



## Making Local Politics Family Friendly

26<sup>th</sup> of May 2021

CAITRÍONA GLEESON, CEO  
CAITRIONA@WOMENFORELECTION.IE  
WOMEN FOR ELECTION, 36 FITZWILLIAM PLACE, DUBLIN 2

[www.womenforelection.ie](http://www.womenforelection.ie)

## Introduction

Women for Election (WFE) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation that is focused on achieving 50/50 gender balance in Irish politics. WFE facilitates practical training and support programmes to inspire and equip women to enter and succeed in politics. We also advocate for systematic changes to remove barriers that prevent the full participation of a diversity of women in Irish politics. WFE are focused on elected local councillors and attracting more women to run (rerun) for election in 2024.

As it stands, local government in Ireland is experiencing a democratic deficit. The female population is represented by only 25% of elected councillors. In 2009, the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality Defence and Women's Rights published a report on [Women's Participation in Politics](#). We are currently working with the Rapporteur of this report, Senator Bacik, along with Dr Fiona Buckley and Dr Lisa Keenan to conduct a review of the 5 main barriers (5 C's) and any additional barriers that are impeding women's participation in politics. The five key barriers that were found to prevent women from running and succeeding in politics are:

- Cash
- Confidence
- Culture
- Candidate Selection
- Childcare

Since the publishing of this report the number of women elected to Local Government has increased by **ninety-five**. In the 2019 Local Elections, more Michaels were elected to Mayo County Council and twice as many men called John were elected to Waterford City and County Council, Offaly County Council and Carlow County Council than women.

Childcare, lack of maternity and parental leave, unsociable meeting times are some of the barriers which have prevented female representatives from fully participating in political life. Most recently South Dublin County Councillor, [Clare O'Byrne](#), resigned her seat citing lack of maternity leave as a key barrier. While parenting and care responsibilities are not gender neutral, in Ireland women still disproportionately hold the majority of unpaid care responsibilities.

Women for Election strongly advocate for family friendly working practices in order to create a working environment which provides equality of opportunity for aspiring and elected female politicians. In addition to standardised maternity, paternity and parental leave these practices also include the promotion of work/family life balance so that all members of Local Government can fulfil their work and family roles and duties.

This position paper has been developed based on a review of relevant research<sup>1</sup> and feedback from participants in WfE training programmes and elected and former local Councillors. There is a dearth of research globally relating to local government and family friendly practice, however much of the research into both the barriers to women's political participation and the recommendations for gender sensitive parliaments are in part transferrable to local government policy and practice.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Bibliography at end of document for related research

We welcome Minister Burkes commitment to reducing barriers to women's participation including the recent establishment of a working group to develop recommendations to address non pay conditions recommended by the Moorhead report including maternity and paternity leave.

Further to our analysis we have concluded a series of practical steps we believe could lead to a family friendly environment for local Councillors. The following summates these recommendations.

### Maternity Leave/Paternity Leave/Parental Leave

- At a minimum local councillors should be entitled to all statutory maternity/paternity and parental leave. As an example [paid parental leave](#) was brought into effect in Australia in 2010, which had the effect of requiring the state governments to legislate to reflect local government employees and local representatives in national legislation.
- Promotion of a culture where women are supported to take full maternity leave at all levels of government.
- Introduction of a substitute system that female councillors can opt into if they want to take full or partial maternity leave – core principle that representation and voting duties are supported in their absence without having to call on them. [Stella Creasy MP](#) became the UK's first MP to use a 'locum MP' to cover her maternity leave.

### Childcare/Carer Supports

- Childcare/care expenses should be eligible election expenses when a parent/carer is running for election.
- Provision of Onsite Childcare facilities, breastfeeding rooms.
- Practical assessment of suitability and accessibility of existing on-site care support provisions including creche/nursery and breastfeeding facilities. For example - Do the current provisions meet the needs of all local councillors with childcare responsibilities- [Women Beyond the Dáil: More Women in Local Government](#)
- Childcare/care expenses should be available in all local authorities. Note Childcare expenses are particularly important as onsite facilities will not be feasible for all children – e.g. living far away, child's specific needs, child's age.

### Family Friendly Culture

Develop a national set of guidelines with incentives to encourage local authorities to become family friendly workplaces – for local councillors these should include a standardisation of the following:

- Option for remote access to meetings with appropriate tech and administrative supports
- Meetings to start on time and finish on time with sufficient advance reading time of meeting documentation/pre reads etc.
- Length of meetings to be managed to maximise efficiency and peoples time
- Employee assistance schemes extended to elected councillors
- Right to disconnect encouraged – effort to promote culture of Local Councillors not having to be on call 12/7
- Family friendly awareness events to promote culture and acknowledgment of family/care responsibilities
- Promotion of awareness of the diversity of family structures in Ireland

- Supports to tackle threatening behaviour towards Councillors – 72% of councillors who took part in the research have been victims of threats, harassment and intimidation. While 62% are worried about the impact on their family and 48% are currently considering leaving their role. [AILG Report](#)
- Implement anti discrimination initiatives which help create welcoming, inclusive and safe environments for all women aspiring and/or succeeding to be elected as local Councillors.

## Conclusion

The establishment of a culture that provides options for full maternity, paternity and parental leave with appropriate substitution supports and a standardisation of measures to make local politics more family friendly will be critical systemic change to help attract and retain more women into local government. The Ministers and the Departments commitments and ambition to address the current democratic deficits and facilitate a culture of elected local government being representative of its community is very welcome. The opportunity to lead a standardisation of working conditions for local Councillors which enable family and carer responsibilities, if harnessed will make a significant contribution to enabling more women to enter and succeed in local politics.

For further information please contact

Caitríona Gleeson

CEO

Women for Election

[caitrona@womenforelection.ie](mailto:caitrona@womenforelection.ie)

[www.womenforelection.ie](http://www.womenforelection.ie)

## References

- Association of Irish Local Government & CMG Professional Training (2021) Report Following Councillor Survey on Threats, Harassment, and Intimidation in Public Office. Maynooth: AILG & CMG.
- BBC News (2019) Stella Creasy: UK's First 'Locum MP' to Cover Maternity Leave. London: BBC News.
- Bonewit, A. (2016) Preparing a Harmonized Maternity Leave for Members of the European Parliament – Legal Analysis: In-Dept Analysis, *Directorate-General for Internal Policies*. Brussels: European Union.
- Buckley, F. and Keenan, L. (2021) More Women – Changing the Face of Politics: Women's Experience of Running for Election in Ireland. Dublin: Women for Election.
- Childs, S. (2020) Gender Sensitising Parliaments Guidelines: Standards and a Checklist for Parliamentary Change. London: Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.
- Childs, S. (2016) The Good Parliament. Bristol: University of Bristol.
- Childs, S. and Palmieri, S. (2020) Gender Sensitive Responses to COVID-19: A Primer for Parliamentary Action. New York: UN Women.
- Cullen, P. and McGing, C. (2019) Women Beyond the Dáil: More Women in Local Government. Dublin: National Women's Council of Ireland.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) Evaluating the Gender Sensitivity of Parliaments: A Self-Assessment Toolkit. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- Joint Committee (2009) Joint Committee on Justice, Equality Defence and Women's Rights: Women's Participation in Politics. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas.
- McQuinn, C. (2021) Departing Green Councillor Criticises Lack of Maternity Leave for Politicians. Dublin Cork: The Irish Times.
- National Women's Council (2015) Making Women Central to Local Government Workshops, Longford, Dublin & Limerick. Dublin: National Women's Council of Ireland.
- Palmieri, S. (2011) Gender Sensitive Parliaments: A Global Review of Good Practice. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- Parliament of Australia (2010) Paid Parental Leave Bill. Canberra: Parliament of Australia.
- Smith, J. and Childs, C. (2021) The Remotely Representative House? Lesson Learning from the Hybrid Commons. London: Centenary Action Group.
- The Scottish Parliament (2017) Diversity & Inclusion: Innovation through Diversity, *Scottish Parliament's Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021*. Scotland: Scottish Parliament Corporate Body.