention to contest the upcoming elections."**

**"Being a councillor has its challenges, but it is very rewarding."**

**"I enjoy the role and feel I am suitable for it. There are projects I have begun I'd like to continue to work on."**

**"Having the opinion that others within the Council have not got the interest of the Community at the forefront or who only represent some cohorts within the Community. Additionally, I know that I have made positive and long-lasting changes for the Community that I wish to continue into the future."**

**“I was always curious to see if it was something I could do. I eventually settled in to the Council after the co-option, and this boosted my confidence that it’s something I could sustain. I also felt I had the right people around me in terms of helping to run a campaign which was a massive factor.”**

**“I want to continue to try and contribute to building an alternative option for how we do politics in this country. Local government is deeply frustrating but I have also enjoyed my work within the community engaging with residents associations, environmental initiatives etc. Also for me this role gives me a position and the time to engage in a considerable amount of activism around issues that matter to me.”**

**“Intend to promote [my] party and stand for [the general election].”**

**“It takes so long to get anything done that 5 years really feels too few. I have projects that I still want to fight for and projects that I want to see completed.”**

## Women who are not running again

Participants not running for re-election cited multiple reasons for their decision, including the increasing demands of the role that made pursuing career progression outside of politics difficult. Demands of the role were perceived to create work-life conflict with negative impacts on family life and family planning. Low remuneration rates necessitated a second job that further exacerbates time poverty with implications for time spent on self-care and with family members. Other factors that suppressed women’s retention were online abuse and the need to continuously maintain a local profile and be available to constituents on multiple platforms. For some, their decision to leave local office included in their view the ‘slowness’ of political decision-making and limited powers of Irish local government. In other words, holding office granted access to decision-making rather than influence, which represented an ineffective use of their time to secure the changes they care about (and why they ran for office in the first place).

Low remuneration merits specific emphasis as it impacts the financial, social, and mental well-being of councillors.<sup>58</sup> Efforts to achieve gender parity and greater diversity in local government have failed to comprehensively address the issue of low pay and its part-time status. This leads to a double bind that requires many councillors to work a second job (see **Table 2** above).

Such sacrifices are disproportionately higher for groups currently under-represented in local government. Adequate remuneration needs to be centred on efforts to increase councillor diversity.<sup>59</sup> Encouraging women and minoritised people to participate is not enough, the pay must be sufficient for gender parity and diversity in politics.<sup>60</sup> Participants highlighted how low pay negatively affected their capacity to represent and suppressed their desire to run for office again. Improving pay and family-friendly working conditions featured strongly in

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58 Donnellan, Creamer and O’Keeffe (AILG) 2024

59 Bernhard et al 2021

60 Murray 2021; Jakimow and Henway 2023

recommendations to advance women's representation in politics and was linked to the weak powers and 'lower' status accorded to local governance.

**"The biggest challenges since 2019 include the increase in the cost of living. For the hours I work, a councillor's wages are less than the minimum hourly rate."**

**"A better salary – so they could work as a councillor full-time."**

**"The entire local government system needs reform – local councillors lack any real status within our democratic system. We are closest to our communities and engage in really impactful issues at a real local level yet our statutory powers have been reduced and those who wish to dedicate their time and energies to the role are not appropriately remunerated."**

**"Mainly financial and the lack of career progression. To be a good Cllr on top of all council work takes time and energy and full-time working. However, the pay and lack of pension entitlements mean many like myself either reduce working hours or juggle a full-time job to cover living costs. Juggling another job means you are not available for all the necessary meetings, and you don't have time to fully get or stay on top of Council work."**

**"I'm super-tired. Powers are increasingly being withdrawn from local government by the central government. Powers increasingly being withdrawn from councillors by local government officials. Need to earn more money to make ends meet. The job of a public representative is supposed to be part-time, thereby enabling a second job. My experience is that the job of a public representative is more than full-time."**

**"I am in my early 30s and don't own a home. By running again, I would be committing myself to living in a certain area in Dublin which I may be unable to afford soon. I am unsure if I have kids, but I know I wouldn't want the job if I did. However, I also know that if I commit to something, I need to see it through so it would be unlikely that I would give it up if I got pregnant, and that is a lot of pressure. Asking a person to run during her 20s/30s is really asking them to plan their life and stick to that life for 5 years."**

**"My problem is the amount of work that comes with communicating your work as a councillor these days. It is not enough to succeed in completing a task, i.e. fixing a pothole. You then have to do a letter drop to that area, go on 3 different platforms to tell people, etc. Similarly, people can contact you on too many platforms, such as social media, emails, and WhatsApp. It's hard to keep track of all the requests."**

**"I have a full-time job and have progressed to a senior management position, this means longer working hours and less time to fulfil my role as an elected rep."**

## Impact of abuse on retention

66% of participants (25) reported experiencing online threats, harassment and/or intimidation due to their role as a councillor, while 65% (24) indicated similar experiences in face-to-face interactions with members of the public and inappropriate behaviour from other political representatives. Alarming, 42% (17) had considered leaving elected office due to this behaviour. Participants detailed these experiences:

**“Many women and minority groups are put off by the coarse and harsh nature of the political arena, which in my experience is very real. I’m not sure how you go about changing that but that is a major blockage. I approached 8 women to run in place for the last local election. All were put off by this; it needs to be addressed.”**

**“Social media is incredibly toxic and will deplete the pool of talented and genuine people who want to run for office very soon I think. These are big questions but Ireland has allowed the word politician to become a dirty one almost and we need to turn back. Better security and response to threats and incidents of violence.”**

**“There is a fake Facebook account there for 2 years on me. Sayings all sorts of disgusting things.”**

**“Maintenance of professional boundaries between male councillors and their female colleagues. Training in gender-based inappropriate language and behaviour and recourse to a system of complaint where a male councillor behaves in a manner that would not be tolerated in an ordinary workplace.”**

## Local government as a pipeline to national office

Gender imbalances in local government also have implications for shaping the process for candidate selection to the Dáil. Local government experience serves as a crucial pipeline to national office and is statistically more significant for women than men.<sup>61</sup> 18% (7) of participants plan to contest the next general election, with another 32% (18) undecided at the time of the survey. This illustrates how local politics, despite the challenges, works to seed national political ambition for women.

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61 Buckley et al 2015

# Councillor role

Regarding committee participation, the sample comprises a highly experienced group of councillors 19 (50%) have chaired a council committee. Previous research<sup>62</sup> indicated that women councillors found it difficult to access higher status and remunerated committees. However, this data suggests a range of valuable committee experience and representation that may be lost when women councillors do not seek re-election or do not retain their seats.

## **Participants were asked about their experiences and views of the councillor role:**

- **87% (33) enjoy being a councillor for the most part.**
- **84% (32) believe it is important for political representatives to maintain an active presence on social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.).**
- **79% (30) feel under pressure to attend events in their local community.**
- **26% (10) agree that the allocation of positions on local authority committees is fair and transparent.**
- **26% (10) agree that the allocation of positions to external bodies is fair and transparent.**

Notably, most participants reported that being a local councillor had negatively impacted their family life, general well-being, mental health, social life, and work-life balance. A considerable proportion of the sample (over 40% in each case) also indicated a negative impact on their physical health, private life, and income. Despite this, the decision to run again infers that, on balance, council work is considered meaningful and that women persevere.

## Councils as gendered workplaces

Research affirms that politics is a gendered workplace<sup>63</sup> reflected in the design of political institutions, political practices, structures and norms that are inhospitable to care responsibilities.<sup>64</sup> This has specific implications for diversifying local politics where working hours and expectations of constituents create a boundaryless working environment that disadvantages those with unpaid care workloads. Being a councillor requires commitment and sacrifice especially for those who do have access to additional economic, material, social and human resources. The time and financial costs of care are borne disproportionately by women and minoritised people.<sup>65</sup> Initiatives such as hybrid and remote working arrangements and the introduction of maternity leave in 2022 were noted by participants as consequential.

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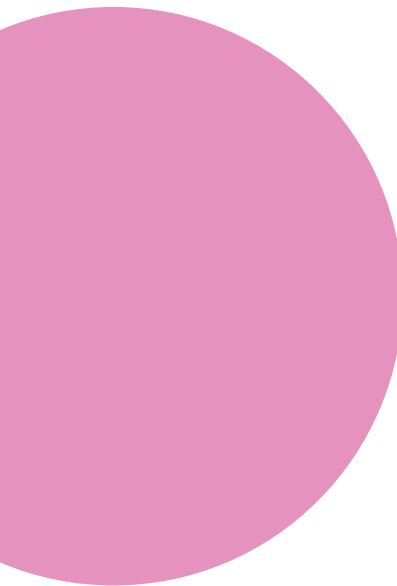
62 Cullen and McGing (NWC) 2019

63 Erikson and Josefsson 2022

64 Fiva and King 2023

65 Cullen and Gough 2022; Cullen 2024





Participants were asked about flexible working arrangements with 66% of participants (24) indicating that video conferencing had been fully maintained by their local authority since the COVID-19 emergency. Meanwhile, 26% (10) reported that a remote/hybrid meeting option is only available for certain meetings. Most participants agreed that remote/hybrid working would facilitate a better work-life balance for all councillors and encourage more women/members of minority and under-represented groups/those with caring responsibilities to participate in local politics.

**“Remote meetings are essential for those whose partner/spouse is not in a position to support women attending meetings.”**

**“Since 2019, the single most useful change has been the local authority’s capacity to accommodate hybrid meetings. Travel can be a dreadful timewaster. However, I find for effective representation and involvement, it is necessary to attend some 50% of statutory meetings.”**

Yet, when asked if decision-making on key council issues (e.g., budgets) is more effectively conducted in person, 71% (27) of participants agreed.

**“I am cautious of the idea that the use of hybrid or online meetings better supports women in particular to participate in local government. It removes women from Council Chambers and the various interactions that occur in and around in-person meetings and discussion. I feel there is a danger that it makes those who consistently engage online somewhat invisible.”**

However, participants noted that meeting times still presented challenges for councillors with care responsibilities:

**“The council role is - allegedly - part time. However, in my council, meetings can be scheduled on any day. What this means in effect is that even if I have part time childcare provision, meetings can be scheduled randomly outside those times. So unless I book and pay for full time childcare - which I don’t want to do either in terms of my child or financially - meetings will be arranged outside of the three days I have childcare arranged for. So either there should be set days on which meetings can be scheduled so that childcare can be arranged around these or drop in childcare for young children needs to be made available. I say this as the mother of a one year old.”**

As such local politics had a long way to go to address the realities of care in women’s lives:

**“I think the council is a workplace and as such the caring supports that apply to other workers should also apply to councillors.”**

**“Women councillors struggle to get male councillors to appreciate the issues of care and logistics that undermine their experience of council.”**

Maternity leave was noted by participants as helpful.

**“I was in the first cohort of councillors in Ireland to benefit from the maternity leave changes, and I used the temporary substitute option. During my leave, I had the full freedom to care for my baby without the worry of missing key items or issues.”**

**“Yes, I saw the positive impact on a councillor taking mat leave and believe it should be open to more people with (other) caring roles.”**

However, given the competitive logic of office holding, local authorities and political parties’ lack of experience in supporting maternity leave, it also raised other difficulties:

**“Giving leave does not address competitive disadvantage of absence from duties and expectations of public.”**

**“My little girl will be a year old in June so having a baby that close to the elections meant Maternity Leave to co-opt someone was a non-runner, it took me ages to hire a secretarial assistant and then I have to pay them and wait about a month to be reimbursed so it is breaking financially. The Council are great, she comes to a lot of my meetings with me. The party HQ have been absolutely useless. So yes, more support is needed, but even if they could get the support they’ve put in place to work right, that would be great.”**

**“My personal experience is that it would be a total waste of time (maternity leave) as few councillors would step out of the representational role for 6 months, enabling other councillor colleagues to establish relationships with our constituents. Moreover, unlike TDs, few councillors have secretaries/offices. We do everything singlehandedly and could not afford to let that volume of work slip. Therefore, maternity leave is aspirational rather than helpful.”**

**“Currently going through application process it’s a nightmare, so no. The admin support is going to be impossible to actually use.”**

**“I was pregnant when first elected. There was no maternity leave. I was expected to attend everything and afforded no leeway whatsoever. My party colleagues volunteered me to sit on numerous committees which I felt I was obliged to attend. I fielded calls from the maternity unit. My husband had to bring my baby in to breastfeed him as I wouldn’t do it in the chamber and there was no facility provided. I could go on.... yes maternity leave/ carers leave is required we are humans not robots and if you want balanced representation you must provide for people to facilitate them participating at every stage of life.”**

**“I had my first child while in office. In no other job would ‘maternity leave’ mean finding my own replacement, then resigning to go on statutory benefits – with only a gentleman’s agreement by the replacement to actually vacate the role when I wish to return.”**

## Advancing women's representation in local government

Across the survey, participants offered analyses of the challenges they faced as women councillors and recommendations on advancing women's representation.

There was strong support for quotas, with 74% (28) arguing for a statutory 40% gender quota to be implemented for local elections, as is currently the case for general elections.

**"I believe there should be candidate gender quotas tied to public funding at local government level. I also believe that we need special mechanisms to make the council more inclusive of minority groups such as Travellers, people with a disability, migrants and people of colour."**

**"There should be a commitment that government will promote and resource more women - gender quotas at 40% is a start, but let's have quotas for council elections."**

Women's caucuses were noted as positive and prevalent across councils, with 76% (29) indicating establishment in their local authority/region. Most participants agreed that caucuses had positively impacted women councillors, encouraged other women to run for local office, and helped to raise awareness of gender equality issues amongst male councillors, local authority staff and the local community. Importantly, 76% (29%) want to see women's caucuses re-established after the 2024 local election.

**"I have seen women's caucuses work really well in other councils and think they can be very effective once party politics are left at the door."**

Despite the burdens of representation, many women participants maintained a commitment to public service and a belief that their role in local government mattered:

**"I love the work! I love supporting my community and being a positive influence in advancing positive change."**

**"I view the June 2024 election as a litmus test of what I have achieved in 2019, so I want to see how I have done. Also, I have a lot of work going on locally that I would like to see completed in the next term."**

**"Because I love helping people in my community, I don't want the far right to take hold."**

# Conclusion

In sum, the survey findings indicate that holding local office is challenging for women, with some participants underlining the gendered push factors that have led to their exit from politics. Despite such challenges, women councillors affirm their commitment to local public service, as illustrated by the number of women who contested for seats in the 2024 local election.

Yet the modest increase in candidacy rates between 2019 and 2024 and subsequent negligible increase in women's political representation (a net increase of only two council seats across the country) indicate that we have yet to level the playing field for women candidates and councillors. Despite improvements in the proportion of women representatives in some local councils, incumbency, masculinist networks and candidate tactics (including vote management tactics in larger parties) continue to limit women's advancement in local politics. This research shows that candidacy remains gendered and racialised in ways that inhibit greater diversity in local politics. In addition, council work remains an inherently white and masculine workplace that presents profound challenges for the inclusion of minoritised people and those with care responsibilities. Structural reforms are required to meaningfully advance gender parity in Irish local government.

## Recommendations<sup>66</sup>

### Pipelines to local office

- **The adoption of statutory candidate gender quotas for local elections (with consideration of diversity targets for ethnic minority women).**
- **Women-only shortlists for co-options and developing party rules that mandate 50:50 in all party internal positions and candidate selection conventions.**
- **Develop party candidate selection processes that look outside of the usual networks to seek a diversity of women, including women from ethnic minorities, migrant women and women with disabilities.**
- **Ask the Electoral Commission to assess the feasibility of term limits for local authority seats and gender quotas for co-options.**
- **Post-electoral gender audit of party recruitment and retention as default/triggered when not meeting the threshold of at least 40% women candidates.**
- **Returning election costs if local election candidates meet a certain percentage of the quota.**
- **Vouched care costs as eligible election expenses.**
- **Ringfence a proportion of public funding of political parties to address the under-representation of women in all their diversity (membership, candidacy and retention).**

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66 These recommendations are based on survey findings and analysis from advocates and organisations for gender parity in politics.

- **Publication of party membership and candidate data by equality grounds to enable measurement (planning), transparency, scrutiny and accountability in achieving greater diversity.<sup>67</sup>**
- **Formal gender and/or diversity-sensitive political party (G/DSPP) audit. Drawing on the globally recognised gender-sensitive parliaments approach of the Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU)<sup>68</sup>, this requires parties to assess the extent to which, as organisations, they are G/DSPP insensitive in respect of equality of participation, party infrastructure, and culture and to identify changes to rules, procedures, practices and norms to make them G/DSPP sensitive.<sup>69</sup>**
- **In line with other recommendations<sup>70</sup>, supports made available to aspirants, candidates and politicians to prevent online and in-person abuse, to deal with it when it happens, and to provide aftercare to reduce its personal and professional consequences.**
- **In line with other recommendations<sup>71</sup>, remove the requirement for election candidates to publish their home addresses.**

### Doing local politics

- **Increase remuneration for local councillors to remove specific barriers to the recruitment and retention of women and members of minority groups.**
- **Creche facilities in local authorities for parents with young children.**
- **Office and administrative (secretarial) support as a default for councillors, with increased supports for re-entry after a period of maternity leave.**
- **Vouched care costs as eligible expense allowances for councillors.**
- **Positive statement of support/code of practice from local councils for the right to disconnect.**
- **Flexible/rotating scheduling of meetings to accommodate additional employment and/or care responsibilities and a minimum notice period for meetings.**
- **Retain possibilities for hybrid meetings with a commitment to guard against a depreciation of visibility and parity of networking opportunities for those who opt for online participation.**
- **Sustainable funding to support the establishment, operations and impact of local and regional women's caucuses.**
- **Increase funding to properly resource and support women's community organisations and the broader community and voluntary sector, advancing a more diverse and participative system of local democracy and governance.**

67 As per proposals in the United Kingdom to use Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, that would require all political parties to publish regular data relating to protected characteristics on their selected candidates. See Collignon 2024

68 IPU 2016 <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/toolkits/2016-11/evaluating-gender-sensitivity-parliaments-self-assessment-toolkit>

69 Collignon 2024

70 Houses of the Oireachtas 2024 [https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBusiness/other/2024-05-15\\_task-force-on-safe-participation-in-political-life\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBusiness/other/2024-05-15_task-force-on-safe-participation-in-political-life_en.pdf)

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