

A Submission to the Commission for Local Councillors

on

Young Women and their Views

Centre for Women & Democracy
2 Blenheim Terrace
Leeds
LS2 9JG

www.cfwd.org.uk
info@cfwd.org.uk

0113 234 6500

Introduction

This submission is the product of a piece of research carried out by Anastasia Jackson, a young woman working as an intern with the Centre for Women & Democracy.

In England nearly 70% of councillors are men, 86.5% are over 45 years old and 95.9% are white. Although I am white, I am not over 45 and I am not a man. I am a 26 year old woman who is wondering, who is representing me at local government level? What could these councillors possibly have in common with me, what do they know about my needs and why aren't there more women my age fighting to get their voice heard?

The Electoral Reform Society say on their website, that "councils deliver vital services, so it is important that local decision makers reflect the community they serve and are aware of its needs firsthand." This made me consider a previous ward I had lived in when I was a student. The population of students in the ward is 61% of the total population and in the city as a whole it is 8% of the total population. However, none of the councillors for that ward are currently full-time students, so how does this reflect this particular community - how is the council aware of the needs of a student? In an article by Nigel Morris from the Independent, a young councillor from Durham has a similar opinion "I feel strongly about having student representatives on the council. Durham has a huge student population and I think it is important to integrate them into how the city is run" I think he makes an important point; not only would the council better reflect the community, but young people would gain a greater understanding of the workings of local government and their town or city.

In 2007 The Minister for Local Government, Phil Woolas, stood up in Parliament and said "unless we can involve younger people in representing our communities, local government will not be as healthy as we would all like it to be." The Local Government Act 2000 was also concerned with increasing diversity particularly that of young people "The government believes that the combination of the new rewarding roles envisaged for councillors and...steps to address...disincentives to serve will encourage a wider cross section of the

community - more employed people, more women, more people from ethnic minorities, more young people, and more people with young families - to serve their communities in the future” However, according to a report ‘Diversity Under the New Council Constitution’ there has been no significant change in the number of young councillors or women councillors since the Act was introduced.

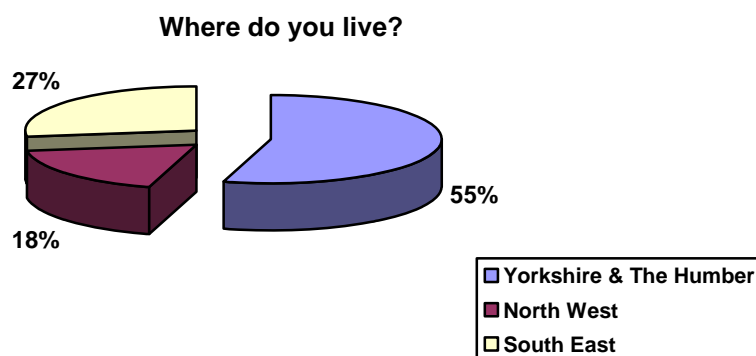
In my view not only would I have to overcome the barrier of being a woman to become a councillor, but also the barrier of being young. Being a young woman in today’s society is very different to even twenty years ago; known by the media as ‘Generation Y’, the new wave of twenty-something’s believe that the quality of life in Britain is best improved by putting themselves first. In an article in the Observer Woman magazine in March of this year, Lousie Carpenter talks about these young women who have “undiluted self-confidence; the absolute cast-iron belief in the power of their own will...success is expected rather than hoped for”. There is an unshakeable belief amongst young women that all the battles have been won and that women and men are equal. So how can we translate this into local government?

To find out more about the views of young women similar to myself I produced a small questionnaire and passed it on to young women I knew. Below are some of the responses I received and my thoughts on their answers.

1. Background Information

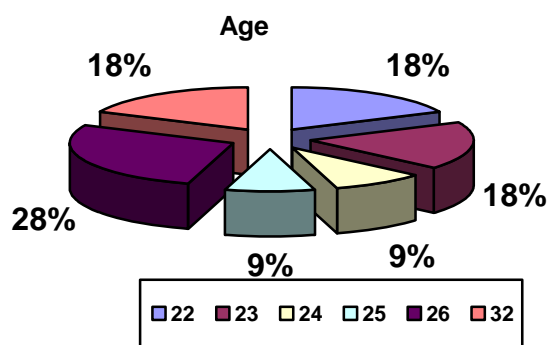
In the first section we asked some basic background information.

The following pie chart shows where the respondents to the questionnaire live.



The majority of people who completed the questionnaire live in Yorkshire and the Humber; most of these reside in the Leeds area. Of the 27% from the South East, most of them live in South Northamptonshire.

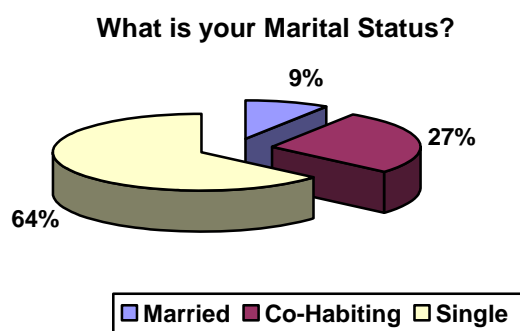
The next pie chart shows the ages of the respondents.



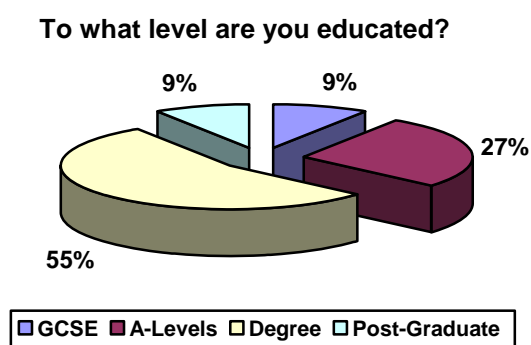
The average age of the respondent was 25.9 years old, with ages ranging from 22 to 32.

The respondents all had different jobs. We had one lawyer, a council officer, one woman who was unemployed and a dental nurse. Unfortunately none of the people who replied had any children. Unfortunately all the women were also white. We would have hoped for a wider variation in ethnicity; however we have achieved variation in age, area and job role.

The pie chart below shows the percentage of women who were married, single or cohabiting.



The following pie chart shows to what level the respondents were educated.

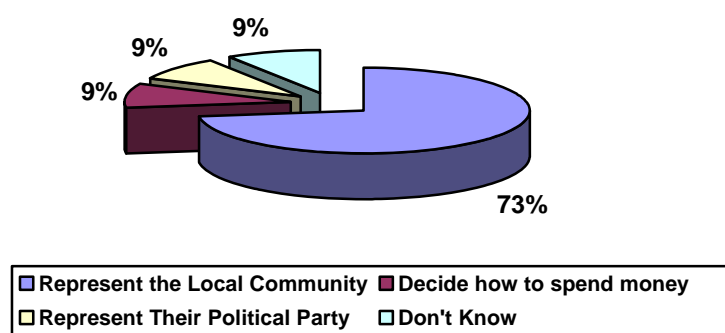


50% of the respondents who held degrees held them in politics.

2. Knowledge & Perception of Councillors

The aim of the next section was to find out how much these young women knew about local government, and some of the perceptions they had.

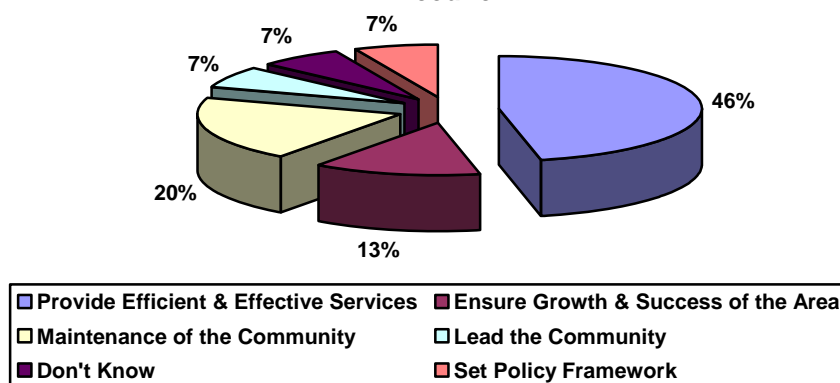
Give a brief description of what you believe to be the role of a councillor.



Nearly everyone in their answer believed that the role of a councillor is to represent their local community. A small number of people added that they were responsible for budgets, policies and plans within the council. Only one person did not have any answer at all and this was the youngest person in the sample.

According to the National Census, “74.5% of councillors indicated, that the role of local community representative best described their approach to being a ward councillor.” If we use this example it shows that the majority of young women do have a basic understanding of what a councillor does.

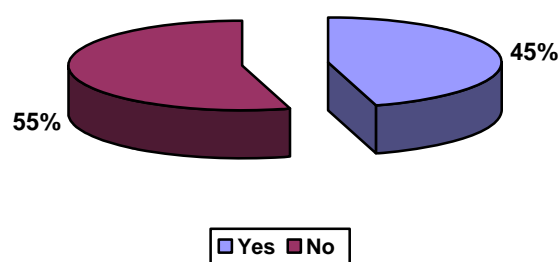
Give a brief description of what you believe to be the role of a council



Only one person distinguished between the roles of a district council and a county council. The majority of people mentioned, roads, refuse/waste and planning in their response. It is perhaps unfortunate that the media tends to focus on negative issues such as refuse and the level of council tax. This in turn means people associate the council with these 'problem' issues.

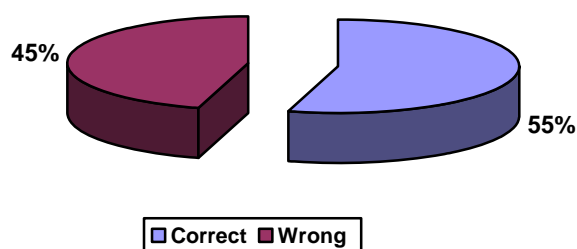
The charts below show how many respondents knew one or more of their local councillors and who controlled their local council.

Do you know who your local councillor is?



Out of the 55% of women who knew at least one of their councillors, 20% named all three of their councillors. One person named their MP instead of their councillor and one named their town councillor, which shows an awareness of local politics but slight confusion over who's who. There are similar figures when we compare the statistics for those who know the name of their MP, which according to the Audit of Political Engagement is 44%.

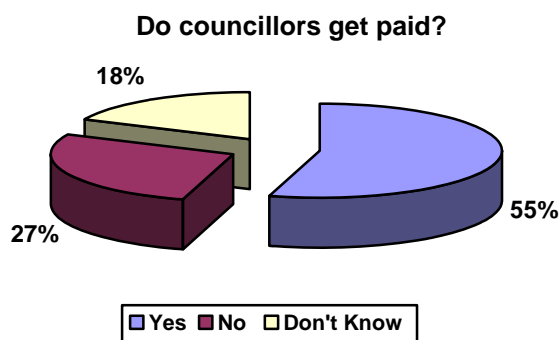
Who runs your local council?



55% of those who responded knew who ran their local council, 25% said they didn't know and the other 20% were wrong. The respondents who knew who ran their council tended to live in areas where only one party was in control of the council, this suggests that a more uniform way of describing a council with

no overall control may make it easier for people to understand, rather than differing terms being used e.g. two party rule or rainbow alliance.

The following pie-chart shows whether respondents believed councillors get paid or not.

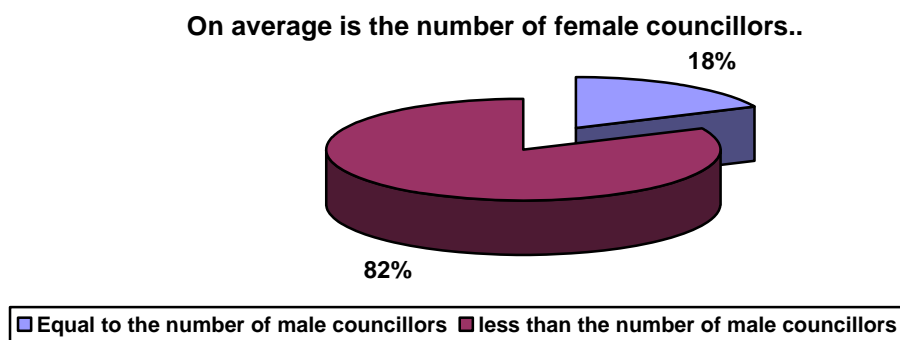


55% of respondents believe that councillors get paid a normal salary, 27% think they do not get paid, but all 27% also believed they received an allowance of some description. Councillors spend on average 21.9 hours a week on council business, which is more than a normal part-time job. However, how much pay you receive depends of which authority you are elected to, and it varies from £3,000 to £10,000 for backbenchers. As Vicky Frost from the Guardian puts it “for those councillors with jobs, the choice is stark; take a big salary cut to do your public service within the usual working week or fit in a part-time job around your full-time work.” When we imagine the lifestyles of those ‘Generation Y’ women, it is hard to imagine them either giving up their job, for what is very likely to be a lot less money or having the time to fit in council work around a full-time job, a social life, domestic duties (as figures show this is still done mostly by women) - and what if they also have a family to look after?

One of the arguments against remuneration is “voters are unlikely to be keen on fat council salaries & for many councillors cash is not a motivating factor”; however I disagree on both points. Firstly, they do not have to be ‘fat’ salaries, they just have to be the equivalent to the private sector, and also, as the above chart shows, the majority of people believe councillors are paid anyway. Secondly, I think young women *are* motivated by money. The statistic quoted is only concerned with those who are already councillors, who we know tend to be

middle-class and retired older men, for whom money may not be a motivating factor, but for young people and women, it certainly is.

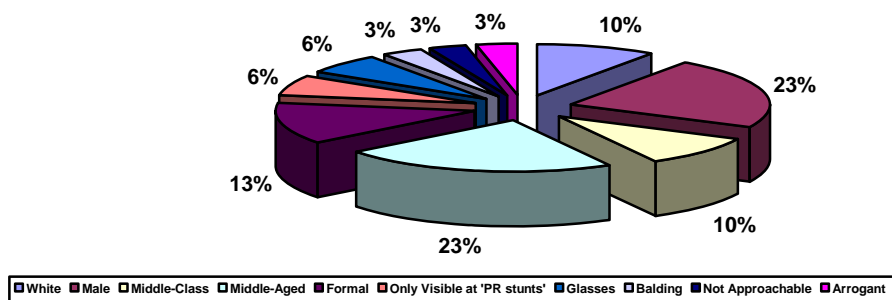
The next chart asks whether respondents think the number of female and male representatives in local council is equal.



Not one person thought that the number of female councillors on average was more than the number of male councillors. When asked, 18% of young women believed there to be equal representation between men and women on their local council. Can we put this down to a lack of knowledge about local government, or are some young women unable to believe inequality still exists? Certainly, the majority were aware of the under-representation of women on councils across the UK and perhaps more importantly all the women asked agreed that it was important that women are equally represented in local government.

The pie-chart on the next page shows us the stereotypical views of a councillor. We wanted to know how young women perceived local councillors. Vicky Frost from the Guardian sums it up well with a quote from the article 'Your Council Needs You' (13/06/07) "Bluntly put; the majority of councillors are pale, male and stale" and it seems are respondents would agree with this;

Pleas give a brief description of your image of a typical councillor.



The majority of people used the terms, white, male, middle-class and middle-aged. An interesting point is the women who believed that women were equally represented in local government all still perceived councillors to be male and middle-aged, which suggests to me that even once parity is reached a lot of hard work will still need to be done to change the image of the council, which I believe is a factor in young women's disinterest in becoming councillors.

3. Becoming a Councillor

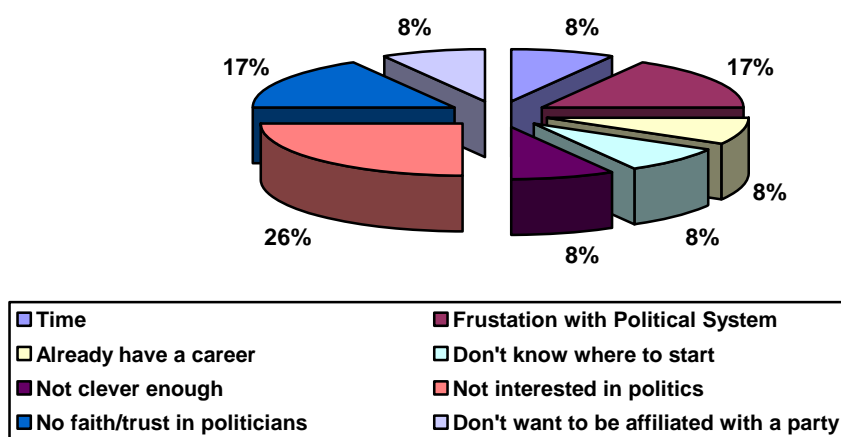
The next section looks at some of the factors that may put people off becoming engaged in politics and some suggestions for improving the current situation.

Perhaps surprisingly 20% of respondents would consider becoming a councillor in the future; the reasons given included, an interest in politics, wanting to help people, to make a difference in the community and have a fulfilling role. Similar reasons were given by those already acting as councillors in the National Census, “86.9% was to serve the community, 52.3% said to change things, 51.5% said political beliefs, 29.4% said because I was asked to.”

80% of respondents would not consider becoming a councillor in the future, below are the reasons stated for and against becoming a councillor.

According to the Audit of Political Engagement, “standing for election to the local council or parliament are by far the least commonly cited actions that people would be prepared to take” which reflects are responses.

Why would you not consider becoming a councillor?

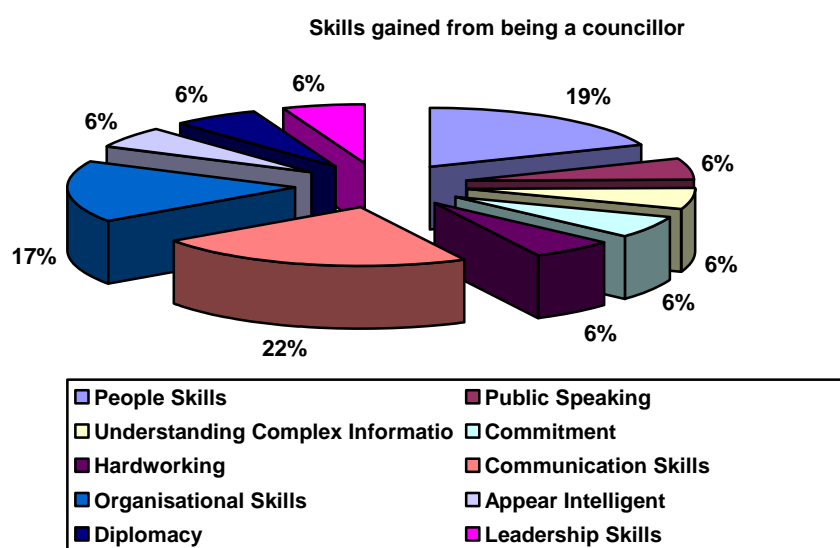


According to the results the biggest factor is a lack of interest in politics. There is evidence for this everywhere, and it is not specific to women - it is young people on the whole, they do not see how politics is an issue for them, it has no relevance to their everyday lives. A disinterest and apathy towards politics is a major issue. The Audit of Political Engagement suggest “the term ‘politics’ suffers from an image problem and is not widely connected by the public to the issues they care about.” Of course this image is just that - an image. “Politics is

a brand that is off-putting to individuals.” Politics has such a negative image that nobody wants to be associated with it.

Other reasons given by the Audit correspond with our results - 71% said in their poll that they trusted politicians not very much, or not at all, in fact a politician is in one of the least trusted professions. Our poll shows that 17% would not consider becoming a councillor for this reason. When the Audit asked if people who became involved in politics could really change the country, only 33% said yes; again this reflects our results with 17% claiming frustration with the political system would deter them from becoming a councillor. Robert Neill MP agrees “one of the biggest disincentives preventing people from becoming involved in local government is the feeling that their role makes no difference” (Hansard 27/03/07) However the National Census shows that 35.6% of councillors believed they had more influence to change things than they had expected and 35.1% thought they had as much influence as they had expected.

Despite the majority of respondents not wanting to become councillors, most (90%) see it as an advantage for prospective employers and believe that there are many transferable skills to be gained from being a councillor. The chart below shows these in more detail.

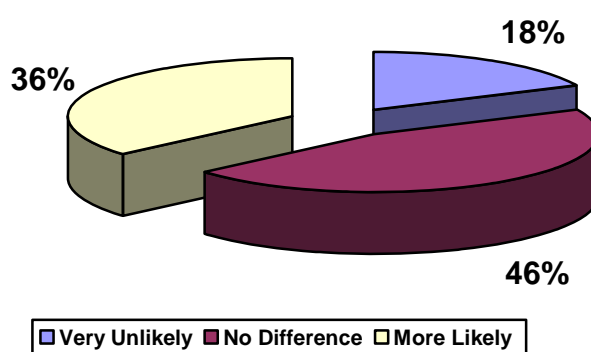


Vicky Frost emphasises the point “big budgets, important decisions - standing as a local councillor should be a no-brain career decision. Not only can you influence what happens in your community, but there is also the opportunity to

acquire a portfolio of skills to make your work colleagues swoon with envy.” When described in this way you would imagine scores of young women coming forward, full of ambition and passion, particularly those with young children (due to the flexibility of the job and the option of working from home), fighting for a position that seems to have everything people aspire to have in their careers.

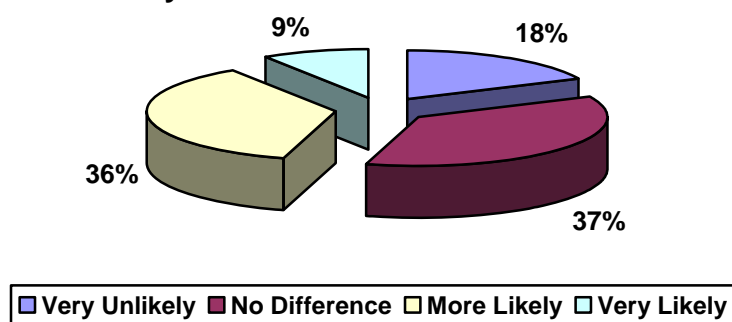
The next set of questions asked women if they were more likely to become councillors due to outside factors, such as a friend or family member already being a councillor. Some of these have been put forward as suggestions to encourage more young women into local government. So would they have the desired affect?

Would you be more inspired to become a councillor if your councillor was the same age as you?

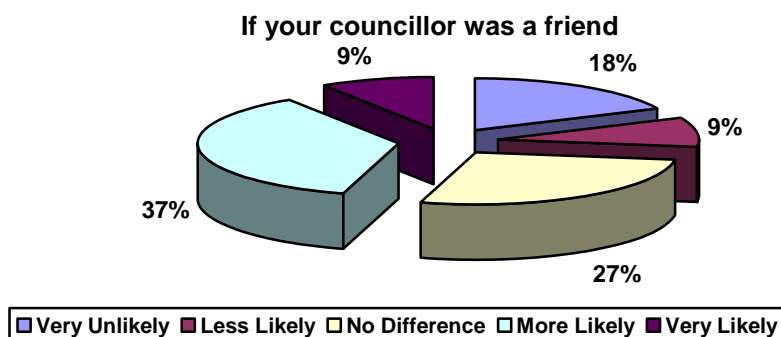


36% of respondents were more likely to be inspired to be a councillor if their own councillor was of a similar age. However 46% said it would make no difference.

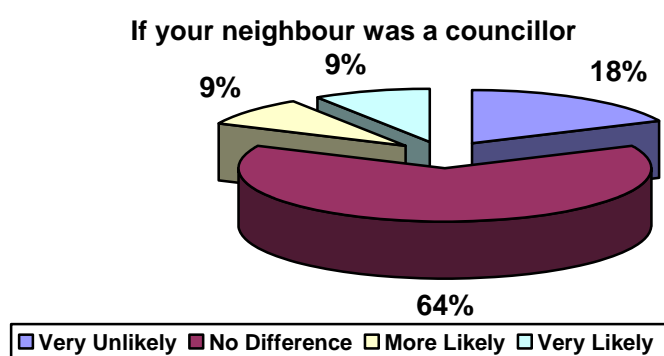
If your councillor was a woman



36% of respondents said it would inspire them to be a councillor more, if their councillor was a woman. This suggests that age is just as important a factor as gender for young women.

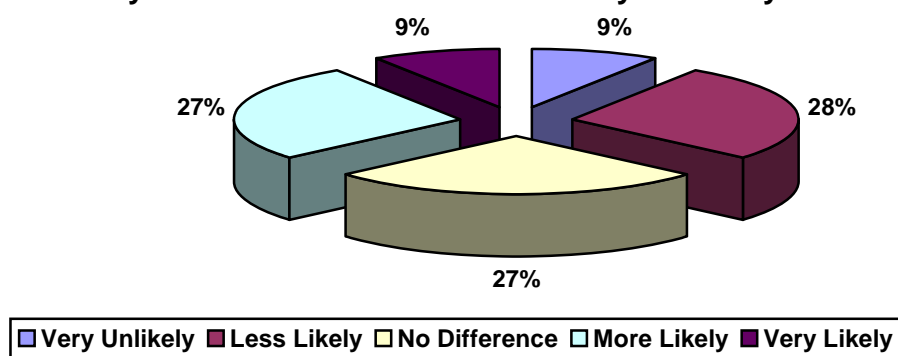


Again 37% of respondents are more likely to consider becoming a councillor if they had a friend who was a councillor.



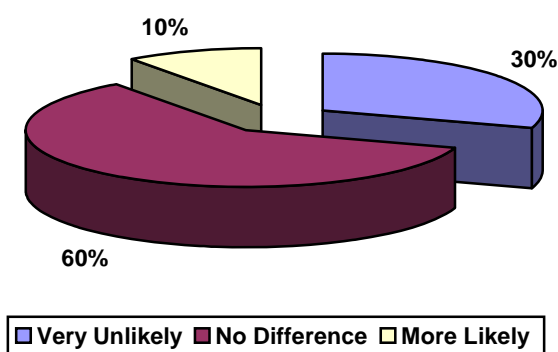
It would make very little difference if the respondent's neighbours were councillors, to whether they would become councillors themselves. Only 10% said they would be very likely to be inspired to become a councillor, if they had a neighbour that was a councillor. I think this compounds the message that encouragement comes from seeing people similar to you, your age and sex being the most visible. Communities are no longer as close-knit as they once were and your next door neighbour may not be somebody you even talk to, let alone feel you have a common connection with.

If your councillor was a member of your family.



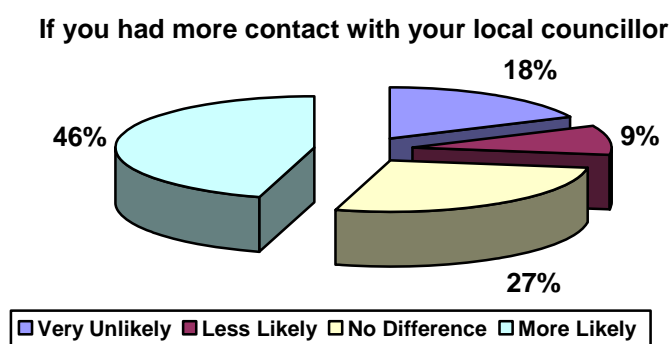
27% of respondents said they were more likely to consider becoming a councillor, if a member of their family was a councillor. 9% said they were very likely. 28% said they were less likely. Interestingly there was one respondent whose father actually is a councillor whose response was that she was less likely to become a councillor, if a member of her family was a councillor. Despite this the respondent cited other things that may inspire her, such as the councillor being of the same age, a woman or having more contact with them. Whilst looking through councils' websites during my analysis of the local elections this year, it is very noticeable that the amount of councillors who are related or married to another councillor is actually relatively high.

If there was adequate childcare.



60% said it would make no difference whether there was adequate childcare; however, this is not really representative of those women with children as none of the respondents had children. It is important to note that a major issue that always enters the debate when talking about barriers that women face is that of

childcare, however, our survey shows that this in fact is not a major issue for young women.

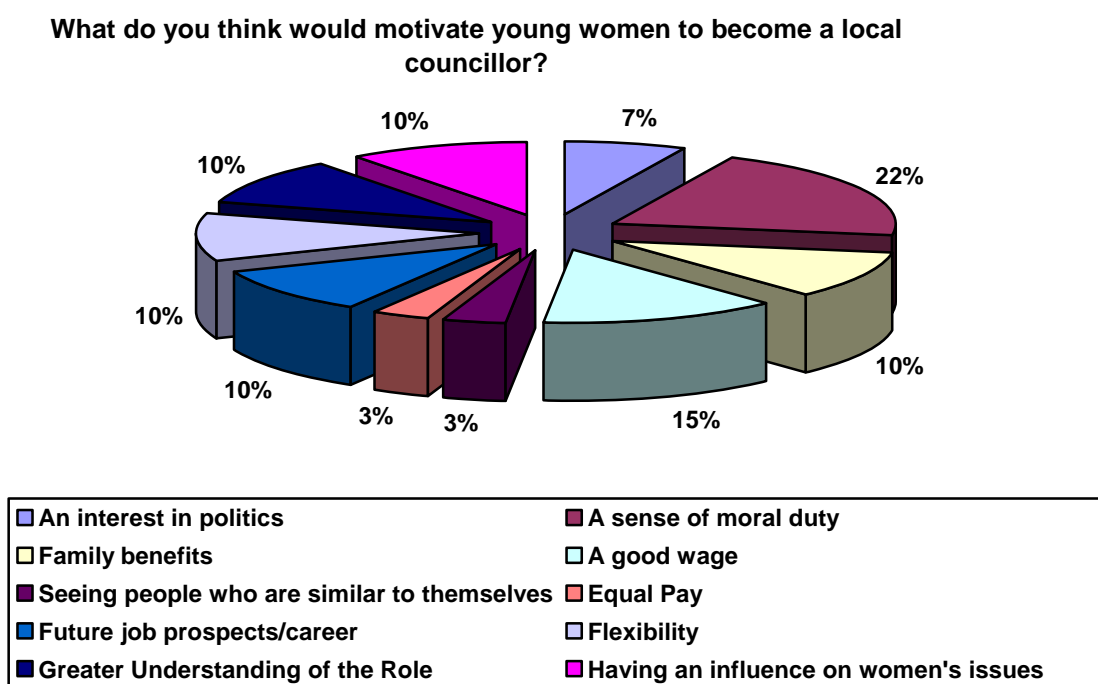


46% said if they had more contact with their local councillor they may be more inspired to become one. This is the one factor that would encourage the most women to become councillors and lack of genuine contact with their local councillor is a consistent issue throughout the responses.

4. Motivation & Inspiration

We asked the women we questioned if they had any suggestions to encourage people like themselves to become councillors and how to improve the image of local government.

Below is a chart that shows what the respondents thought would motivate women to become councillors.

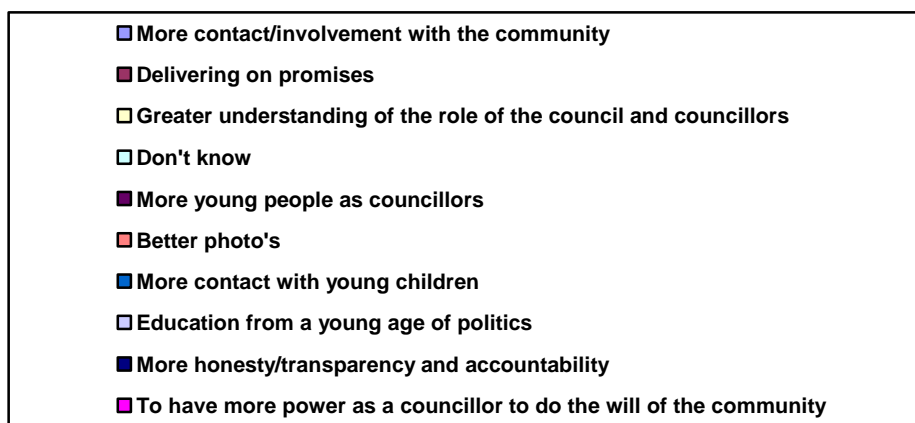
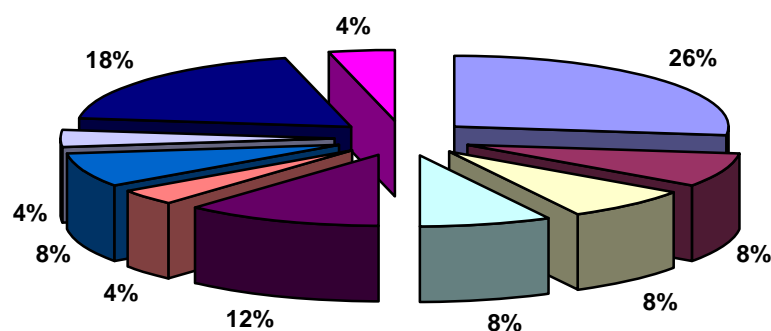


According to the women who responded, having a sense of moral duty would be the most important thing that motivated a young woman to become a councillor. This was described as wanting to help people, others and the community. This would perhaps suggest that the people we need to be looking at recruiting initially are people who already have a connection with the community. The second thing that the respondents believed would motivate young women was a good wage and the opportunity for a career. As a councillor tends to be a role that people take on as well as a job, perhaps it is worth looking into the issue and making the role of a councillor a plausible career, paid the equivalent to a similar role in the private sector, making it a more viable option for young women.

We then asked if the role of a councillor was important. Although there may be confusion over the role of a councillor and the council, and councillors do not have the greatest of images according to the findings, it is still seen as an important role to have within society by the majority of young women. 90% said yes, the work that councillors do is important.

So we asked them how the image of councillors could be improved. The chart below shows the response.

How can the image of a councillor be improved?

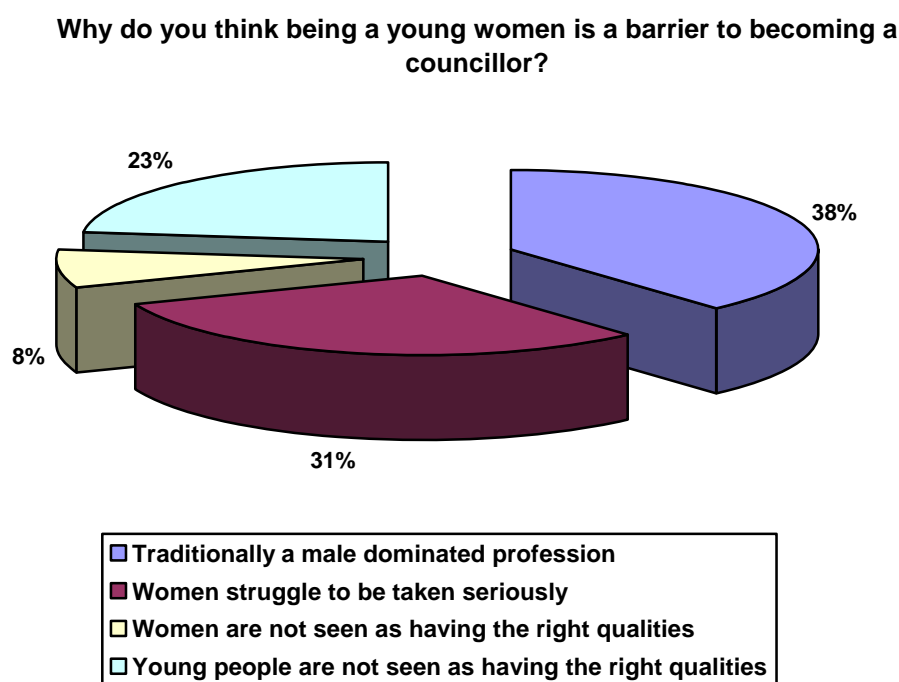


An overwhelming amount of responses claimed that if councillors had more contact with the community they represent, their image would be improved. It was made clear that the councillors had to be genuine and not there to receive press. This has also been an issue raised in other areas, that councillors are rarely seen in the community unless the press is present

The next question asked was if being a young woman was a barrier to being a councillor.

When we asked this question, 27% of respondents believed that being a young woman was not a barrier to becoming a councillor. When asked their reasons, some were rather refreshing, such as a young lawyer - “young women can achieve whatever they want to.” This is similar to the ‘generation y’ women found in Louise Carpenter’s article. Another response cited “political parties...actively look for young female candidates. I believe that most people vote for a party rather than a specific candidate.” This reminds us that some political parties do indeed have all women shortlists and try to encourage women to stand as candidates. However, when we look at the 73% of respondents that believed being a young woman was a barrier to becoming a councillor, we can see some reasons that perhaps do make it rather more difficult.

The following pie-chart suggests some reasons as to why a being a young woman may be a barrier to being a councillor.



The majority of people, 38%, believe that as a male dominated profession it is difficult for young women to breakthrough, “It takes time to change this perception. It is a problem of society as a whole but magnified within councils and politics”

31% of people we asked also believed that women found it difficult to be taken seriously within the political arena - "people don't have the same degree of respect for women in areas such as politics" - and another respondent said "women aren't taken seriously in a position of power"

Age was also something that people believed was a barrier, whether you were a woman or man, "you're seen as too young to represent your community. The stereotype of a councillor has made it very difficult for young women to progress into council" another response was "irresponsible, uncommitted and untrustworthy are assumptions of the younger generation"

Age is a resounding factor and for many of the young women we spoke to, was more of a barrier than their gender. In Scotland, changes have been made to encourage younger people to stand as councillors and they have lowered the legal age to 18. This has led to three young people, two men and one woman, all under the age of 22, being elected in Aberdeen. According to an article in the Society Guardian not all voters were happy with this, "I'm all for youth...but 18? Come on, what do you know at 18?" This view shows that age is an issue for some people, however as Nigel Morris points out "if you are old enough to vote & pay taxes, you should have the ability to influence local government." One of the young councillors elected was confused about the complaints of council being unrepresentative and then when the council has taken steps to rectify this, they continue to receive complaints, but this time that the councillors are too young. It is important to bear in mind that this is just three councillors not the whole council of 43! As the young female councillor elected also points out, "we could be nurses...we could be doctors...making life or death decisions." The image of young people suffers by people's preconceptions just like that of a councillor.

The final question asked, was 'briefly state three things that would encourage young women, like you to become a councillor' and we received many different responses. However a couple remained consistent. 50% of respondents believed that the role of a councillor should receive wages equivalent to that in the private sector to make it a viable full-time position. This would encourage those young women, who cannot afford to leave their career or work part-time to think about being a councillor as a viable job prospect. 50% also suggested that

children are educated about politics from a young age and that councillors should have more contact with young children. A lack of understanding and knowledge regarding councils and councillors means people tend to not even regard it when thinking about jobs or careers, unless already interested in local politics. 40% believed that having a good role model within the council would encourage them to become a councillor, if they could see the positive impact somebody like themselves was having on the community, it would perhaps inspire them also.

Conclusions

A consistent theme throughout this report has been that young women are fighting a battle on two fronts, age and gender. To focus on one will lead to either an increase in older women or younger men. We need to grab the attention of the 'Generation Y' woman and show her just how interesting, exciting, challenging and fulfilling a career as a councillor can be. We need to increase the number of young, vibrant, ambitious and passionate women in local government, women who are representative of the young women I know, women I went to university with, women I go to work with, women I go out on a Saturday night with. I am an equal member of this society, this community, this country and I want my council to understand, reflect and argue for my needs and wants. Just as I want my next door neighbour, a young Asian family, or the elderly lady that catches my bus in the evening, to have their concerns and opinions raised and represented also. Our society has a huge variation of people in it, with their concerns and issues changing as they go through different stages of their lives; our councils should reflect this. We need to rejuvenate local government, put the fire back in its belly.

We know that the women in this survey believe it is important for women to be equally represented, so perhaps we need to shout louder that actually they aren't and increase awareness of those women who believe we have reached parity.

Changing the face of local government means breaking a vicious circle. Anna Bawden from the Guardian agrees there needs to be a change in culture "until there is a critical mass of women in senior positions in central and local government, these off-putting working practices are unlikely to disappear. But for that to happen, there needs to be a change in culture." If we look at some of the factors that turn young women away from politics and others that may encourage them to become engaged, we can see that they are all interlinked. Remuneration, image change, more contact with the community and increased education from a young age about politics, are consistent factors, but without one the other won't work.

The first issue which should be considered is remuneration; in the questions where the young women were asked, what would encourage and motivate women like you to consider becoming a councillor, a full-time salary with a wage equivalent to that of the private sector was an over-riding factor. According to the Electoral Reform Society “some women are disinterested in local government, put off by the lack of support and remuneration and the thought of combining another major time commitment with family and work life” There needs to be a mature debate on this issue. I believe remuneration would increase the number of young women on many levels, but the issue of time is a major one. Women traditionally have been the members of society who stay at home and therefore have more opportunity to carry out the role of councillor. However as society changes, this advantage has all but disappeared. Women now work more than they ever have and still carry responsibility for the majority of domestic and caring duties. This makes it increasingly difficult for young women to find the time to combine a full-time job, home-life and the role of a councillor. Remuneration would mean being a councillor would be the full-time career. This would not just be a benefit to young women but to all those who work. According to the Diversity under the New Council Constitution “the argument was that the barrier to increasing diversity was the degree of time councillors could make available to the role. The people who could make the commitment were those who were retired or semi-retired and who no longer had dependents to support so could afford to take the risk of an uncertain income stream.” By paying a reasonable salary, this problem would be resolved.

Remuneration would also mean that with councillors being able to spend more time on their role, they would be able to spend more time in the community. Currently councillors spend on average 7.2 hours a week out of 21.9, on engaging with their constituents. However, 86.9% became councillors to serve the community and 93.5% believe listening to their community is the most important aspect of their role as councillor. Contact with councillors is the best way to inspire young women to become councillors according to our survey, which leads us onto the next point.

Increasing the amount of time a councillor spends in the community has many advantages, it will increase peoples knowledge and understanding of how the political system works, therefore increasing their interest in local government. This is one of the major problems politics as a whole suffers from today - an extremely bad image and a massive lack of interest. 18-24 year olds are more likely than any other age group to say they are not interested in politics and young women, who although likelier than men to say they are not interested in politics, are actually just as likely to be political activists - this supports are questionnaire results. Not only will increased interaction with the community help improve the image of local government; if from a young age children are taught about it, the knowledge and understanding will mean that politics no longer remains an elite sport. Initiatives such as citizenship as part of the curriculum and the youth parliament are steps in the right direction.

If the councillors young women were coming into contact with were similar to themselves, this would inspire them to become councillors too. Arwen Folkes, a councillor from North Cornwall says “people do need to hear things from people who are like them. People think that politics is for a different type of people or that politician’s don’t understand them. We have to have people in politics that are like them.” Women who responded to the questionnaire agree that having councillors similar to them would be an inspiration, if we can show women that it is a viable career choice, with a good career path (for some women councillors it can be a start to a national political career), and flexibility, more will follow. Nearly 30% of councillors stood for election because they were asked to. Perhaps that is where we should start - ask more women.

It would be naive to talk about encouraging young women into local government without talking about the major obstacle that still faces most women in today’s society. The majority of councils are based around a system that has not changed for decades. Councils are male dominated and many councillors are unwilling to give up seats to women at the risk of losing them, even though there is evidence to suggest that women are more likely to win marginal seats. The media also still struggles to deal with female politicians; for example, on a national scale, in a week where the country was in fear of another attempted terrorist attack, the main issue in the papers around the new Home Secretary’s

first speech to Parliament was not what she had said or how well she had done under pressure, but the amount of cleavage she had shown. The tabloids were not alone; many 'respectable' broadsheets also had something to say on the matter. What woman would purposely put herself in a position where she is likely to be ridiculed and hounded not for doing her job badly, but for being a woman? For young women to become interested in politics, not only do we have to do the things above, we must also get them to realise there is still an old battle to be fought and won.

Anastasia Jackson
Research Intern
Centre for Women & Democracy
July 2007