

Who Sits on Councils Affects Where Money Goes

A policy brief on gender representation in English local government

Local councils make important decisions about how public money is spent. These decisions affect children, families, and community services. Recent analysis of English local council data shows that councils with more women in elected office spend more on children's social care, even under austerity conditions. This is not just about symbolism. Who gets elected can directly change which services are prioritised.

This matters now more than ever. Between 2010 and 2020, council budgets fell in real terms, with children's social care spending declining by approximately 9 percent.¹ At the same time, following the 2019 local elections, women accounted for only 35 percent of councillors across the UK.² With debates ongoing about gender balance, council funding, and levelling-up, these findings highlight how political representation can influence which services are protected during times of constraint.

Key Messages

- **More women on councils leads to more spending on care.** In practical terms, electing one additional woman to a typical 50-member council results in around £870,000 more spent on children's social care each year. This estimate is based on councils with budgets of about £300 million, which is typical for unitary authorities and county councils with social care responsibilities.
- **A minimum threshold matters.** The increase in children's social care spending only appears when women hold more than 30 percent of council seats. Below that level, changes in spending are limited.
- **Money is reallocated, not increased.** Councils with more women do not receive or spend more money overall. Instead, they shift funding between services. Evidence suggests that reductions may occur in areas like infrastructure, transport, or environmental services, but patterns differ across councils.
- **Changes last over time.** These shifts are not temporary. They persist beyond a single election cycle, showing a lasting change in budget priorities.

Policy Recommendations

1. Political parties should commit to gender-balanced candidate slates.

Research shows that real spending changes only occur when women make up at least 30 percent of council members. To reach this threshold, parties should aim for at least 30 percent female candidates in council elections.

¹ Ogden, K. and Phillips, D., *How have English councils' funding and spending changed? 2010–2024*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2024, <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/how-have-english-councils-funding-and-spending-changed-2010-2024>

² Dods Diversity, *Women in Local Government*, Professional Women Series, <https://www.dodsdiversity.com/professional-women-series/local-government>

2. Local authorities should embed gender-responsive budgeting.

Although equality impact assessments are legally required, research by the Women's Budget Group shows that most councils do not routinely use them in budgeting decisions or apply them in a meaningful way.³ Councils should adopt formal gender-budgeting procedures. These should include systematic gender impact analysis before annual budgets are approved, to ensure that resource allocation reflects the needs of women, children, and care-related services.

3. Political parties, local government bodies, and civil society organisations should invest in pathways for women to enter local politics.

Support should include mentorship programmes, campaign training, and targeted outreach. This is essential to overcome barriers such as care responsibilities, lack of networks, and limited access to resources.

4. Central government should consider representation in council funding reform.

Current funding debates focus on how much money councils receive. But who sits on councils also shapes how that money is spent. National policymakers should reflect this reality when designing funding formulas and guidance for local authorities.

Conclusion

Who serves on councils meaningfully shapes how budgets are allocated. Councils allocate more to **care-related services** when more women serve on councils, particularly when women make up about one-third of councillors. These patterns matter in a context of **tight budgets and rising demand**, where choices about spending have real consequences for families and vulnerable residents.

As discussions continue about gender representation and local government funding, the evidence highlights a simple insight: **representation influences priorities**. Supporting women into local politics and adopting gender-responsive budgeting can help ensure council decisions meet the needs of all communities.

About the Author

Zhou Zhou is a PhD candidate in Economics at the University of Glasgow, with research interests in political economy, public finance, and gender. This brief is based on her working paper "*Do Female Councillors Change Spending Priorities? Evidence from UK Local Elections*," conducted as part of her doctoral work at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow. For the full working paper with detailed methodology and technical appendices, please contact the author at z.zhou.5@research.gla.ac.uk.

³ Women's Budget Group, *Equality impact assessments and equality-responsiveness of budgets in English local authorities*, 2021, <https://www.wbg.org.uk/publication/equality-impact-assessments-and-equality-responsiveness-of-budgets-in-english-local-authorities/>