

Local Government Association (LGA)

Debate on the role of women in public life

House of Lords

5 February 2018



Key messages

- The Local Government Association's *Be a Councillor* campaign works with councils, political parties, individuals and talent-spotters to encourage more people to stand as a local councillor. It is important that local government reflects the communities it represents and the *Be A Councillor* campaign includes a focus on encouraging woman and under-represented groups to engage with and enter politics.
- Our members tell us that a lack of parental leave and pension contributions, and the intimidation of women in public life, can act as barriers to standing as a councillor or taking on responsibilities as a cabinet member. We want to work with central government to encourage more women to enter politics, whether as local councillors or Members of Parliament.
- The LGA will continue to work through our four political groups to support women councillors through a whole range of training and development programmes. The groups each adopt their own approaches to promote diversity in the representatives they put forward.
- In this centenary year of the Representation of the People Act 1918, the LGA is working with the Women's Local Government Society, a cross-party and independent organisation which campaigned to enable women to stand as local councillors, to identify 100 suffrage pioneers who were active in the campaign for votes, and who went on to use the extended rights to citizenship in a positive way locally.
- Women had the right to vote in local elections long before they could vote in parliamentary elections. Single women ratepayers received the right to vote in local government elections in the Municipal Franchise Act 1869, and this was extended to some married women in the Local Government Act 1894. By 1900, more than 1 million single women were registered to vote in local government elections in England.ⁱ

Background

Be a Councillor

In 2017 33 per cent of councillors were women, and 20 per cent of council leaders are women.ⁱⁱ The LGA's *Be a Councillor* campaign works with councils, political parties, individuals and talent-spotters to encourage more people to stand as a local councillor. It is based on the belief that democratic institutions make the best decisions when they have a mix of people with different skills, backgrounds and experiences.

In October 2017, we held the first *Be a Councillor* event for women interested in getting more involved in political and civic life with a cross-party panel and Q&A session. The campaign has also recently facilitated setting up a women's network of female councillors who can help and advise people thinking about standing for

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election. There are already over 80 members, both existing councillors and people interested in standing as councillors.

Over this year the *Be a Councillor* campaign will continue to develop new resources, promote and advertise the role of councillor and provide support to people considering standing for election. In the past six months, over 24,000 different people have visited the *Be a Councillor* webpage.

Overcoming barriers

Our members tell us that a lack of parental leave and pension contributions, can all act as barriers to standing as a councillor, and in particular taking on responsibilities as a cabinet member. The Local Government Pension Scheme was abolished by the Government in 2014, and the LGA opposed the move at the time.ⁱⁱⁱ

The intimidation of figures in public life, which affects both men and women, can also be a barrier. The Committee on Standards in Public Life recently published a report into Intimidation in Public Life.^{iv} Although the review primarily focused on the intimidation and harassment of candidates in parliamentary elections, the LGA met with the Committee during the review to discuss related issues impacting local councillors. The report recommends that the Government should bring forward legislation abolishing the requirement for councillor candidates to publish home addresses on ballot papers and calling for the sensitive interests' provision under the Localism Act to be highlighted to Monitoring Officers. The Committee is now seeking further evidence in relation to the intimidation of local councillors as part of the wider review of local government standards.

We want to work with central government to overcome barriers that discourage women from entering politics, whether as local councillors or Members of Parliament. It is important that the parties at a national and local level work together on these issues.

100 suffrage pioneers

2018 is the anniversary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, giving women over 30 the right to vote. Women also gained other opportunities to join in civic life that year, enabling them to become magistrates and extending their right to sit as councillors. The centenary year provides an opportunity to focus on women's under-representation in local politics.

The Women's Local Government Society, a cross-party and independent organisation which campaigned to enable women to stand as local councillors, is leading the *From Suffrage Campaigns to Citizenship* project in partnership with the LGA. Together we are looking to identify 100 suffrage pioneers who were active in the campaign for votes, and who went on to use the extended rights to citizenship in a positive way locally. The suffrage pioneers include:

- **Margaret Ashton:** Margaret Ashton was the first woman councillor in Manchester, elected as an Independent in 1908.^v Her first involvement in politics came in 1888, when she helped to found the Manchester Women's Guardian Association, an organisation that encouraged women to become Poor Law Guardians and to take a more active role in local politics. Margaret was a councillor from 1908 until 1921. During these years she was instrumental in developing municipal health visiting, midwifery and better maternal care in the city. She worked tirelessly for better education for working class children, was a committed anti-militarist and travelled

ceaselessly to campaign for the vote across the country.

- **Clara Rackham:** Clara was a member of the Cambridge Women's Suffrage Association branch of the NUWSS and also served some years as President of the Eastern Counties NUWSS branch.^{vi} She held numerous positions including city councillor for 28 years, county councillor for 38 years. She was also a Poor Law Guardian (1904-17), President of the Co-operative Women's Guild for 23 years and during the First World War she was a Factory Inspector. Clara gave unstinting and unpaid service to the local community in every field of local care and welfare for many years.

- **Juanita Maxwell Philips:** After the First World War, Juanita Maxwell Philips embarked on a career in public life and was elected as a Guardian, became the first woman Borough Councillor in Honiton, the first woman mayor, and the first woman County Councillor in Devon.^{vii} Juanita also campaigned on women's employment, fought for better conditions in welfare institutions, and for access to family planning services. As a councillor, guardian, magistrate and NHS board member she secured better housing, better support for mothers and children and for those in poverty, and better healthcare. She was a constant advocate for opportunities for women in education and employment.

ⁱ <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/RP13-14>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=0de4f7f0-d1a0-4e63-94c7-5e69081caa5f>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-26542442>

^{iv} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>

^v <http://www.suffrage-pioneers.net/the-list/margaret-ashton/>

^{vi} [http://www.suffrage-pioneers.net/the-list/clara-rackham-\(tabor\)/](http://www.suffrage-pioneers.net/the-list/clara-rackham-(tabor)/)

^{vii} <http://www.suffrage-pioneers.net/the-list/juanita-maxwell-phillips/>