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Striving to thrive

Councillors' reflections on local democracy

TOWN HALL

About APSE

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is owned by its members and, working on their behalf, maintains and develops a network of local government officers, managers and councillors from local authorities across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Working on a not-for-profit basis, APSE is dedicated to promoting excellence in the delivery of frontline services to local communities around the UK. Through the extensive APSE network, more than 300 local authorities and organisations are able to share information and expertise on vital frontline services, ask for advice and innovative solutions, as well as develop new, viable ways forward in an effort to help one another.

APSE provides a united national voice for these authorities, supporting them in the development of strong and sustainable public services.

About the research team

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The research team would like to thank all the councillors across the UK who gave up their time to support this study and make this report possible. We hope to have faithfully reflected their views and voices in our analysis.

Our special thanks go to Mo Baines whose valuable advice and support guided us through every step of this study.

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Foreword

In many ways the title of this research report, produced in collaboration with De Montfort, Staffordshire, Essex and Leeds Beckett Universities, acts as a summary for its main findings.

Whilst local democracy has many challenges, local councillors are working hard for their local communities and supporting political leadership in their local areas. Yet they continue to face many obstacles. In short, they are 'striving to thrive' against the challenges of the role.

The research finds that many of the known challenges of being a local councillor continue to frustrate them, and in many ways have arguably been made worse by the continuing demands on services in the face of limited resources and inflationary pressures.

So too continues the frustration in local political structures which do not always reflect on the substance of a councillor's role in supporting and advocating for citizens within their local ward or area. The ever-increasing role of councillors, often spanning across different partnerships, and a diverse workload of dealing with constituents' concerns, alongside ward matters and council committee structures, often creates conflicting demands, loyalties, and time-pressures.

Most alarmingly, the report finds that there has been a barely discernible shift in the make-up of local councillors. Councillors still fail to reflect the overall make-up of the constituents that they seek to serve. This has long been recognised as an issue across representative democracies and yet progress remains painfully slow.

Sadly, the report also reflects growing concerns as to the wellbeing and safety of councillors in going about their council business. Reports of abuse, both in-person and through social media channels, is on the rise. This is unacceptable and will only serve to further frustrate efforts to attract a more diverse cohort of councillors across all political parties. It is not an exaggeration to say that the abuse of local councillors is a threat to local democracy and the democratic institution of the local council itself.

I would urge you to share this informative report amongst your political groups, council leaders, chief executives and corporate directors. Let us start a conversation about how we can better value our local councillors and the vital role that they play in our local councils.

Cllr Jacqui Burnett, APSE National Chair 2023-2024

Executive summary

Policy stagnation or the 'same old same as'?

Our evidence confirms the presence of persistent challenges and obstacles that have stood in the way of councillors for far too long, and hampered effective local democratic governance. Key challenges and obstacles remain unaddressed. At best, our evidence suggests, the everyday experience for many councillors continues to frustrate. At worst, in the current conjuncture of austerity, inflationary pressures, and growing demands on services, the crisis facing local representative democracy may have deepened.

Efforts to widen access are still not working

Councillors remain unrepresentative of the broader UK population. Elected members tend to be older than the general population. They are more likely to be male. They tend not to undertake any paid employment. And importantly, they are predominantly white, with people from minority ethnic backgrounds significantly under-represented in their ranks. With little change over the last ten years, our evidence therefore leads us to conclude that it is time for a new approach to widening access to the pool of people prepared to stand in local elections. The thorny issue of pay for councillors needs to be re-considered for the role to become financially viable and more attractive to different sections of the community, younger people and those in employment.

Local political structures continue to divide councillors

The effectiveness of local political structures continues to divide elected members. Only a third of elected members agreed that council structures enable councillors to engage communities effectively, while approximately four in ten did not believe that scrutiny committees worked to hold the executive to account. Less than half of our respondents, 44.3%, agreed that decision-making is transparent and that councillors are provided with the right information to make effective decisions and support constituents.

Strikingly, almost half of councillors, 44%, did not agree that their council structures supported the engagement of non-executive or 'backbench' elected members. Equally damning for local democratic governance, less than half of elected members, 46.8%, argued that they would personally be able to contribute to efforts to maintain and improve council services. Such findings arguably point to the continued relevance of the existence of 'two tribes' in local government, each with contrasting values, experiences and beliefs depending on whether they are members of the executive or

not. Indeed, our findings underline the failure of recent policies to carve out an effective role for backbench councillors and the persistent recognition that scrutiny and the model of the 'community councillor' have not delivered in practice what was expected of them.

More needs to be done to challenge unacceptable behaviour and intimidation

Significantly, our evidence demonstrates that the demands and tensions of being a councillor are being navigated by far too many in an environment of challenging behaviour, bullying, harassment and intimidation. 79% of our respondents reported that their councils had experienced in the last four years behavioural issues from councillors, officers or other staff. Approximately one in seven claimed that at least one incident was so serious that their council or officers were unable to carry out some or all of their proper functions. Equally, 81.2% of our respondents reported that their councils had experienced in the last four years issues related to intimidation and harassment from members of the public towards councillors, officers, or other staff. Approximately one in five stated that at least one incident was so serious that the council had to put in place a specific action plan to ensure the safety of councillors or officers.

Less time spent by councillors working with communities

Our evidence confirms that councillors continue to devote their time to the widely recognised roles and responsibilities of local political leadership. As might be expected, there are variations in the proportion of time spent by elected members on particular tasks. First, some tasks appear to divide elected members into distinct camps, notably dealing with complaints and working with area/neighbourhood committees, where approximately a third of councillors devote a high proportion of their time to such activities and a third spend a low proportion of their time engaged in such activities. Second, other tasks remain 'minority sports' engaging only a limited number of elected members, particularly external facing activities representing authorities on other bodies (for example only 6.6% of councillors spend a high proportion of their time working with regional or national government bodies). Finally, and importantly, our evidence suggests a worrying trend for the legitimacy of local democratic government: more councillors in 2023 devoted a low proportion of their time working with communities than they did in 2014, be it acting as a source of ideas/proposals for their ward, feeding community views into council policies, explaining council decisions or working with area or neighbourhood committees. For example, in 2023, more councillors spent a low proportion of their time working with area or neighbourhood committees than they did in 2014 (37.7% in 2023 compared to 26.5% in 2014).

Partnership working is increasingly contested

Our evidence suggests that a significant proportion of councillors question the effectiveness of partnership working and its impact on service delivery and local democracy. Only around four in ten councillors agreed in 2023 that partnership working would enable authorities to maintain or improve services, compared to just under six in ten in 2014. In addition, around half of councillors agreed that partnership working was driven by the financial issues facing authorities, while four in ten viewed public-private partnerships as diluting public accountability. Interestingly, more councillors in 2023 spent a low proportion of their time working in partnership than in 2014 (46.1% in 2023 compared to 32.3% in 2014).

As such, collaboration and partnership, one of the key policy instruments of recent years across local government, may well be facing increasing challenges from elected members. But the strength of these challenges may, we suggest, vary from partnership board to partnership board and from authority to authority and across each nation of the UK. Access to partnership boards was thus relatively evenly split among councillors in Scotland but remained a 'minority sport' in England and Wales, where respectively only 22% and 30% of councillors sat on a partnership board. Similarly, while approximately half of councillors in Wales and England did not believe that they could personally contribute effectively to decisions in partnership bodies, almost half of councillors in Scottish reported that they could influence such decisions.

Devolution and localism are increasing centralisation

Our evidence finds a continued disconnect between central and local decision-makers. Strikingly, half of all councillors expressed concerns over increasing central control over local priorities and policies, and this despite efforts to implement devolution and localism across the UK. In Scotland, almost six out of ten councillors agreed that devolution had increased central control over local authorities, compared to approximately five out of ten in Wales, while in England five out of ten councillors agreed that localism has in practice increased centralisation. In Northern Ireland, although our survey did not identify a majority view on local government reorganisation, there was broad agreement that local government requires further powers to meet the needs of communities.

Equally, our evidence suggests that few councillors are confident that efforts to increase collaboration between local authorities, health and social care will deliver significant change. In England, only an estimated three in ten councillors expected integrated health boards to increase the voice of local authorities. In Wales,

approximately two in ten elected members reported that public service boards had amplified the voice of local councils in defining local priorities. In Scotland only two in ten elected members agreed that health and social care partnerships had produced a greater say for local government in the setting of health care priorities, while just under half of Scottish councillors agreed that community empowerment initiatives have complicated the lines of accountability between councillors and constituents.

A growing pessimism?

Councillors are far from optimistic that what they see as the desired changes to local government will take place over the next five to ten years, while recognising the difficulties of increasing voter turnout and attracting new people to stand in local elections. Here little has changed since 2014. But importantly, our evidence suggests a significant change in the outlook of elected members: councillors are in 2023 increasingly pessimistic as to their capacity to bring about impactful change. Elected members, compared to our findings in 2014, increasingly doubt the effectiveness of all available mechanisms of service improvement. Yet, just under two-thirds of councillors still believed that their authorities were strongly committed to improving services, while approximately six in ten expected service improvement plans in their authority to actually improve services. Significantly, however, over seven in ten councillors agreed that their authority was often prevented by its financial position from improving services.

Recommendations

Widening access

1. The renumeration of councillors, as well as pension, maternity and paternity rights, should be standardised across the UK and brought further in line with that of MPs. Renumeration practices in England and Wales should be brought in line with those of Scotland and Northern Ireland.

2. UK Governments must take all necessary statutory measures to enable local councils to conduct council business through hybrid models as means of encouraging fairer representation and participation, particularly for people with a disability, those with carer and/or parental responsibilities and those in employment.

3. Councils should publish and report on plans to ensure access to political office for people of all backgrounds. This should include concrete measures to address the unsociable timing of meetings, childcare provision, maternity and paternity leave, and the possibility for online meetings.

4. Political Parties across the UK should create councillor development strategies that commit to the development and support of the next generation of councillors, reflecting their vital contribution to the future of vibrant local and national democracy and democratic participation.

Standards, intimidation and political behaviour

1. UK Governments must take all necessary statutory measures to ensure the safety of councillors including a legal right to withhold home addresses from ballot papers, council websites and if necessary declarations of interest.

2. UK Governments should consider enhanced protections for local councillors from abuse both in person and on social media platforms. This may include consideration of a specific crime of aggravated assault where assault takes place during the course of a councillor's duty, local dedicated police support and named contacts, as well as specific recognition by social media companies of the impact of online abuse on local democracy.

3. Councils in England should be given the power to suspend councillors for up to six months if they are found to have breached the code of conduct, and the Independent Person agrees this would be an appropriate sanction.

Local decision-making and accountability

1. Councillors should have the right to be consulted and fully engaged in any decisions or negotiations impacting on their wards.

2. Councils should review existing reporting mechanisms for councillors, ensuring that there are clear protocols and mechanisms in place to enable the scrutiny and accountability of decision-making within local authorities and across external bodies, partnerships and the multiple tiers of government.

3. Councils should ensure that the representation of councillors on partnership boards and external bodies reflects the body of councillors in the authority.

Future of elected members

1. Government across the UK should evaluate the democratic decision-making processes and outcomes of the return to committee systems and experiments with alternative political structures across authorities, with particular reference to how different systems engage non-executive councillors.

2. Governments across the UK should introduce independent and representative councillor commissions of inquiry to deliver proposals on the future role of councillors and local political leadership.

3. National associations and local government sector leads across the UK should undertake a collective assessment of good practice in relation to support for, and engagement of, councillors within local authorities. This should include practices of induction and training for elected members and protection from and reporting of abuse.

The future role of elected members

It is long recognised that councillors contribute to the vitality of local democracy. Being a councillor can be rewarding, offering opportunities for individuals to work with communities and contribute to the wellbeing of neighbourhoods, villages, towns and cities.[1] However, equally, for some time now, the role of the councillor has been running up against a set of inter-locking challenges and uncertainties that are making it more and more difficult for elected members to bring about the transformative policies and services that support local communities.[2] Obviously, the pressures on councillors cannot be divorced from the austerity that has imposed severe cuts to local services, recent inflationary pressures and cost of living crises, and the pandemic and its aftermath. But pressures on elected members are also tied to new demands for participatory democracy and doubts over the representativeness of councillor body, as well as ongoing debates over the role of so-called backbench councillors, rising concerns over public standards and behaviour, and the persistent tensions of combining the demands of being a councillors with individual careers and everyday life.[3] In such challenging times, you might ask: why be a councillor?

This study examines the day-to-day 'reality' of being a councillor. It presents and analyses the findings of a survey of the beliefs and attitudes of elected members towards local political structures, their roles and responsibilities, service improvement, partnership working, standards and behaviour, and local governance and centre-local relations. It finds evidence of a body of councillors better educated than the general population and committed to local democracy and the maintenance of local services. But it also unearths increasing pessimism among councillors over their capacity to deliver local democratic change. Councillors are split over the effectiveness of fundamental mechanisms such as scrutiny and their ability to hold decision-makers to account. They have less faith in partnership working, and they remain circumspect over the impacts of devolution and localism – echoing frustrations of growing centralisation and a disconnect between the tiers of government which have been

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[1] Local Government Association (2023) *Local Leadership Framework for Councillors*, available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-leadership-framework-councillors accessed 16 April 2024.

[2] See Barnett, N. and Chandler, J. (2023*) Local Government and Democracy in Britain*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Copus, C. (2023) 'Councillors as Local Representatives' in Teles, F. (ed.) *Handbook on Local and Regional Governance*, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800371200.00018; Copus, C. (2015) *In Defence of Councillors*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[3] Barnett, N., Griggs, S. and Howarth, D. (2019) 'Whatever Happened to Councillors?', *Political Studies*, 67 (3): 775-94.

voiced for some time. And importantly, almost half of councillors do not believe that they are able to contribute to efforts to maintain and improve council services, seven out of ten report that their authority is often prevented by its financial position from improving services. In other words, as the title of this report suggests, we find that councillors are 'striving to thrive'.

Methodology and sample representativeness

The data in this report was collected from a survey of 393 councillors from across the UK. The survey was conducted between 14 April 2023 and 18 May 2023, with data collected online. Councillors were invited to participate by APSE, with invitations being sent to every councillor's public council email address in the country. The intention was to sample councillor beliefs and attitudes very shortly before the 2023 local elections in England and Northern Ireland, so that the survey would be able to capture the perceptions of councillors who had sufficient experience in their roles. Owing to specific requests from councillors to allow them to complete the survey after the electoral campaign in England, we extended the time that the survey was open. Nonetheless, we did not expand the invitation to any newly elected councillors and as such the population targeted remained consistent.

The sample aimed to be as representative of councillors as possible. In the final sample, 387 respondents declared the nation of the UK in which their local authority resides. Of these 306 were in England (79.1% of the sample), 35 in Scotland (9%), 41 in Wales (10.6%) and 5 in Northern Ireland (1.3%). These numbers approximately track the relative numbers of councillors in the respective nations of the UK, where England has 85.1% of the total population, Scotland 6.2%, Wales 6.3%, and Northern Ireland 2.3%; although England and Northern Ireland are somewhat under-represented and Scotland and Wales somewhat over-represented relative to population distributions.

Nonetheless, while the sample allows for valid inferences to be made about the population of councillors in the UK, particular care should be taken when making inferences about Northern Ireland owing to the very small numbers of respondents in absolute terms. As such, the report sometimes omits sub-national analyses of Northern Ireland. While the samples are sufficient in England, Scotland, and Wales to allow for analyses on these nations individually, these analyses have been carried out in a way that is mindful of the need to not divide these samples yet further. In terms of demographic representativeness of the survey, the demographics of councillors in this survey match closely with other recent surveys of councillors in the UK.

Reading the survey

Offering significant insights into changes over time, the survey builds on two earlier surveys supported by APSE, one in 2003 and one in 2014. The analysis of the survey is divided into seven sections. The first examines the demographic profile of councillors. The second section turns to an assessment of the activities of elected members and the time they apportion to different tasks. The third section evaluates the attitudes of councillors to different mechanisms of service improvement, before a fourth section analyses attitudes towards local political structures and partnership working. Two further sections subsequently investigate attitudes and experiences of standards and political behaviour, and the views of councillors towards local governance and centre-local relations. The final section addresses prospects for the office of councillor. Let us now turn to the analysis of the demographic profile of elected members in 2023 and its implications for local political leadership.

## The demographic profile of UK councillors in 2023

Councillors were asked a series of questions relating to their age; gender; educational background; length of service; political affiliation; and official responsibilities and roles. The position of 'executive councillor' was broadly interpreted as an elected member holding office as a council leader, cabinet member, committee convenor or officeholder in the council majority (or alternatively an elected member who fulfils leadership duties for opposition parties as in the case of a 'shadow executive' councillor).

Our evidence confirms that the demographic profile of councillors in the UK remains relatively stable. Councillors remain unrepresentative of the broader population. Women and ethnic minorities continue to be under-represented, as do younger people and the working population. While the number of women councillors appears to have risen in recent years, and women themselves are more likely to be executive rather than backbench members, they remain under-represented across the board, being individually less likely to be councillors, members of the council leadership group, or represented in senior party positions. Yet, for those who cast doubt on the qualification and skills of councillors, councillors tend to be more educated than the rest of the population, with the proportion of councillors with undergraduate or postgraduate degrees almost double that of the UK population.

Age and length of service

The average age of councillors who responded to our survey was a little over 60 years old. Our evidence suggested no significant variation in the age of councillors across different types of council nor between political parties. Nonetheless, there is a wide range of ages among elected councillors, with the youngest in our sample being 21 years old and the oldest being 86 years old (see Figure 1). Councillors aged below 50 were in the minority; indeed, the three most frequent age categories into which councillors fell were 60-64, 65-69 and 70-74 years old.

Figure 1. Histogram of Councillors' Ages
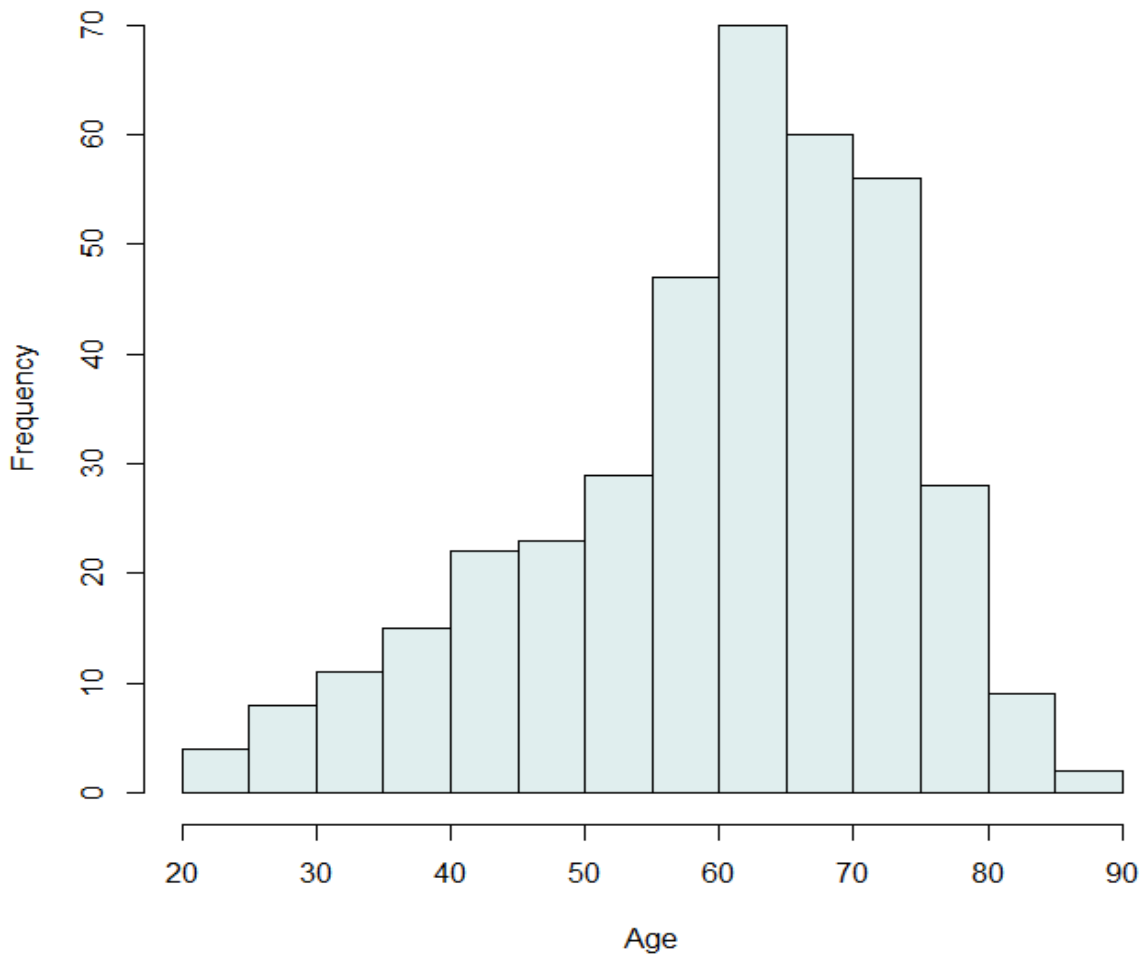
On average, respondents had served as councillors for 11.5 years, with female councillors having served on average for 9.4 years and male councillors having served on average 13.3 years. The shortest length of time served as councillor was one year, while the longest length of time served was 58 years. As expected, there is a strong correlation between the age of councillors and length of service.

Gender

Four in ten councillors, 42%, were women while 58% of respondents were men. The average age of male and female councillors was essentially the same: 60.7 years for men, and 60.6 years for women. The Labour Party had by far the most representation of women councillors in our sample: 62.9% of Labour councillors were women, compared to 45.0% of councillors in the Green Party, and 44.5% of councillors who stood as Independents (see Table 1). In contrast, our evidence suggests that the lowest representation of women councillors by political party was found in the Conservative Party where women councillors accounted for 26.5% of the party's councillors. This

said, in our sample, when compared to the general population, women councillors were under-represented in all but the Labour Party.[6]

Table 1. Women Councillors by Party Affiliation

Party affiliation	% of women councillors
Labour	62.9
Green	45.0
Independent	44.4
Liberal Democrat	31.7
Conservative	26.5

*Base: all respondents who chose a gender of either male or female. Shown to 1dp.*

Turning to the representation of women councillors in senior roles and responsibilities in both council and party structures, we found that female councillors accounted for 46.2% of those elected members in executives or cabinets or acting as committee chairs. By contrast, only 40.7% of backbench councillors were female. Women councillors were less represented in senior political party roles: 37.5% of party whips and 34.9% of members of the opposition leadership groups were female. Party whips were less likely to be female than non-whips (37.5% of party whips were female).

Ethnicity

Over nine in ten of respondents, 93.67%, described themselves as 'white British', 'white European Union', or 'white other'. As such, it remains the case that elected members are far more likely to be white, and less likely to be black or minority ethnic, than the general population which they represent (see Figure 2).

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[6] Because the survey aimed to be representative of the UK as a whole, there are relatively few councillors in the survey who are members of the SNP (17 councillors) or Plaid Cymru (7 councillors). As such, we have less confidence in the representation of women councillors in these parties and we have therefore chosen to omit this data from our analysis of the survey returns.

Figure 2 The Ethnicity of Councillors
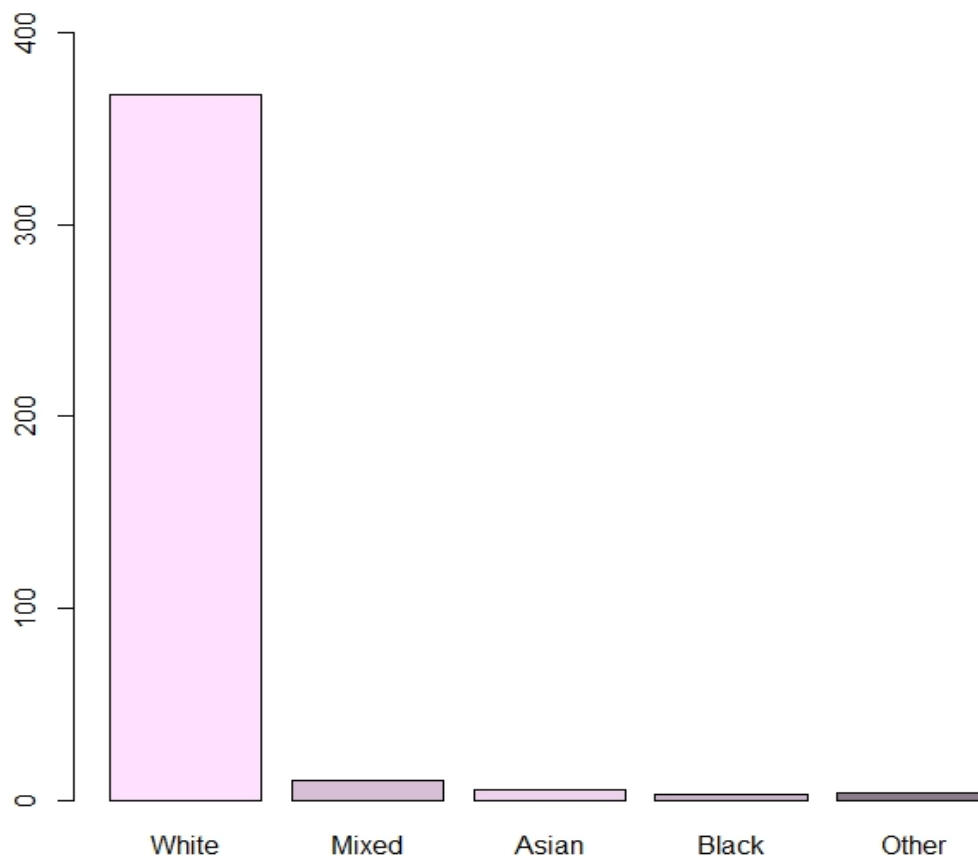
Education

Approximately one-third of councillors, 31.2%, hold a postgraduate degree qualification, while a further third, 31%, hold undergraduate university degrees (see Figure 3). In comparison, 26% of 25–64 year-olds in the UK hold a bachelor's degree or equivalent, while 14% hold a master's degree or equivalent and 2% hold a doctoral degree or equivalent.[7]

[7] See OECD (2023), *Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes*, OECD Publishing: Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/d7f76adc-en: Accessed 16 April 2024.

Figure 3 Educational Qualifications of Councillors
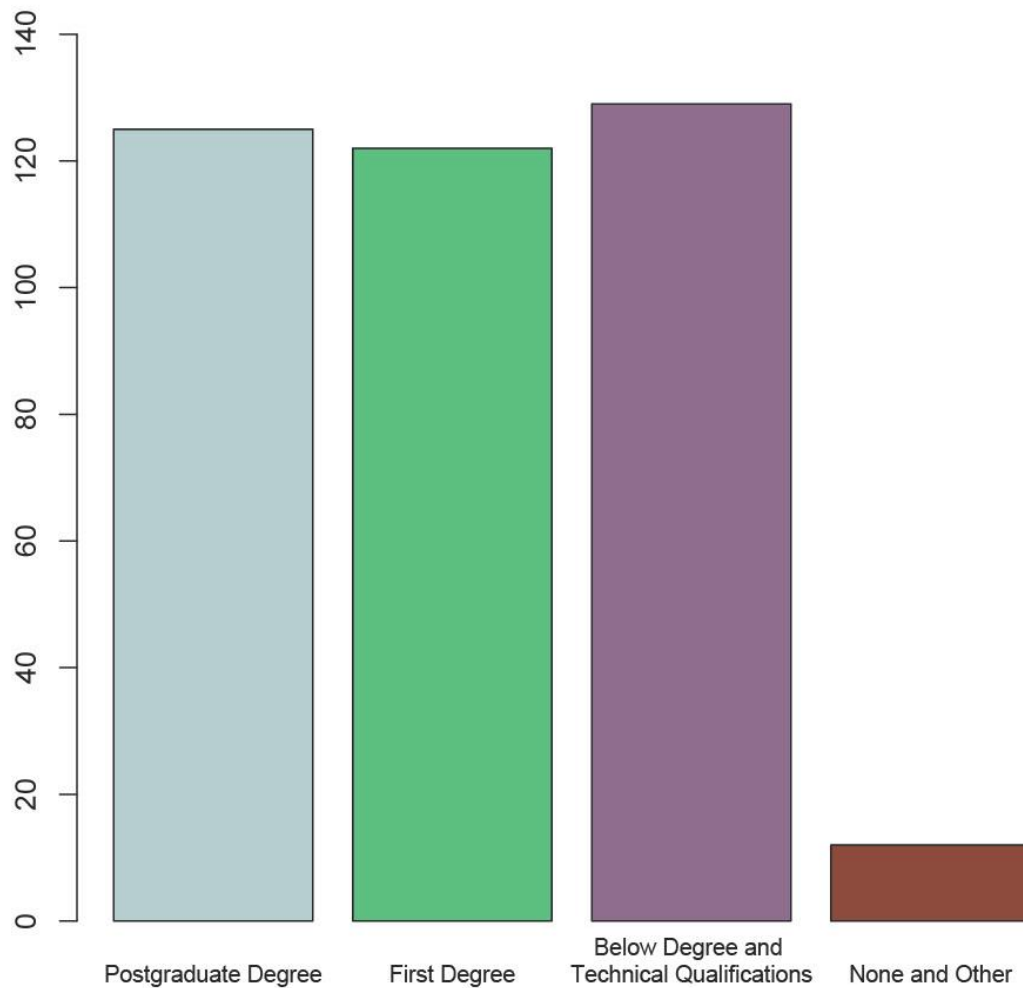
Interestingly, there are no significant differences in educational background according to the roles and responsibilities exercised by councillors. For example, 62.8% of councillors who are members of the executive, cabinet or chairs of committees have university degrees (either undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications), as do 64.5% of those councillors who do not exercise such roles and responsibilities (see Table 2). However, women councillors are more likely to have a degree than their male counterparts, with 67.9% of women having either a first degree or postgraduate degree compared to 60.1% of male councillors.

*Table 2. Educational Background and Positions Held by Councillors.*

Position	Councillors in these groups with degrees	Councillors *not* in these groups with degrees
Executive/Cabinet or Committee Chair	62.8 %	64.5 %
Party Whip	62.5 %	63.7 %
Opposition Leadership Group	60.0 %	64.2 %

Base: all respondents. Shown to 1dp. Figures include undergraduate and postgraduate degrees

Employment

Over half of councillors, 53.6%, did not undertake any paid employment in addition to their work as a councillor. The remaining half of respondents were split evenly between those in full-time employment and those in part-time employment. Less than a quarter of councillors, 22.8%, were in full-time work and the same number were in part-time work. Of those councillors not in employment, almost two-thirds, 64%, were retired. Furthermore, 23.2% of elected members not in work had given up jobs to become councillors. In other words, our evidence confirms that in practice occupying the office of the councillor is not easily compatible with full-time or part-time employment.

Figure 4. Aside from Working as a Councillor, do Councillors Undertake any Paid Employment?
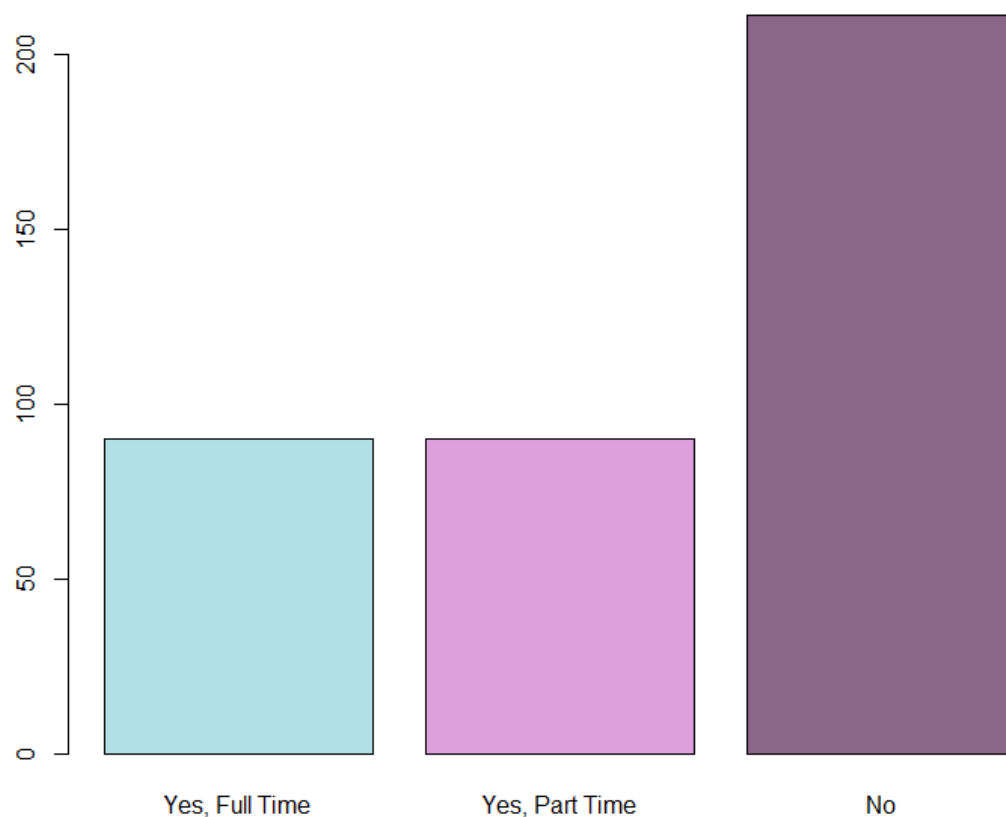
Overall, therefore, our evidence suggests once again that the impact of measures undertaken in recent years to attract different social groups to stand for election as councillors are either not working or not working quick enough. This lack of progress has been widely recognised. Long-voiced demands continue to call for the auditing of local government election candidates and intersectional disadvantages, changes to the scheduling and timing of meetings, increased support for childcare, and the implementation of effective measures to enhance civility.[8] Political parties should be at the forefront of such changes, proactively leading change through the recruitment and selection of candidates to ensure representation from all local communities. But, equally, for many of those 'doing the job' as councillors, the thorny issue of pay needs to be re-considered for the role to become financially viable and more attractive to

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[8] See Begum, N. and Sobolewska, M. (2024) 'Ticking Tow Boxes, Fighting Tow Battles: Intersectional Experiences of Ethnic Minority Women Councillors in UK Local Government', *Politics & Gender*, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X24000047; Sobolewska, M. and Begum, N. (Undated) *Ethnic Minority Representation in UK Local Government*, Manchester University, available at: https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=49921: Accessed 16 April 2024

different sections of the community, younger people, and those in employment. Inadequate remuneration for councillors was repeatedly viewed, by respondents from across the UK experiencing different remuneration regimes, as a financial barrier to those prepared to stand for election, while limiting the capacity of those elected to fulfil the roles and responsibilities of a councillor (see Box 1).

Box 1. Councillors and Remuneration

'I think there has to be proper payment for people taking on this role. Too many good people are leaving because of this single fact, and too many good people are put off standing because it is not financially viable.'

'In Scotland we pay councillors, but it is not enough. £19,000 a year means I have to have another job. This means I cannot be as good a councillor as I'd like to be because half my week is taken elsewhere. Better pay will allow party campaigners [...]to attract talent that otherwise either holds off running as a councillor in order to stand for Parliament [...], or simply goes off to do other things. With this extra pay though should come an expectation of more working hours and scheduling of more activities each week.'

'Increased allowances so that members are adequately rewarded for their time - I think this would also help to attract new younger councillors. I'm not talking a full-time salary but when the allowance often equates to only half of the minimum wage something needs to give.'

'The demographic of councillors will not change unless action is taken to make it a professional role i.e. remunerated. At present the only people who have time to do it effectively are those, like me, who are semi-retired, work part-time and/or have independent means.'

What councillors do

The responsibilities and duties of elected members cover the demands of democratic representation, political leadership, and governance. While these duties are nonetheless interconnected and characterised by somewhat porous boundaries, we report on how councillors divide their time between these broad areas of activity, asking councillors the proportion of time they estimated to spend on a series of tasks associated with working with constituents, ensuring and leading local governance, and formulating and developing policies. In reporting our findings, we aggregated together 'low' and 'very low' scores, as well as 'high' and 'very high'. We begin by analysing the proportion of time councillors spend on tasks associated with working with constituents.

Working with constituents

Councillors underlined their roles and responsibilities as representatives of all sections of the community, with only 9.6% of respondents devoting a high proportion of their time to representing particular sections of the community (see Table 3). Similarly, they recognised their work as a first point-of-call for constituents, with 42% of elected members spending a high proportion of their time fulfilling this role. But other roles and responsibilities associated with working with constituents divided councillors into distinct camps. For example, 34.4% of councillors reported spending a high proportion of their time dealing with complaints, compared to 31.6% who spent a low proportion of their time on such activities.

Table 3. Councillors and Proportion of Time Working with Constituents

Working with constituents	Proportion of Time by % of councillors	
	High Proportion	Low Proportion
Acting as a first point-of-call for local people	42.0	26.2
Acting as a source of ideas/proposals for wards	38.7	29.0
Dealing with complaints	34.4	31.6
Working with area/neighbourhood committees	32.3	37.7
Representing sections of the community	9.7	67.4

As part of the inquiry into how councillors work with constituents, we also asked how they contacted constituents. Elected members continue to use an array of different forms of communication, including social media platforms and conventional practices of informal in-person meetings and surgeries. However, whilst social media platforms have added to the ways in which councillors communicate with constituents, it is significant that informal in-person meetings, email and telephone remain for councillors the most significant modes of communication with constituents. Notably, local surgeries are now held by a minority of councillors.

Figure 5. How Constituents Contact Councillors
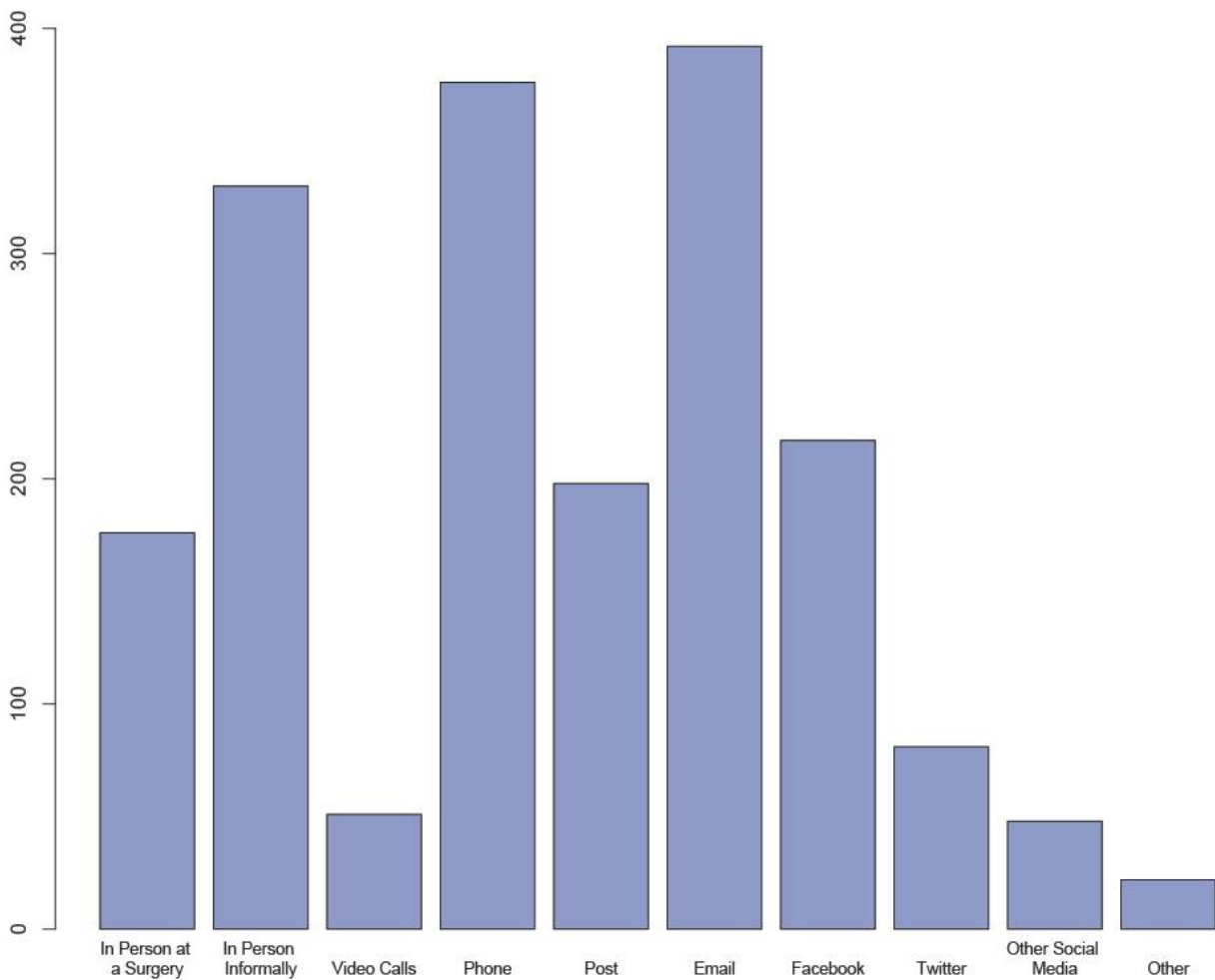
Ensuring and leading local governance

Approximately 42.5% of councillors spent a high proportion of their time communicating and explaining council decisions. However, in terms of the activities of coordinating local governance or what be called 'outward facing' activities of collaboration and working with other organisations, only a minority of councillors

devoted a high proportion of their time to such activities, be it representing the authority on public bodies, working with other agencies, or working with national government. Importantly, our evidence suggests that coordinating local governance and collaboration is the work of a minority of councillors. Only 6.6% of councillors reported spending a high proportion of their time working with regional and central government, while under a third, 27.2%, suggested that they spend a high proportion of their time working in partnership with other public agencies.

Table 4. Councillors and Proportion of Time Spent Coordinating Local Governance

Coordinating local governance	Proportion of time by % of councillors	
	High Proportion	Low Proportion
Communicating and explaining council decisions	42.5	24.4
Working in partnership with other agencies (e.g. health, police, schools etc.)	27.2	46.1
Representing the authority on other public bodies	14.2	69.7
Communicating with the local media.	12.2	67.9
Working with regional/national government bodies (e.g. devolved parliaments/assemblies, Whitehall departments etc.)	6.6	80.2

Formulating and developing policy

Approximately five in ten councillors, 52.9%, spent a high proportion of their time ensuring that the provision of services aligned with community needs. Notably this was the activity which most councillors reported spending a high proportion of their time on, and the only activity on which an absolute majority of councillors spent a high proportion of their time, suggesting it is widely seen as a core part of the job of a councillor. Four in ten, 43.8%, devoted a high of their time to scrutinising council policies, compared to 39.4% who spent a high proportion of their time feeding community views into councils. In contrast, over half of councillors, 51.4%, reported that they spent only a low proportion of their time giving advice to council officials.

Table 5. Councillors and Proportion of Time Spent Formulating and Developing Policy

Formulating and developing policy	Proportion of time by % of councillors	
	High Proportion	Low Proportion
Ensuring that services match community needs	52.9	14.5
Scrutinising council policies	43.8	29.5
Feeding the community views into council policies	39.4	25.4
Giving advice to council officials	23.9	51.4

Against this background, our findings confirm that councillors broadly continue to devote their time to what might be seen as the established roles and responsibilities of elected members. When ranked according to the number of elected members devoting a high proportion of their time to an activity, elected members continue to prioritise ensuring that services match community needs and aspirations; scrutinising council services; communicating and explaining council decisions; acting as a first point of call for constituents; and feeding community views into council policies (see Table 6).

However, beyond such broad findings, we also find divisions between councillors in terms of the differential proportions of time they spend on different activities. First, certain tasks appear to divide elected members into distinct camps, notably dealing with complaints and working with area/neighbourhood committees, where approximately a third of councillors devote a high proportion of their time to such activities and a third spend a low proportion of time engaged in such activities.

Second, certain activities are best characterised as a 'minority sport' in that only a small percentage of councillors devote a high proportion of their time to such roles and responsibilities. For example, only a minority of councillors devote a high proportion of their time to external-facing activities such as partnership working, representing the authority on other bodies, and working with regional and national government bodies. Equally, less than a quarter of councillors, 23.9%, spend a high proportion of their time to giving advice to council officials.

Table 6. Elected Members Spending a High Proportion of Time on Activities

High Proportion of Time by Mechanism	% of Councillors
Ensuring that services match community needs	52.9
Scrutinising council policies	43.8
Communicating and explaining council decisions	42.5
Acting as a first point of call for local people	42.0
Feeding the community views into council policies	39.4
Acting as a source of ideas/proposals for wards	38.7
Dealing with complaints	34.4
Working with area/neighbourhood committees	32.3
Working in partnership with other agencies	27.2
Giving advice to council officials	23.9
Representing the authority on other public bodies	14.2
Communicating with the local media	12.2
Representing sections of the community	9.7
Working with regional/national government bodies	6.6

Finally, when compared to the findings of the 2014 survey, the proportion of time spent by councillors on certain activities associated with working with communities appears to have declined (see Table 7). For example, in 2023, more councillors spent a low proportion of their time working with area or neighbourhood committees than they did in 2014 (37.7% in 2023 compared to 26.5% in 2014). Similarly, more councillors spent a low proportion of their time either working in partnership (46.1% in 2023 compared to 32.3% in 2014) or representing the authority on other bodies (69.7% in 2023 compared to 58.1% in 2014) (see Table 7).

Table 7. Elected members and Low Proportion of Time Spent on Activities (2023-2014)

Mechanisms by area of activity/by order of relative increase, 2023-14	% of Councillors Spending a Low Proportion of Time on…	
	2023	2014
Acting as a source of ideas/proposals for wards	29.0	14.8
Ensuring that services match community needs	14.5	8.9
Feeding the community views into council policies	25.4	16.1
Communicating and explaining council decisions	24.4	15.7
Working in partnership with other agencies	46.1	32.3
Working with area/neighbourhood committees	37.7	26.5
Communicating with the local media	67.9	50.9
Scrutinising council policies	29.5	22.3
Giving advice to council officials	51.4	40.2
Acting as a first point of call	26.2	21.0
Representing the authority on other public bodies	69.7	58.1
Representing sections of the community	67.4	65.5
Working with regional/national government bodies	80.2	79.8
Dealing with complaints	31.6	32.1

However, the weight of undertaking these activities and meeting the demands on councillors has not diminished.[9] Councillors continue to underline the 'unrealistic' workload expectations put on elected members, as well as the difficulties of managing work-life balance (see Box 2).

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[9] Thrasher, M., Borisyuk, G., Shears, M. and Rallings, C. (2015) 'Councillors in Context', *Local Government Studies*, 41 (5): 713-34.

Box 2. Councillors and Workloads

'I've been overwhelmed and broken at times and the expectations placed on us are often unrealistic and the public are becoming increasingly nasty however hard you try. I put in 50hr weeks working most evenings, but it feels many have no idea of the demands and think we do it for the money (which in itself is ludicrous as I took a substantial cut in pay and lost most weekends and evenings).'

'I have sat down at scrutiny meetings, with two days' notice, to face a pile of up to 2000 pages of reports. This is plainly not designed to enable scrutiny to take place.'

'The workload is insane. Really bat shit crazy. Casework, reports, committees, and group management. This workload is classed as "part time".'

Mechanisms and attitudes towards service improvement

In this section, we discuss how councillors perceived different activities in terms of their effectiveness at improving services. Respondents were asked to grade individual mechanisms from not at all effective through to very effective. Here, we again aggregate our findings into two categories, setting out whether councillors viewed activities as 'effective' (covering the two highest categories) or 'ineffective' (covering the two lowest).

Significantly, councillors tended to value activities linked to working with constituents as the most effective mechanisms to improve services. Approximately six in ten councillors, 61.1%, thus acknowledged that acting as a first port of call for their constituents was an effective mechanism of service improvement, while approximately half, 54.2%, perceived dealing with complaints to be an effective way for councillors to drive forward services (see Table 8). In contrast, core roles and responsibilities associated with the coordination of local governance tended to be viewed as less effective mechanisms of service change. As such, 62.8% of councillors doubted the effectiveness of working with regional and national bodies as means of improving services. Equally, approximately four in ten of our respondents, 42.0%, perceived representing their authority on other public bodies as an ineffective mechanism for service improvement, while over half of councillors, 51.9%, doubted the effectiveness of communicating with the local media. Other mechanisms such as working in partnerships or engaging in area or neighbourhood committees, and to a lesser extent acting as a source of ideas and proposals for wards, were more contentious, with councillors divided over their effectiveness as mechanisms of service improvement. (see Table 8).

Table 8. Elected members and Mechanisms of Service Improvement

Mechanisms by area of activity	% of Councillors	
	Effective	Not Effective
Acting as a first point of call	61.1	14.2
Dealing with complaints	54.2	13.5
Communicating and explaining council decisions	45.3	20.9
Feeding the community views into council policies	45.3	20.9
Scrutinising council policies	42.5	29.3
Acting as a source of ideas/proposals for wards	38.9	23.7
Ensuring that services match community needs	38.4	20.4
Working with area/neighbourhood committees	35.6	29.8
Working in partnership with other agencies	34.6	29.0
Representing sections of the community	25.7	33.6
Giving advice to council officials	25.2	37.4
Representing the authority on other public bodies	25.2	42.0
Communicating with local media	18.1	51.9
Working with regional/national government bodies	12.0	62.8

Interestingly, the time devoted by councillors to specific mechanisms of service improvement did not always match the presumed effectiveness of such activities (see Table 9). The majority of councillors perceived dealing with complaints and acting as a first port of call for constituents as effective mechanisms for improving services, but only a minority of councillors acknowledged spending a high proportion of their time on such activities. In contrast, although only a minority of respondents, 38.4%, judged the task of ensuring that services match community needs to be an effective mechanism for service improvement, over half, 52.9%, acknowledged spending a high proportion of their time on doing just that.

Table 9. Councillors, Effective Mechanisms of Service Improvement, and Proportions of Time

Mechanisms/High proportion of time	% of Councillors	
	Effective	High Proportion
Acting as a first point of call	61.1	42.0
Dealing with complaints	54.2	34.4
Communicating and explaining council decisions	45.3	42.5
Feeding the community views into council policies	45.3	39.4
Scrutinising council policies	42.5	43.8
Acting as a source of ideas/proposals for wards	38.9	38.7
Ensuring that services match community needs	38.4	52.9
Working with area/neighbourhood committees	35.6	32.3
Working in partnership with other agencies	34.6	27.2
Representing sections of the community	25.7	9.7
Giving advice to council officials	25.2	23.9
Representing the authority on other public bodies	25.2	14.2
Communicating with local media	18.1	12.2
Working with regional/national government bodies	12.0	6.6

Finally, the ranking by councillors of the effectiveness of different mechanisms of service improvement has remained relatively stable. Acting as a first point of call and dealing with complaints were in 2023, as in 2014, the top ranked mechanisms in terms of their perceived effectiveness, while communicating with the local media and working with regional/national government bodies remained at the opposite end of the ranking (see Table 10). But it is striking how the perceptions of councillors of the effectiveness of mechanisms to bring about service improvement have fallen across the board since 2014. A lower proportion of councillors in 2023 considered the mechanisms of service improvement at their disposal to be effective, whatever the mechanism. Notably, the proportion of councillors asserting the effectiveness of acting as a source of ideas/proposals for their wards and ensuring services match community

needs had fallen significantly, as had dealing with complaints, working in partnership with other public bodies and representing the authority on other public bodies.

Table 10. Elected members and effective mechanisms of service improvement, 2023-2014

Mechanisms	% of Councillors reporting mechanism as effective	
	2023	2014
Acting as a first point of call	61.1	74.1
Dealing with complaints	54.2	71.9
Communicating and explaining council decisions	45.3	57.7
Feeding the community views into council policies	45.3	57.4
Scrutinising council policies	42.5	51.1
Acting as a source of ideas/proposals for wards	38.9	60.6
Ensuring that services match community needs	38.4	59.8
Working with area/neighbourhood committees	35.6	48.6
Working in partnership with other agencies	34.6	51.2
Representing sections of the community	25.7	37.2
Giving advice to council officials	25.2	38.0
Representing the authority on other public bodies	25.2	42.0
Communicating with local media	18.1	34.8
Working with regional/national government bodies	12.0	20.9

Turning to the broader approach of their councils, just under two-thirds of councillors, 64.6%, believed that their authorities were committed to service improvement (see Table 11). They were more circumspect when asked if their authority had a clear plan of action to maintain services, with 58.5% agreeing that their authority had a clear action plan to maintain services and 57.5% expecting such plans to maintain or improve services in practice. Significantly, over seven in ten councillors agreed that their authorities were often prevented by its financial position from improving services, whilst less than half, 46.8%, agreed that they would personally be able to contribute to service improvement.

Table 11. Elected Members and Service Improvement

	% of Councillors	
	Agree	Disagree
My authority is strongly committed to improving the services it is responsible for.	64.6	16.5
My authority is often prevented by its financial position from improving services.	71.5	14.0
My authority has a clear action plan to maintain services in the face of the current situation.	58.5	21.6
I expect plans in place at my authority to allow it to maintain or improve the quality of services it is responsible for.	57.5	21.1
As an elected member I will personally be able to contribute to efforts to maintain and improve council services in the foreseeable future.	46.8	26.5

Overall, therefore, output legitimacy, or the capacity of councillors and authorities to deliver improved services for local communities, appears to have fallen since 2014 (see Table 12). But this is a complex picture. On the one hand, councillors are less optimistic in 2023 about the effectiveness of service improvement mechanisms. Also, fewer councillors in 2023, 64.6%, agreed that their authorities were strongly committed to service improvement than in 2014, while only 46.8% of councillors agreed that as elected members, they would personally be able to contribute to efforts to improve services (see Table 12). But, on the other hand, a higher proportion of councillors in 2023 agreed that plans in place in their authority would maintain or improve service quality, despite three-quarters of our respondents, 71.5%, also acknowledging in 2023 that after years of persistent austerity and cuts to funding that their authority was prevented by its financial position from improving services.

Table 12. Elected Members and Service Improvement, 2023-2014

	% of Councillors agreeing with statement	
	2023	2014
My authority is strongly committed to improving the services it is responsible for.	64.6	73.1
My authority has a clear action plan to maintain services in the face of the current situation.	58.5	63.0
I expect plans in place at my authority to allow it to maintain or improve the quality of services it is responsible for.	57.5	51.0
As an elected member I will personally be able to contribute to efforts to maintain and improve council services in the foreseeable future.	46.8	53.2

Attitudes towards political structures and partnerships

Our evidence confirms that councillors are divided over the effectiveness of local political structures, be it the transparency of local decision-making, the capacity of scrutiny to hold council leaderships to account, or the 'fitness for purpose' of local political structures to engage communities (see Table 13). Asked if council structures enable councillors to engage communities effectively, approximately one third of our respondents agreed that they do, whilst one third asserted that they did not. Less than half of our respondents, 44.3%, agreed that decision-making is transparent while only 43.3% of our respondents agreed that councillors are provided with the right information to make effective decisions and support constituents.

Table 13. Elected Members and Political Structures

Statements	% of Councillors	
	Agree	Disagree
Decision-making is transparent.	44.3	35.9
Scrutiny committees are effective at holding the council leadership to account.	34.4	41.2
Our council structures enable members to engage with the local community effectively.	36.4	30.5
I am provided with the right information to make effective decisions and support my constituents.	43.3	29.0
Overall, council structures support the engagement of non-executive/'backbench' members.	31.6	44.0

Such divisions arguably reflect the ongoing debates over the role of non-executive councillors and broad concerns over the potential for executive leaderships to dominate decision-making (see Box 3).[10] Only approximately three in ten of our respondents agreed that their council structures supported the engagement of non-executive or so-called 'backbench' councillors, while only approximately three in ten councillors agreed that scrutiny committees are effective at holding the council leadership to account. More councillors disagreed with these two latter statements than agreed with them (see Table 13).

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[10] See APSE (2014) *Two Tribes? Exploring the Future Role of Elected Members*, Manchester: APSE.

Box 3. Councillors and Political Structures

'All decisions are taken by cabinet while the scrutiny committees are mere rubber stamping. There is less democracy and involvement in our council now than when I began 21 years ago.'

'Something that has been disappointing me about being a Councillor is the lack of proper debate. We do get the chance to talk about issues in committee, but this rarely has a significant impact on policy.'

'Once you have worked in local government, you realise a lot of it is just theatre. A leader and cabinet make the decisions (yes, their group should sign off but mainly cabinet decide). Overview and Scrutiny is a complete waste of time.'

Councillors also expressed clear reservations over partnership working and its potential impacts on service delivery and local democracy (see Table 14). Over half of councillors, 55.7%, expected local authorities to engage in more partnership working in the future, while four in ten, 41.2%, agreed that partnership working has increased recently in their authority. However, partnership working attracted strong criticism from councillors, notably in relation to its capacity to meet the challenges facing local authorities. Over a quarter of elected members, 26.7%, did not expect partnership working to lead to their council being able to maintain or improve council services. In addition, around half of elected members, 53.4%, agreed that public-private partnership working was driven by the need to address financial issues, while four in ten councillors, 41.2%, asserted that public-private partnerships weaken public accountability.

Table 14. Elected Members and Partnership Working

	% of Councillors	
	Agree	Disagree
Partnership working between my authority and other bodies has increased recently.	41.2	26.5
I expect there to be more partnership working between my authority and other bodies in the foreseeable future.	55.7	17.3
Increased public-private partnership working leads to a decrease in public accountability.	41.2	32.2
Public-private partnership working is motivated mainly by the need for councils to address financial issues.	53.4	17.8
I expect partnership working to lead to my authority being able to maintain or improve the services it is responsible for.	37.7	26.7

In fact, there was a wide discrepancy in the access of councillors to partnership bodies across different parts of the UK (see Table 15). In general, access to partnership boards was relatively evenly split among councillors in Scotland, but this was not the case in England and Wales. Only 30% of councillors in Wales sat on a partnership board, while in England the number of councillors on partnership boards fell to 22%. However, as might be expected, access also varied according to the nature of the partnership. For example, in Scotland, 31.4% of councillors sat on community planning partnerships; 22.9% sat on integrated health and social care partnerships; and 8.6% sat on regional economic partnerships. In Wales, 19.5% of councillors sat on a public service board; 17.1% on a regional partnership board; and 7.3% on a city-region board.

Table 15. Councillors and Partnership Working: Do you sit on a partnership board?

% of councillors	Yes	No
England	22.0	78.0
Scotland	48.6	51.4
Wales	30.0	70.0

Base: all respondents in England, Scotland, and Wales. Shown to 1dp.

As might be expected, these unequal patterns of access to partnership boards aligned partly with the attitudes of councillors as to whether they could contribute to decisions in partnership bodies (see Table 16). Approximately half of councillors in Wales and England, 51.2% and 47.7% respectively, disagreed with the statement that as an elected member they could personally contribute effectively to decisions in partnership bodies. In Scotland, however, almost half of councillors reported that they were able to influence decisions in partnerships.

Table 16. Councillors and Decision-Making in Partnerships: As an elected member I am able personally to contribute effectively to the decisions taken in partnership bodies.

% of councillors	Agree	Disagree
England	26.1	47.7
Scotland	45.7	22.9
Wales	31.7	51.2

Base: all respondents in England, Scotland and Wales. Shown to 1dp.

Overall, therefore, partnership working, the predominant policy instrument of recent efforts to improve service delivery and policy coordination, appears to be attracting increasing criticisms and doubts from councillors, notably in relation to its capacity to meet the challenges facing local authorities. Support for partnership working among councillors has, our evidence suggests, dropped since 2014 (see Table 17). On the one hand, our evidence suggests a slowdown in the rate of increase in partnership. On the other hand, it identifies a clear rise in pessimism about the efficacy of partnership working. Councillors are less and less convinced that partnership working will enable their authorities to maintain or improve the quality of services. Just over a third of councillors, 37.7%, agreed in 2023 that partnership working would enable authorities to maintain or improve services, compared to over half, 56.3%, of respondents in 2014.

Table 17. Elected Members and Partnership Working, 2023-2014

% of Councillors	2023	2014
	Agree	Agree
Partnership working between my authority and other bodies has increased recently.	41.2	63.9
I expect there to be more partnership working between my authority and other bodies in the foreseeable future.	55.7	75.6
Increased public-private partnership working leads to a decrease in public accountability.	41.2	44.2
Public-private partnership working is motivated mainly by the need for councils to address financial issues.	53.4	59.4
I expect partnership working to lead to my authority being able to maintain or improve the services it is responsible for.	37.7	56.3

Standards and behaviour

As public officeholders, all councillors in the UK are required to follow the Seven Principles of Public Life (also known as the Nolan principles) – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership. Yet while there is commonality across the UK in these principles to which councillors must adhere, the mechanisms for ensuring high standards vary greatly both between the nations of the UK and between individual councils. Moreover, different nations implement the requirement to follow the Seven Principles in different ways.[11] This variation makes it challenging to take a holistic view of the situation across the UK. We therefore break answers down by country to account for situations where there are notable differences between nations, and to allow for comparison in approaches.

Presence of standards committees

Councillors were asked whether their local authority maintained a standards committee, and across the UK, 82.6% indicated that they did. However, the prevalence of standards committees varied across the nations. In Wales, there was near unanimity in the presence of standards committees, reflecting statutory requirements under the Local Government Act 2000 and Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. In England, slightly over 85% of councillors indicated that their authority had a standards committee. The situation was much more mixed in Scotland where fewer than half of respondents (47.1%) stated that their local authority maintained a standards committee. It should be noted that we were unable to assess the position in Northern Ireland due to the limited number of respondents and the need to ensure all data if robust. We have therefore purposely excluded this data. The sharply different rates of standards committees across the UK reflect the differential requirements to have such committees, yet even where such committees are not required and may have little formal power, their informal roles as promoters and supporters of high standards should not be overlooked.

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[11] In Scotland, the Standards Commission for Scotland adds 'duty' and 'respect' as key principles of its standards code and expands the principle of accountability to 'accountability and stewardship'. Wales, on the other hand, adds 'equality and respect', 'stewardship', and 'duty to uphold the law'. In England the situation has become more complex following the abolition of Standards for England and introduction of the Localism Act 2011, which allows for variation between councils in their codes of conduct subject to a general requirement that the code as a whole is consistent with the Seven Principles.

Councillors and training in standards

Across the UK, 80.8% of councillors have had training in the Seven Principles of Public Life. Interestingly, this engagement is relatively consistent across the nations, notwithstanding that the Seven Principles are just one formulation of principles which apply to councillors in some regions. Indeed, even in Scotland which primarily promotes a different formulation of the principles under the generic title of 'key principles', 62.9% of respondents had had training in the Seven Principles. There was an even higher rate of training in councils' own codes of conduct. Across the UK, 86.4% of councillors had training specifically in their authority's code.

**Councillors and attitudes towards standard systems**

Regardless of the specific systems in place, across respondents there was a general sense that systems for regulating standards were working, although there remained significant variation between councillors (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Elected Members' Attitudes to Whether Their Authority's Current System for Ensuring Standards are Working Well
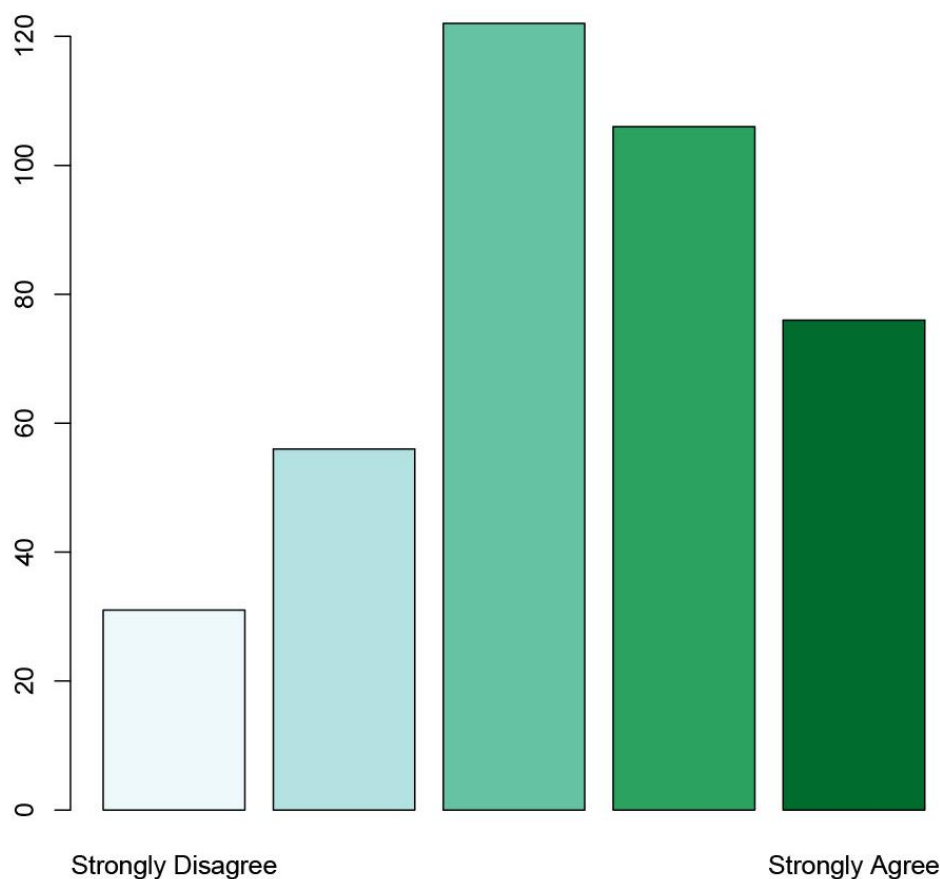
In England and Wales, monitoring officers play a crucial role in investigating the conduct of members to determine whether a breach of the code has occurred. In this context it is important to understand whether monitoring officers maintain the confidence of members to carry out such a role. Because in Scotland this role is carried out primarily by the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland and in Northern Ireland the role is primarily undertaken by the Local Government Commissioner for Standards, Scottish and Northern Irish respondents have been omitted.

Figure 7. English and Welsh Members' Attitudes to Whether They Would Trust Their Monitoring Officer to Conduct an Investigation into Them Fairly and Impartially
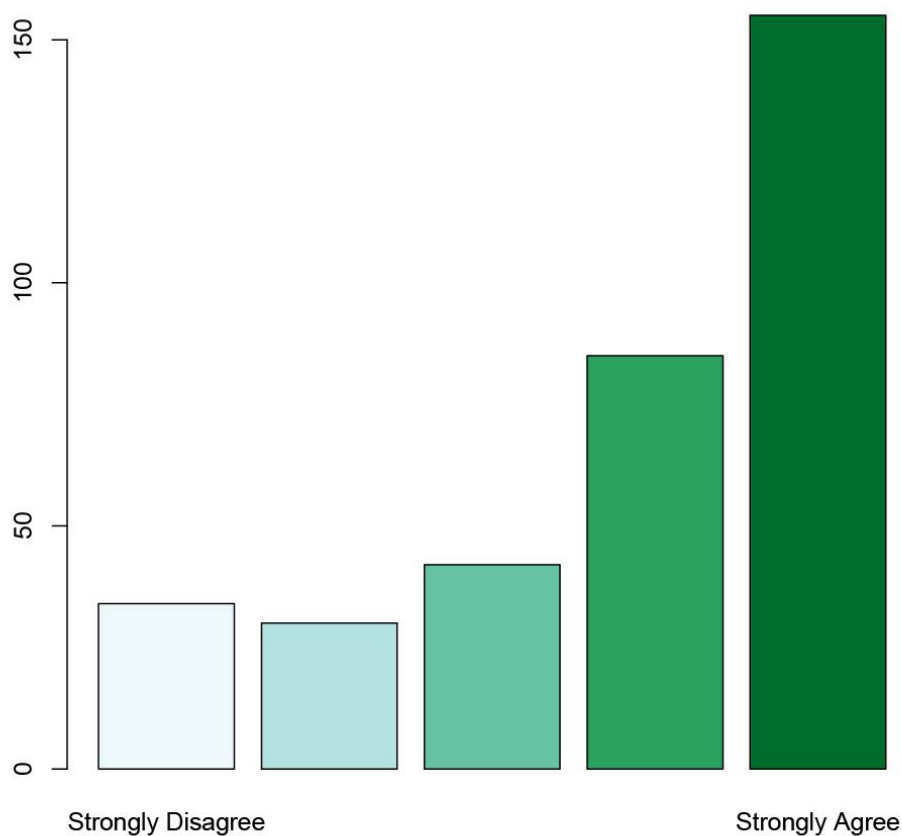
Experience of behavioural issues and intimidation in public life

A significant area of concern within the standard system has been the extent to which councils suffer from issues caused by bullying, harassment, and intimidation, both internally and externally (see Box 4). To probe the substantive effect of these issues on councils as a whole, we asked two questions about the extent to which respondent's councils had experienced problems which undermined the proper functioning of the councils or resulted in the need for other mitigations over the last four years (see Table 18).

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Table 18. The Extent of Behavioural Issues and Intimidation from Within Councils and from Members of the Public (% of councillors).

In the last 4 years, has your council experienced serious behavioural issues from councillors, officers, or other staff, such as bullying and disrespect?		In the last 4 years, has your council experienced serious issues related to intimidation and harassment from members of the public towards councillors, officers, or other staff?	
Yes, at least one incident so serious that the council or its officers were unable to carry out some or all of their proper functions.	15.2%	Yes, at least one incident so serious that the council had to put in place a specific action plan to ensure the safety of councillors or officers.	21.9%
Yes, at least one serious incident but which did not prevent the council or its officers from carrying out their proper functions.	23.0%	Yes, at least one serious incident but which did not require modifying normal practice.	23.5%
There have been behavioural issues, but these have not been serious.	40.8%	There have been issues, but these have not been serious.	35.8%
There have not been notable behavioural issues.	20.9%	There have not been notable issues.	18.8%

Our evidence highlights the very significant problems faced by councils as a result of behavioural issues and intimidation in public life. Over 15% of councillors surveyed reported issues at their council over the last four years which were so serious that the council was no longer able to carry out all of its proper functions. In 23% of councils there have been serious issues, albeit not so serious as to prevent the council from carrying out its work. Approximately 40% of councillors said that while there had been issues in their councils these had not been serious. In only 20.9% of councils have there been no notable behavioural issues by councillors, officers, or other staff in the last four years. However, while this problem is undoubtedly serious it is arguably slightly less concerning than the intimidation that councillors face from members of the public. Over one in five councillors, 21.9%, said that there was an issue related to intimidation or harassment from a member of the public in the last four years which was so serious that the council had to put in place a specific action plan to ensure the safety of councillors or officers. In both cases, these results demonstrate the unreasonable burdens experienced by councillors as they fulfil their duties.

Box 4. Councillors and Attitudes Towards Intimidation

'Hiding your address should be mandatory. Action should also be taken against the public who intimidate councillors. You should be able to remove elected members via public petition triggered after a complaint, arrest, change of party or attendance below 50%.'

'Abuse by the public has to be dealt with and the police need to be able to tackle online abuse as they would aggression and threats in the street.'

'Harassment and bullying organised by POLITICAL groups must be stopped. The test must become the opinion of the victim, not the intention.'

'Poor behaviour from a minority of councillors, including public hounding of officers at scrutiny, publicly critical emails circulated, needs to be addressed. Refusal of members to attend standards committee and no effective sanction just allows those behaviours to continue. Effective sanction is a must.'

Councillors and the ability to suspend councillors

Across the UK, the ability of local authorities to suspend councillors for breaches of codes of conduct remains uneven. Councils in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales can suspend councillors for lengths of time between six and twelve months, so long as certain conditions are met. In England, the ability of councils to suspend councillors was controversially removed in the Localism Act 2011 over concerns that suspensions might be politically motivated and undermine the ultimate responsibility of the public to sanction councillors via the ballot box.[12] However, our evidence suggests that councillors themselves do not share such reticence. The vast majority of councillors,

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[12] Committee on Standards in Public Life (2019), *Local Government Ethical Standards A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life*. Available online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c5c3f68e5274a3184bac66f/6.4896_CO_CSPL_Command_Paper_on_Local_Government_Standards_v4_WEB.PDF; see also Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (2022) *Government Response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life Review of Local Government Ethical Standards*. Available online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62346bc3e90e0779a31e082b/Government_response_to_CSPL_review_of_local_government_ethical_standards.pdf. Accessed 16 April 2024

70.9%, agreed that councils should be able to suspend elected members for up to six months, with only 14% disagreeing with this proposal. Interestingly, this pattern of responses is similar to the pattern seen in other nations of the UK which already have equivalent systems, suggesting that there is not significant opposition to such a scheme from councillors in general.

Attitudes towards local governance and centre-local relations

In this section, we examine councillors' attitudes towards the changing relations between central and local government and the shifting engagements of local government in different forms of collaborative governance, particularly in health and social care. Distinct systems of local government have taken shape across the nations of the UK following devolution and the institutional churn, particularly in England, of city-region deals, mayoral combined authorities and local government reorganisation. As with codes of conduct and standards of public life, it is therefore increasingly difficult to draw a holistic picture of UK local government, not only because of differences between nations but also between different regions and authorities.[13] Indeed, approximately one fifth, 18.6%, of our respondents in England reported having been part of a local government reorganisation in the last five years, while 18.0%, had been part of a county devolution deal, highlighting the churn of English local government institutions. With this in mind, we again break the survey responses of councillors down by the different UK nations to account for notable differences in the systems of local government and to allow for comparison of the attitudes and values of councillors and approaches to local governance.

Councillors' perceptions of increasing central control

It is striking how councillors in England, Scotland and Wales tended to perceive the reform of centre-local relations as increasing central control over local priorities, even allowing for the implementation of different processes of centre-local relations as part of devolution and localism policies across the UK (see Table 19). Approximately half of all councillors agreed that central control over local priorities had increased, be it under devolution or localism in England, Wales, and Scotland. In Northern Ireland, while recognising the limitations of our sample of respondents, there was no majority view on whether local government reorganisation had weakened local government, although there was broad agreement that local government in Northern Ireland requires further powers to meet the needs of communities.

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[13] Barnett, N. and Chandler, J. (2023) *Local Government and Democracy in Britain*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Table 19. Councillors and Centre-Local Relations

Localism in England and devolution in Scotland and Wales, as it has been delivered, has increased central control of local priorities rather than reduced it.	% of councillors	
	Agree	Disagree
England	50.0	14.7
Scotland	57.1	31.4
Wales	48.8	19.5

Significantly, councillors in Scotland were arguably the most divided over the impacts of devolution on local authorities, with 57.1% agreeing that devolution had increased central control over councils as opposed to 31.4% who rejected such claims. In Wales, almost a half of councillors, 48.8%, believed that central control had increased under devolution, while approximately one-fifth, 19.5%, challenged such claims. In England, perhaps due to the varied implementation of devolution deals and local government reorganisation, central control was associated most clearly with localism rather than devolution and local government reorganisation. In other words, while half agreed that localism had increased central control, councillors in England were more divided over the impact on elected members of devolution deals and local government reorganisation. Notably around one fifth of our respondents in England, 21.2%, represented authorities that were part of a combined authority, with 80% of these respondents being part of a mayoral combined authority. Against this background, approximately a quarter of councillors in England, 25.8%, agreed with the claim that devolution was having a detrimental impact on the role of elected members (compared to 37.6% who did not), while about a third, 35.3% agreed that local government reorganisation has weakened local democracy (compared to 29% who disagreed).

Collaborative governance and integration with health and social care

Place-led policymaking and better integration in the likes of health and social care has been one of the favoured policy instruments of UK governments in recent times. However, our evidence suggests that the effectiveness of efforts to 'design in' more effective local collaboration is questioned by councillors across the UK.

In England, councillors were divided as to whether integrated health boards would increase the voice of local authorities in the definition of health priorities (see Table 19). Only an estimated three in ten councillors expected integrated health boards to increase the voice of local authorities, while approximately three in ten did not. More

broadly, 25.5% of councillors in England agreed that partnership working weakened public accountability.

Table 19. Attitudes of Councillors to Local Collaboration

	% of Councillors	
	Agree	Disagree
Councillors in England		
I expect integrated health boards to lead to a greater voice for local government in the definition of health care priorities.	34.3	28.4
Partnership working leads to a decrease in public accountability.	25.5	41.2
Councillors in Scotland		
Health and social care partnerships have led to a greater voice for local government in the definition of health care priorities.	22.9	31.4
Community empowerment initiatives have complicated lines of local accountability between councillors and their electorates.	45.7	20.0
Councillors in Wales		
Public service boards have led to a greater voice for local government in the definition of local priorities.	17.1	43.9
The Future Generations Act has changed how councillors perform their role.	46.3	22.0

Councillors in Scotland were equally uncertain over the voice attributed to local authorities in health and social care partnerships. In a policy context where national proposals to reform social care have generated significant controversy, only 22.9% of respondents agreed that health and social care partnerships had produced a greater say for local government in the setting of health care priorities, compared to 31.4% who did not. Importantly, community empowerment, one of the recent drivers of changes to local governance in Scotland, also led councillors to raise concerns: just under half of councillors, 45.7%, agreed that community empowerment initiatives have complicated the lines of accountability between councillors and constituents.

In Wales, almost half of councillors, 43.9%, stated that public service boards had not amplified the voice of local councils in defining local priorities. However, almost half of councillors, 46.3%, agreed that the Future Generations Act had changed how

councillors exercise their roles and responsibilities. Unfortunately, our evidence does not allow us to comment further on the nature of that changing role of councillors.

Overall, therefore, our evidence underlines that a significant proportion of councillors across the UK view devolution and localism as increasing central control over local authorities (see Box 5). Such findings thus suggest a widespread concern about the position and authority of local authorities across the UK, and a disconnect between local and central politicians and policymakers. Indeed, this unease spreads into efforts to increase local collaboration and place-led policymaking, with councillors tending to be somewhat circumspect as to the increasing voice of local government in, and the accountability of, such institutional arrangements.

Box 5. Councillors and Local Governance

'Sitting on partnerships etc. isn't running things; it is simply sitting on partnerships.'

'[I would like local government] to be valued in the same way that MPs are. It feels like local government is the poor relation but actually we do much more of the operational delivery for residents.'

'Devolution done differently could enhance localism and that will make elected members more relevant not less.'

'[We need] more devolution of powers to Councils from Scottish Government.'

Future prospects

Our findings underline how the majority of councillors have little faith that the required changes to local government will be delivered (see Figure 8). Approximately two-thirds of councillors, 66.7%, agreed that it is increasingly difficult to attract new people to stand as councillors. Importantly, only 27.2% agreed that their authority was taking effective steps to increase voter turnout (see Table 20). These findings are in line with our findings in 2014 when 64.5% councillors recognised the difficulties of attracting new candidates for election, and approximately a third, 32.0%, believed that their authority was taking effective steps to increase voter turnout. In other words, councillors tend to remain pessimistic over the future prospects of change across local government.

Table 20. Elected Members and Future Prospects

	% of Councillors	
	Agree	Disagree
It is becoming increasingly difficult to attract new people to stand as councillors in my authority.	66.7	16.3
The number of elected members in my authority is likely to be reduced over the next 5 to 10 years.	21.1	49.1
My authority is taking effective steps to increase voter turnout at local elections.	27.2	41.0

Figure 8. Elected Members' Optimism That Desired Changes Over the Next 5 to 10 Years Will Happen
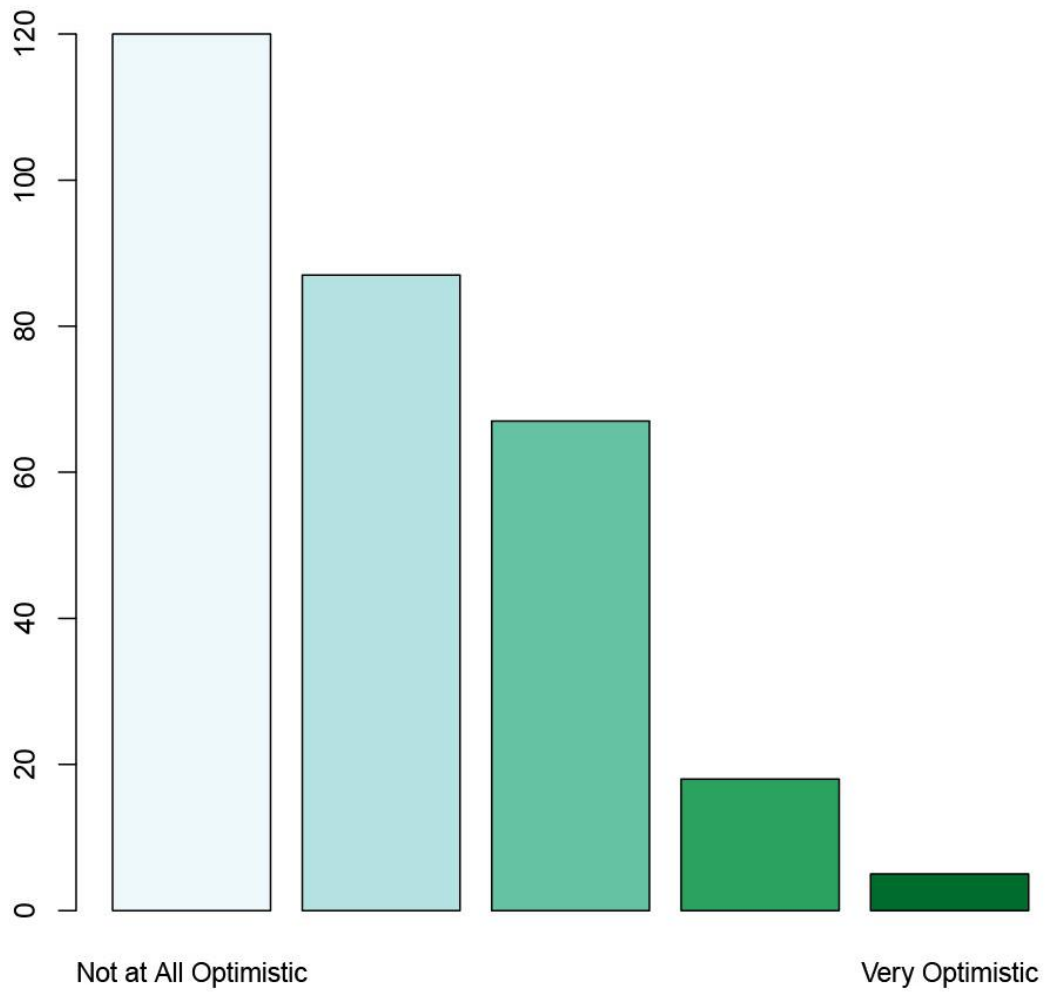
Conclusion

Policy stagnation or the 'same old same as'

The role of the councillor is no doubt rich and varied, offering multiple opportunities for elected members to deliver positive changes for their communities. However, one of the fundamental messages of this survey is the effective policy cul-de-sac within which the role of the local councillor has languished in recent years. Of course, there have been notable contributions to, and studies of, the shifting skills and capabilities of political leadership and the changing roles of councillors.[14] But, under the guise of localism and devolution, the role and responsibilities of councillors have been pushed to the margins of government policy and arguably the thinking of political parties, particularly in England where the attention of policymakers has become fixated on the presumed advantages of elected mayors.

Our evidence thus confirms the presence of persistent challenges and obstacles that have stood for some time in the way of councillors and hampered effective local democratic governance. These challenges vary from authority to authority, from context to context, and from institutional arrangement to institutional arrangement. Yet, in many ways, the picture of the role of local councillors captured in our survey, and the concerns expressed by elected members, bear a striking resemblance to the findings of our 2014 survey. Almost ten years on, key challenges and obstacles in the way of elected members remain unaddressed. At best, our evidence suggests, the everyday experience for many councillors continues to frustrate. At worst, in the current conjuncture of austerity, inflationary pressures, and growing demands on services, the crisis facing local representative democracy may have deepened.

Efforts to widen access are still not working

Councillors are, our survey suggests, unrepresentative of the broader UK population. Elected members tend to be older than the general population. They are more likely to be male. They tend not to undertake any paid employment. And importantly, they are predominantly white, with people from minority ethnic backgrounds significantly under-represented in their ranks. In other words, the demographic profile of councillors in 2023 remained much as it was in 2014 and indeed as it was in the 2003

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[14] See Mangan, C., Needham, C., Bottom, K. and Parker, S. (undated) *The 21st Century Councillor*, Birmingham: Public Service Academy, University of Birmingham.

survey carried out by APSE. As we therefore concluded in 2014, measures designed to widen the pool of people standing for election as councillors are not working quickly enough. However, with little change over the last ten years, our evidence leads us to conclude that it is time for a new approach to widening access to the pool of people prepared to stand in local elections. Indeed, councillors themselves continue to express little confidence in the opportunities to attract new members to stand in local elections.

Local political structures continue to divide councillors

The effectiveness of local political structures continue to split elected members into different camps. A significant proportion of councillors doubt the transparency of local decision-making, the effectiveness of scrutiny and the fitness for purpose of council structures in terms of engaging local communities. Approximately four in ten councillors did not agree that scrutiny committees worked effectively to hold the executive to account (compared to a little over a third of councillors who did). Strikingly, almost half of councillors, 44%, did not agree that their council structures supported the engagement of non-executive or 'backbench' elected members. Equally damning for local democratic governance, less than half of elected members, 46.8%, argued that they would personally be able to contribute to efforts to maintain and improve council services.

Such findings arguably point to the continued relevance of the existence of 'two tribes' in local government, each with contrasting values, experiences and beliefs depending on whether councillors were executive elected members or backbench elected members. As in 2014, the hypothesis of 'two tribes' has to been seen against the background of ever present power imbalances between elected members in local authorities, as well as the capacity of personal networks and party groups to offer alternative channels of influence. The engagement of backbench councillors is only one of multiple measures of the effectiveness of executive models of local government organisation. However, this said, our findings underline the failure of recent policies to carve out an effective role for backbench councillors and the persistent recognition that scrutiny and the conception of the 'community councillor' have not delivered in practice what was expected of them.

More needs to be done to challenge unacceptable behaviour and intimidation

Significantly, our survey suggests that the demands and tensions of being a councillor are being navigated by far too many in an environment of challenging behaviour, bullying, harassment and intimidation. 79% of our respondents reported experiencing

in the last four years behavioural issues from councillors, officers or other staff. Approximately one in seven claimed that at least one incident was so serious that their council or officers were unable to carry out some or all of their proper functions. Equally, 81.2% of our respondents reported experiencing in the last four years issues related to intimidation and harassment from members of the public towards councillors, officers, or other staff. Approximately one in five argued that at least one incident was so serious that the council had to put in place a specific action plan to ensure the safety of councillors or officers.

Less time spent by councillors working with communities

Councillors continue to devote their time to the widely recognised roles and responsibilities of local political leadership. As might be expected, there are variations in the proportion of time spent by elected members on particular tasks. Notably, certain tasks remain 'minority sports' engaging only a limited number of elected members, particularly external facing activities representing authorities on other bodies. But importantly, our evidence suggests a worrying trend for the legitimacy of local democratic government: more councillors in 2023 devoted a low proportion of their time working with communities than they did in 2014, be it acting as a source of ideas/proposals for their ward, feeding community views into council policies, explaining council decisions or working with area or neighbourhood committees.

Partnership working is increasingly contested

Our evidence suggests that a significant proportion of councillors question the effectiveness of partnership working and its impact on service delivery and local democracy. Only around four in ten councillors agreed in 2023 that partnership working would enable authorities to maintain or improve services, compared to just under six in ten in 2014. In addition, around half of councillors agreed that partnership working was driven by the financial issues facing authorities, and four in ten viewed public-private partnerships as diluting public accountability.

As such, collaboration and partnership, one of the key policy instruments of recent years across local government, may well be facing increasing challenges from elected members. But the strength of these challenges may, we suggest, vary from partnership board to partnership board and from authority to authority and across each nation of the UK. Access to partnership boards was thus relatively evenly split among councillors in Scotland but remained a 'minority sport' in England and Wales. Similarly, while approximately half of councillors in Wales and England did not believe that they could personally contribute effectively to decisions in partnership bodies, almost half of councillors in Scotland reported that they could influence such decisions.

Devolution and localism are increasing centralisation

Our evidence confirms a continued disconnect between central and local decision-makers. Strikingly, half of all councillors expressed concerns over increasing central control over local priorities and policies, and this despite efforts to implement devolution and localism across the UK. In Scotland, almost six out of ten councillors agreed that devolution had increased central control over local authorities, compared to approximately five out of ten in Wales. In England five out of ten councillors agreed that localism has in practice increased centralisation. In Northern Ireland, although our survey did not identify a majority view on local government reorganisation, there was broad agreement that local government requires further powers to meet the needs of communities.

Equally, our evidence highlights that few councillors are confident that efforts to increase collaboration between local authorities, health and social care will deliver significant change. In England, only an estimated three in ten councillors expected integrated health boards to increase the voice of local authorities. In Wales, approximately two in ten elected members reported that public service boards had amplified the voice of local councils in defining local priorities. In Scotland only two in ten elected members agreed that health and social care partnerships had produced a greater say for local government in the setting of health care priorities, while just under half of councillors agreed that community empowerment initiatives have complicated the lines of accountability between councillors and constituents.

A growing pessimism?

Councillors are far from optimistic that what they see as the necessary changes to local government will take place over the next five to ten years. They also recognise the difficulties of increasing voter turnout and attracting new people to stand in local elections. Here little has changed since 2014. But importantly, our evidence suggests a significant change in the outlook of elected members: councillors are in 2023 increasingly pessimistic as to their capacity to bring about impactful change. Elected members, compared to our findings in 2014, increasingly doubt the effectiveness of all available mechanisms of service improvement. Yet, just under two-thirds of councillors still believed that their authorities were strongly committed to improving services, while approximately six in ten expected service improvement plans in their authority to actually improve services. Significantly, however, over seven in ten councillors agreed that their authority was often prevented by its financial position from improving services.

Recommendations

Widening access

1. The renumeration of councillors, as well as pension, maternity and paternity rights, should be standardised across the UK and brought further in line with that of MPs. Renumeration practices in England and Wales should be brought in line with those of Scotland and Northern Ireland.

2. UK Governments must take all necessary statutory measures to enable local councils to conduct council business through hybrid models as means of encouraging fairer representation and participation, particularly for people with a disability, those with carer and/or parental responsibilities and those in employment.

3. Councils should publish and report on plans to ensure access to political office for people of all backgrounds. This should include concrete measures to address the unsociable timing of meetings, childcare provision, maternity and paternity leave, and the possibility for online meetings.

4. Political Parties across the UK should create councillor development strategies that commit to the development and support of the next generation of councillors, reflecting their vital contribution to the future of vibrant local and national democracy and democratic participation.

Standards, intimidation and political behaviour

1. UK Governments must take all necessary statutory measures to ensure the safety of councillors including a legal right to withhold home addresses from ballot papers, council websites and if necessary declarations of interest.

2. UK Governments should consider enhanced protections for local councillors from abuse both in person and on social media platforms. This may include consideration of a specific crime of aggravated assault where assault takes place during the course of a councillor's duty, local dedicated police support and named contacts, as well as specific recognition by social media companies of the impact of online abuse on local democracy.

3. Councils in England should be given the power to suspend councillors for up to six months if they are found to have breached the code of conduct, and the Independent Person agrees this would be an appropriate sanction.

Local decision-making and accountability

1. Councillors should have the right to be consulted and fully engaged in any decisions or negotiations impacting on their wards.

2. Councils should review existing reporting mechanisms for councillors, ensuring that there are clear protocols and mechanisms in place to enable the scrutiny and accountability of decision-making within local authorities and across external bodies, partnerships and the multiple tiers of government.

3. Councils should ensure that the representation of councillors on partnership boards and external bodies reflects the body of councillors in the authority.

Future of elected members

1. Governments across the UK should evaluate the democratic decision-making processes and outcomes of the return to committee systems and experiments with alternative political structures across authorities, with particular reference to how different systems engage non-executive councillors.

2. Governments across the UK should introduce independent and representative councillor commissions of inquiry to deliver proposals on the future role of councillors and local political leadership.

3. National associations and local government sector leads across the UK should undertake a collective assessment of good practice in relation to support for, and engagement of, councillors within local authorities. This should include practices of induction and training for elected members and protection from and reporting of abuse.

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