

SCOTLAND'S COUNCILLORS 1974-1995

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INTRODUCTION

In April 1996 another era of Scottish local government came to an end. The largely two-tier system of 9 Regional, 53 District and 3 Islands Area authorities introduced in 1974 by the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1972 was replaced by a system of 32 unitary authorities.

Whilst there already exists a substantial literature covering a wide range of areas of research on local government councillors in different parts of the United Kingdom, the demise of one system and the institution of another is a particularly appropriate time to take stock of some aspects of local government in Scotland. Comprehensive data and some analysis relating to all local elections since 1974 has been systematically provided by Bochel and Denver (1975 to 1994). Their publications give details of the pattern and outcome of every contest. They chart, among other things, the slow but consistent increases in women's participation as councillors and the increasing partisanship of local elections and the consequential rise in the proportion of seats contested. Much less is known, however, about the personnel in elected positions who ran the system. During the twenty-two year period from 1974 to 1996, 4,686 individuals served as councillors, 1,227 on Regional, 3,209 on District and 250 on Islands councils. In this article we take a more councillor-oriented approach, using some new data and also presenting material from new analysis of existing data. We discuss councillors' motivations, experiences in becoming candidates and councillors, ambitions, involvement in council work, lengths of service, personal and political constraints and reasons for retiral from council work.

The new data comes from a postal survey of councillors in post in the spring of 1996, the final year of the outgoing system. As one of the initial interests

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of the researchers was in gender differences, the sample consisted of all 333 female councillors and 333 randomly selected male councillors. The questionnaire was distributed through the Chief Executives of each of the 'old' councils, with reminder letters and questionnaires being sent to non-respondents four weeks later. Although the survey period coincided with much of the work preparing for the new councils (to which many in the sample had been elected), and in particular with the setting of budgets, the response rate was quite high: 344 people (52 per cent) responded. The data presented in this article are unweighted: that is, no allowance is made for the differential sampling of female and male councillors. Our analyses show that in almost every instance the percentages vary only slightly if weighting is applied. The one area where weighting does produce rather different results is the discussion of 'full-time' councillors, but the differences between men and women are covered in that section.

The secondary analysis is largely based upon the collections of Bochel and Denver for each of the twelve local government elections (six each for Regional, District and Islands authorities) between 1973 and 1995. Other data has been compiled from **The Municipal Yearbook**.

BECOMING A COUNCILLOR

For most aspirants an essential stage in embarking upon a council 'career' is obtaining a nomination as a candidate. In considering the process of becoming a councillor, it is obviously important to distinguish between those who seek to represent a party and those who participate in the system as Independents. Between 1974 and 1994, Scottish local government became increasingly partisan, with the proportion of Independent candidates contesting elections falling from 28 per cent to 13 per cent of a growing number of candidates; by 1994, 79 per cent of seats were taken by party candidates compared with 67 per cent in 1974. For the vast majority of aspiring councillors in most parts of the country it was therefore necessary to be selected as a candidate by a political party. The rigour, formality and indeed incidence of formal selection procedures varies between the parties and in different parts of the country. For example, the Conservative Party in Scotland does not generally have such an exhaustive procedure as the Labour Party; but in all the major parties some people have to be encouraged or pressed into becoming candidates, and although the formal selection procedures are followed in most cases, it is frequently little more than a gesture.

Despite the existence of competition for candidatures in some areas, the overwhelming majority of our party respondents (96 per cent) claimed that they had no difficulties in being selected as candidates. Just 14 said that they had experienced some problem: 9 referred to difficulties with branch support and five women said that they had experienced some sex discrimination. Nor does it seem that it is necessary for the majority to serve a kind of apprenticeship as candidates in less winnable seats before acquiring a winnable one. Around three-quarters had been through only one selection and only six per cent more than two. Women respondents reported a higher rate of selection (78 per cent) at their first attempt than men (70 per cent), and Labour and SNP aspirants (31 per cent and 36 per cent respectively) had faced multiple selections more often than Conservatives (21 per cent) and Liberal Democrats (10 per cent).

Although previous experience of candidature seems to be unimportant, a reasonable length of party membership is the norm for successful candidates. More than three-quarters (78 per cent) of respondents had been in their parties for 5 or more years before being elected, the largest proportion (30 per cent) between 5 and 9 years, and as many as 20 per cent had been members for more than twenty years. Intriguingly, four people joined their parties at the same time, or at least in the same year, as being elected, whilst another four, drawn from Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats, joined their parties after their election.

Liberal Democrat councillors had, on the whole, been members of their party for a shorter time before their election than those in other parties: almost two-thirds of Liberal Democrats (64 per cent) had spent fewer than ten years as party members, compared with around half of Labour (50 per cent) and Conservative (49 per cent) councillors and just over one-third of SNP councillors (37 per cent). Over 40 per cent of SNP respondents had been party members for more than fifteen years when first elected to the council. A larger proportion of Conservative (31 per cent) and Liberal Democrat (39 per cent) councillors than Labour (13 per cent) and SNP (10 per cent) had less than five years membership before election.

Relatively little difference was found between men and women in the length of party membership before becoming a councillor, but a higher proportion of men (36 per cent) than women (30 per cent) had been in their parties for more than fifteen years before election.

Independents are in a sense self-selected, or at least do not need to go through any formal selection procedures. There is no data available about the process immediately leading up to their candidatures, but in response to a survey

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question on reasons for standing for election to the council, 24 per cent of Independents referred to having been 'asked' to stand 'by the community' or 'by a retiring councillor', more than twice as often as Conservatives, the group registering this reason with the next highest frequency (11 per cent).

Given the increasingly competitive nature of recent local government elections in Scotland, it is somewhat surprising that a very large proportion of respondents (83 per cent) were elected at their first attempt. Only ten per cent had fought one previous contests unsuccessfully, and only seven per cent had fought two or more. Whilst those in the survey were by definition successful candidates, these data tend to confirm the absence of any need for 'candidate' experience in hopeless or less winnable seats before becoming a councillor. Perhaps predictably, given both long-term trends and their recent electoral fortunes, the Conservatives had the lowest (although still relatively high) proportion of candidates who won seats at their first attempt (76 per cent). Respondents from all the other parties reported first-time success rates of over 80 per cent (SNP 81 per cent, Labour 83 per cent and Liberal Democrats 85 per cent). Independent candidates were the most successful of all in being elected at a first candidature (92 per cent). Women were slightly more likely than men to succeed the first time they stood (85 per cent against 82 per cent). Perhaps again reflecting the relative fortunes of the parties, first-time candidates in partisan councils (those where local electoral politics is dominated by the major parties) had a higher success rate at their first attempt than those in non-partisan and intermediate authorities (where Independent candidates predominate).

Generally speaking councillors are middle-aged when first elected; the median age was 45, but the range stretched from 22 to 70 years of age. Some gender differences were found to exist in relation to the age at which respondents had become councillors. Whilst similar proportions of males and females had been elected for the first time aged fifty or over, women were much more likely than men to have been elected in their forties and much less likely to have been elected in their thirties. Only six per cent of males and three per cent of females had become councillors whilst under thirty.

LENGTH OF SERVICE

At the time of standing for election it is unlikely that perceptions of how long they would wish to have the incumbency are to the forefront of most candidates' minds. Little is known about the lengths of service actually given by individual councillors. Our secondary analysis of local election results

(Bochel and Denver, 1974 to 1994) for the period under consideration does, however, fill the gap for Scotland.

Whatever their original perceptions, table 1 illustrates the relatively limited tenure of office of most councillors. Almost half (45 per cent) served for only one term, whilst 70 per cent served only two terms.

Table 1
Number of terms served by councillors between 1974 and 1996 by type of authority (aggregate data)

	One term		Two terms		Three terms		Four terms		Five terms		Six terms	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Regions	535	43.6	305	24.9	195	15.9	100	8.2	42	3.4	50	4.1
Districts	1451	45.2	827	25.8	428	13.3	236	7.4	140	4.4	127	4.0
Islands	128	51.2	65	26.0	26	10.4	14	5.6	16	6.4	1	0.5
ALL	2114	45.1	1197	25.5	649	13.8	350	7.5	198	4.2	178	3.8

However, of those returned as councillors at the commencement of the new system in 1974, eleven per cent (178 people) served for the entire twenty-two years. Our survey shows that at least forty of this group had even longer experience, having been members of councils in the pre-1974 system. A few others, elected in the years following 1974, had also served on the 'old' councils, although amongst this group there were breaks in council service of up to twenty years.

This table also illustrates that there is a striking uniformity in the patterns of service amongst the different types of authority, except that in the Islands a higher proportion served only one term and a lower proportion six terms. The reasons for this difference are not easy to deduce from the available data, but it is possible that the geographical characteristics of these authorities, which involved many councillors having to travel difficult distances to council meetings and perhaps having to spend nights away from home, may have dissuaded many from serving longer. In addition, it is possible that the absence of political party groups to take responsibility for the actions of the council may put more strain on individual councillors. The difference cannot be attributable to a greater incidence of electoral defeat of incumbent

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councillors as the overall proportion of those defeated is very close to that for those in other types of council.

Of course the potential length of time for which an individual councillor could have served is determined by the stage at which they entered the system. Table 2 shows how each cohort fared in the context of the maximum period available to them and how this compared with other cohorts.

Table 2

Number of terms served by each entry cohort, 1974 to 1994

Regions

Year first elected	Percentage of cohort remaining after				
	Second election	Third election	Fourth election	Fifth election	Sixth election
1974	65.7	43.2	25.8	16.1	11.5
1978	66.0	37.9	22.9	14.4	
1982	61.6	36.0	26.2		
1986	71.9	48.5			
1990	57.6				

Districts

Year first elected	Percentage of cohort remaining after				
	Second election	Third election	Fourth election	Fifth election	Sixth election
1974	65.9	43.2	28.6	18.8	11.5
1977	49.9	30.3	20.8	14.2	
1980	64.4	35.2	22.9		
1984	59.5	36.1			
1988	62.8				

The data presented in table 2 has also been analysed to allow us to distinguish between males and females and between councillors from partisan and non-

partisan councils. Whilst in the Regions the proportions of women who served for more than four terms were significantly lower than for men, in general terms the service of both genders followed similar patterns.

Evidence from the survey indicates significant differences in the length of service amongst councillors from the different parties (table 3). As might be expected, given its electoral success over the 22 year life of the system, of all the parties Labour had the highest proportion of councillors with more than twenty years of service (12 per cent). Whilst, as we indicate later in this article, defeat is by no means the principal reason for leaving council service, it clearly has an influence on the time served by some councillors and more on those in the less successful parties. That there remained, at least until 1995, some solid Conservative territory in Scotland is indicated by the seven per cent of Conservative respondents who had periods of more than twenty years of service. The SNP and the Liberal Democrats had under five per cent in this position which is probably a function of the small number of seats won by these parties in 1974. The Independent councillors in the survey far outstripped the party groups in the proportion who had seen more than twenty years service.

Table 3

Length of service by Party (survey data)

Years service	Con		Lab		SNP		LibDem		Independent	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Up to 4	27	49.1	28	22.6	16	38.1	22	37.9	20	32.3
5 to 9	8	14.5	39	31.5	16	38.1	13	22.4	10	16.1
10 to 14	10	18.2	30	24.2	4	9.5	15	25.9	9	14.5
15 to 19	6	10.9	12	9.7	4	9.5	6	10.3	8	12.9
20 and over	4	7.2	15	12.1	2	4.8	2	3.5	15	24.2

Our analysis for each local election (table 4) reveals that, despite the ebbs and flows of the electoral tide, the turnover of councillors varied little (between 34 and 39 per cent) from election to election and between the different types of authority.

The data in this table represents the more impersonal aspects of length of service and turnover. However, underlying these is a range of decisions and

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occurrences in the lives of the councillors involved. The reasons for ceasing to serve as a councillor can be divided broadly into the 'personal' and the 'political' (in the sense of suffering defeat at the poll or being deselected). We have identified all those in the system who retired following a defeat: about one-fifth of incumbent councillors suffered defeat over the whole period, with little difference between type of authority (22 per cent of Regional councillors dropped out following a defeat, 21 per cent of District councillors and 20 per cent of Islands councillors). Nor was there any significant difference between partisan and non-partisan councils. Thus, in about four-fifths of all cases of retiral of elected representatives, the reason was other than defeat at an election.

Table 4

Councillor turnover, Regions and Districts, 1974 to 1994 (aggregate data)

Regions

	Seats	New councillors	% seats with new members
1974	432	432	100.0
1978	431	154	35.7
1982	441	161	36.5
1986	445	165	37.1
1990	445	151	33.9
1994	453	164	36.2

Districts

	Seats	New councillors	% seats with new members
1974	1110	1110	100.0
1977	1117	409	36.3
1980	1127	438	38.9
1984	1152	427	37.1
1988	1158	425	36.7
1992	1158	400	34.5

There is a paucity of data providing insight into the reasons for career cessation or interruption occurring in situations other than electoral defeat. Of the respondents in our survey only a very small proportion (five per cent) had had an interrupted career (which fits well with the aggregate data covering all councillors). Where there had been breaks, in more than half of these cases the interruption had been due to electoral defeat; other reasons cited were having been deselected, leaving their parties, or standing down for career or family reasons.

Kerley (1992) has examined the 'retiral and replacement' of Regional and Island councillors in Scotland. His findings, based upon a survey including all those 'voluntarily retiring' (not standing as a candidate), showed that the main reasons for retiral were personal ones; primarily 'age' (42 per cent), with much smaller proportions identifying 'frustration' and external career pressures (15 per cent each). Bloch (1992) surveyed ex-councillors in England and also found that the reasons for turnover were largely personal, although for her sample competing demands and commitments was the largest category (42 per cent), followed by 'personal reasons' (health, age, etc.) (28 per cent).

Our calculation of the proportions of councillors who left council service following a defeat and conversely those who ceased for other reasons broadly bears out the observations of Kerley and Bloch and their identification of factors other than defeat as being the major contributors to councillor turnover. Thus reasons other than those relating directly to the most formal aspect of the competitiveness of the system account for the cessation of most councillors' careers. This remains an area requiring further research.

MOTIVATIONS

Motivations are a difficult area to study through quantitative survey methods, with the difficulties being compounded in a postal survey. A very wide range of answers was received to the question 'Why did you decide to stand for election as a councillor?'. Given the limitations of the approach, we examined distributions of responses amongst different groups in the sample based on factors such as party, gender and age.

In the case of party, a clear difference emerged, on the one hand between Independents and party councillors, and on the other among parties, in many of the answers which respondents gave to a question about why they stood for council office. As indicated above, more than twice as many Independents (24 per cent) cited 'community request' as a reason than did councillors from

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any party; 11 per cent of Conservatives and 10 per cent of Liberal Democrats responded in this fashion, with only 5 per cent of SNP and 3 per cent of Labour councillors citing this 'motivation'. Party loyalty or a feeling of obligation was clearly important amongst party councillors. Over half of Liberal Democrat (54 per cent) and SNP (52 per cent) respondents said that they stood 'to help the party' or because of 'encouragement from the party', whilst only 28 per cent of Labour and 27 per cent of Conservative councillors gave similar answers. Labour and SNP councillors frequently alluded to 'ideological' reasons for standing; for Labour these included 'the fairer distribution of resources' and 'a commitment to social justice', for the SNP independence for Scotland. The distribution of the vaguer and more clichéd reason of 'public service' was in some ways more surprising. Conservatives gave this reason most often (40 per cent) compared with 33 per cent of Liberal Democrats, 29 per cent of Labour and 17 per cent of SNP respondents. Only 19 per cent of Independents gave this response.

A few of our survey respondents made the point that some form of self-fulfilment, a desire for a new experience, and even a degree of self-importance were motivating factors. These may be more common than our data show, but obviously a different research instrument would be necessary to explore this.

Ambitions

Many councillors never move on, for whatever reason, to the national political stage. On the other hand there is no doubt that councils are a recruiting ground for a significant number of Westminster politicians. Among those elected to Westminster from Scotland in 1997, one SNP member, two Liberal Democrats and no fewer than 28 Labour MPs had experience in elected local government, whilst a significant number of unsuccessful candidates also were or had been councillors.

Our survey suggests that many councillors are not without further political aspirations, although for most of them these are limited. Almost half our respondents (48 per cent) said that they would be interested in seeking election to one or more of a devolved Scottish parliament, an independent Scottish parliament, Westminster or the European parliament. The main preference was for a devolved Scottish parliament (39 per cent), with 17 per cent expressing an ambition to stand for an independent Scottish parliament, and 14 per cent for each of the Westminster parliament and the European parliament. Women and men were equally likely to have these ambitions.

There were however significant differences to be found in the ambitions of councillors from the different parties. Two-thirds of SNP and almost sixty per

cent of Liberal Democrat respondents said that they would be interested in standing for another elected body, whilst Labour and Conservatives were slightly less ambitious in this respect with only about half interested in such a future. Of the 24 per cent of Independents who showed an interest in serving on a legislative body, almost all referred to a devolved Scottish parliament; of those representing parties, 59 per cent of Liberal Democrats, 48 per cent of Labour and 38 per cent of SNP respondents said that they would like to serve in such a parliament; only 25 per cent of Conservatives expressed an interest in this. The levels of interest shown in an independent Scottish parliament reflect the different party attitudes to such a body. As would be expected, this was the preferred option for 62 per cent of SNP respondents, with only 17 per cent of Liberal Democrats, 12 per cent of Labour and 7 per cent of Conservatives recording an interest in this.

The largest proportion favouring the idea of election to Westminster were to be found amongst the Conservatives (32 per cent), with the SNP next (26 per cent) followed by the Liberal Democrats (17 per cent) and Labour (7 per cent). The European parliament has less appeal for all party groups, with SNP councillors showing the most ambition in that direction (19 per cent compared with the Conservatives' 9 per cent, Labour's 7 per cent and the Liberal Democrats' 4 per cent).

Over one-third (34 per cent) of our respondents claimed to be 'full-time' councillors, but whilst there can be little doubt that the proportion of councillors who are full time is increasing, this remains a somewhat ambiguous category. Five of these respondents said that they were full-time councillors in addition to their having normal full-time occupations. By far the largest proportion of those claiming to be full-time (39 per cent) were 'retired' people. A further 22 per cent were 'unemployed', 15 per cent 'looking after home and family' and 8 per cent 'self-employed'. Eight per cent were either in part-time work or in full-time education.

Fewer than a third (29 per cent) of men, but 44 per cent of women respondents said that they considered themselves full-time councillors. This difference may be due to their respective employment status because, for example, more men than women (28 per cent to 16 per cent) were in full-time employment; 16 per cent of women claimed to be looking after home and family (no men) and 11 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women said that they were unemployed. If this pattern continues, over time this could result in more women rising to senior council posts which require a full-time commitment.

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Of those who were full-time almost a half had been full-time since they were first elected and seventy (60 per cent) had gone full-time since 1990. Indeed, there has been a clear trend since the mid-1980s for those elected to become full-time at the time of, or soon after, election, so that twelve of the twenty two councillors in our sample first elected in 1994 became full-time immediately. This reflects a number of changes in recent years including an increasing workload for councillors (Young and Rao, 1994; SLGIU, 1995), changes to allowances for both rank and file councillors and for those in senior positions (Hampton, 1991; SLGIU, 1990), and perhaps the spread of partisanship in Scottish local government (Bochel and Denver, 1974 to 1994).

Eighty (68 per cent) of those who had become full-time councillors gave the demands of council work as their reason: 'I couldn't reconcile family, work and political duties - work went' (female Regional councillor), '[I became full-time] because of the workload of our Island authority; the need to attend meetings on mainland Scotland - every day is spent on council work or related work' (female Island councillor), 'I could not do justice to my employer and council work' (male District councillor). A further group of 35 (30 per cent of full-time councillors) had become full-time councillors on retiring from work or on becoming unemployed.

The survey revealed significant differences amongst the parties in the proportions of full-time councillors. Contradicting anecdotal evidence, our data shows that it is not Labour councillors who are most likely to be full-time, but SNP members, and Labour is not so far ahead of the Liberal Democrats as might have been thought. The figures are as follows: SNP 55 per cent, Labour 41 per cent, Liberal Democrats 32 per cent and Conservatives 22 per cent; as many as 39 per cent of Independent respondents said that they were full-time councillors, but this is perhaps not so surprising as it might seem because the bulk of these serve in more scattered communities and have often to travel some distance to committee and council meetings. The pattern of full-time councillors in the different parties is more difficult to explain, but may be due to employment status, gender balance or age.

The largest proportion of full-time councillors (39 per cent) is to be found in non-partisan or intermediate councils compared with just one-third in partisan authorities. The most likely explanation for this may be the geographical character of their constituencies and authorities, but other factors including age, gender and employment status may also have an impact.

Council work

As is well known, the great bulk of council discussion and decision making takes place in committees. All the Regional and Island and all but two of the District authorities were operating in this way in 1995. In twelve of the fifty-one Districts which had a committee system all councillors were members of all committees. In most, if not all, councils, certain office-holders, such as provost, convener or leader held ex-officio membership of all committees. Of those respondents in situations which involved them in only being on some committees, the median number of committee memberships was four.

The manner of allocation of councillors to committees varies from authority to authority. Of those respondents from authorities where rank and file councillors were only on some committees, 61 per cent said that they had expressed a preference about which committees they wished to serve on and had generally been satisfied with the outcome; a further 26 per cent had expressed a preference and had some degree of satisfaction with the outcome. The four per cent who had not felt satisfied all said that this was because the party in control of the council had exercised total power in determining the composition of committees. Nine per cent had expressed no preference.

The survey revealed gender differences in respect of committee membership, with significantly more women than men reporting membership of certain types of committee, such as equal opportunities (17 per cent against 7 per cent), education (17 per cent against 12 per cent), general purposes (20 per cent/11 per cent) and social work (14 per cent/11 per cent). More men than women reported membership of committees such as planning and economic development (61 per cent against 50 per cent), buildings/property (10 per cent/6 per cent) and commercial/Compulsory Competitive Tendering (10 per cent/5 per cent). Whilst it may be tempting to suggest that this to some extent reflects gender stereotyping, it is important to recognise that in relation to committees such as social work and education, which might traditionally have been seen as women's areas, the differences are not great. Given the evidence that many councillors were satisfied that their preferences for committees had been largely met, women and men councillors may have chosen these particular committees rather than having been pushed into them.

Constraints

It is a truism that during the period covered by this article local government was increasingly circumscribed by central government in what it could do and how it did it. Our respondents referred to 'the increasing frustration felt with local government because of increased government centralisation' and 'much of the satisfaction involved with improving services is no longer there on

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account of the continuing cutting of resources making the running of councils well nigh impossible'.

At the same time, demands on individual councillors in the form of workload had become heavier, and probably more than some could have expected when they first decided to stand for election: 'there is a lack of awareness of the workload of a councillor. You only discover the full extent of the job once you undertake it.' Many of those who had become full-time councillors cited the workload as the reason. As one commented: 'a councillor is now expected to know more than before. The reading matter increases weekly. It is an impossible task with continuing changes of government policy and legislation.'

We sought through our questionnaire to elicit information from respondents about the constraints that they experienced in their work as councillors. Whilst just over one-fifth claimed not to have experienced any, most mentioned two or three and some added comments about these at the end of the questionnaire. In general the most common responses fell into two broad categories - those to do with the effects on personal life, mainly family and employment, and those to do with council structure, council business and its conduct, such as the restrictions resulting from shortage of finance, the bureaucracy, and being a member of a minority group.

The most commonly referred to constraints were 'balancing family and council work' (29 per cent of respondents), 'balancing employment and council work' (29 per cent) and lack of time (20 per cent). Men were more likely to see the demands of employment as a problem (36 per cent compared with 21 per cent of women) whilst women were the more likely to identify family needs (20 per cent against 13 per cent of men). A survey by the Scottish Local Government Information Unit (SLGIU 1995) found that one in three women councillors expected to have to make special child care arrangements compared with only one in ten male councillors. One woman councillor who had decided not to stand again said that she deeply regretted 'being forced to make this choice ... the need for child care whilst undertaking council duties was in no way covered by allowances' and another stated that 'crèche facilities would greatly benefit women councillors (and staff) and encourage more women to stand for local government'.

Barron, Crawley and Wood (1987) have contrasted the public world of the councillor with their private lives and considered that, much of the research previously undertaken having focused on the public world, there is a need to explore the relationship between the pressures of council work and home life.

This is supported by the results of our survey and the findings of the SLGIU research referred to above.

Numbers mentioning constraints in our second category were smaller, although there were also many on the margins of this type. Being in a minority group and financial stringencies on authorities were each mentioned by 14 per cent of respondents. Men were more likely to refer to the minority issue (20 per cent to 13 per cent) and women to the financial one (16 per cent to 12 per cent).

There were some party differences in the way in which constraints were perceived: Labour councillors were much more likely to see 'other work' as a problem in their pursuit of council business, and less likely than others to see being part of a minority group as a difficulty, differences not surprising given their party's control of much of Scotland's local government. Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors were more likely than others to see 'balancing family needs' as a constraint and Conservatives were more likely to identify being part of a minority group and less likely to see restrictions on council finances as a problem.

Senior posts

As is well recognised, holding one of the senior posts in an authority or chairing a committee carries with it greater potential for exercising influence than is enjoyed by most rank and file councillors. This research enables us to report the findings of our analysis of their distribution using a gender perspective, concentrating on the years 1977, 1985 and 1993 to show trends.

Young and Rao's (1994) survey of councillors across Britain suggested that women were as likely as men to hold senior posts such as leader, chair or committee chair. Our research has produced rather different results. In Scotland, in both Regions and Districts, women have throughout the period held a disproportionately low number of such positions in relation to their presence on the councils. The difference is greatest in the Regions. In 1977 women, with 10 per cent of seats, occupied no 'senior posts' (convener, vice-convener, leader, etc.) and chaired only 3 per cent of committees. The equivalent figures for the Districts were 13 per cent of seats, 6 per cent of senior posts and 11 per cent of committee chairs. In 1985, despite the fact that women held 17 per cent of seats on both Regional and District councils, in the former they held no senior posts and 10 per cent of committee chairs, and in the latter 7 per cent of senior posts and 13 per cent of committee chairs.

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By 1993 the gaps had closed to some extent. The proportion of councillors who were women had risen in both types of authority to 21 per cent. They held 8 per cent of senior posts in the Regions and 19 per cent in the Districts; and occupied 17 per cent of committee chairs at both levels.

Analysis of the types of committees chaired by women shows that for the Regional councils in both 1977 and 1985 they were more likely to be in 'caring' areas, notably education and social work. By 1993 the range had broadened considerably, although education, social work, personnel and women's/equal opportunities remained significant.

For District councils there was a similar pattern in 1977, with environmental health, housing and leisure and recreation committees frequently being chaired by women, although a significant number were also chairing 'higher status' committees such as finance and general purposes. In 1985 the pattern was similar, although the range of committees chaired by women was beginning to widen. By 1993 the range was again much greater, although housing, leisure and equal opportunities still figured notably.

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