



# EXPLORING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL POLITICS

## Analysis of Observations of Milton Keynes Council Meetings

### Abstract

In 2015 Milton Keynes members of the Fawcett Society undertook an observational study of MK Council Meetings in order to explore whether there were gender differences and/or inequalities in the way Council business was seen to be carried out in public forums. This Report analyses the data collected and concludes that it shows significant gender differences in the participation of male and female councillors in MK Council meetings. We therefore recommend that: there should be more engagement by all political groups in Milton Keynes to encourage more women to enter local politics as councillors, all political groups need to offer support for women councillors once they are elected to ensure they are able to engage fully with all aspects of Council work and finally that there is a need for changes in meeting behaviour so that there is a better representation of all voices present.

# Exploring women's participation in local politics:

A Report on observations and analysis of Milton Keynes Council meetings July-December 2015 by MK Fawcett Society members

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The following Fawcett Members are the authors of this report: Ms. Gill Bryan, Ms. Margaret Gallagher, Dr. Gill Kirkup (Convenor), Professor Joan Swann, Ms. Sheila Thornton. We would like to thank the other members of the Milton Keynes Fawcett Group who read and commented on earlier drafts, and those local Milton Keynes women councillors who were kind enough to spare us their time to listen to early presentations of our findings and give us comments and feedback. Any errors remaining in this final report are ours alone.

If you are interested in the work of the Fawcett Society nationally, please ref to the website: <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/>

If you are interested in the activities of the local Milton Keynes Fawcett group, please email: [miltonkeynesfawcettgroup@gmail.com](mailto:miltonkeynesfawcettgroup@gmail.com)

## 2 BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

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The Fawcett Society nationally is concerned about the lack of engagement of women in politics. The news media and most campaigning groups have focused on the lack of women at a national level (see for example the 50:50 Parliament Campaign<sup>1</sup> and the Women's Equality party<sup>2</sup>). Fawcett is concerned about women's representation at the local level<sup>3</sup> and has encouraged members to explore the situation in their local areas and support women (voters, activists and elected representatives of all parties) to engage more. Engagement in local politics is seen as important both in its own right and because it can serve as the entry stage for individuals who later go into national politics. Members of Milton Keynes local Fawcett group decided to carry out independent research into the situation in MK Council. This report describes that work.

The available statistics about the proportions of local councillors who are women show a significant under-representation of women:

- Women make up only 32% of local councillors in England and 24% in Northern Ireland. Women make up 35% of councillors in MK (prior to the local elections of May 2016), so our overall representation is slightly better than the average.
- 12.3% of local authority leaders in England are women (2014), compared to 16.6% in 2004.
- Only 13% of elected mayors are women.
- Women's representation at a local level is stagnating with virtually no change in the level of female councillors in the last ten years<sup>4</sup>.
- All political parties have organisations that offer support/training to women who want to engage in political activity: Labour Women's Network, Conservative Women's Organisation, Liberal Democrat Women, Green Party Women.

Since we carried out this research the country has seen a campaign around the EU Referendum which was recognised by both politicians<sup>5</sup> and researchers<sup>6</sup> as dominated

<sup>1</sup> URL: <http://www.5050parliament.co.uk> accessed 07.08.2016

<sup>2</sup> URL: [http://www.womensequality.org.uk/equal\\_representation](http://www.womensequality.org.uk/equal_representation) accessed 07.08.2016

<sup>3</sup> URL: <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/policy-research/local-government-commission> accessed 07.08.2016

<sup>4</sup> URL: <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/policy-research/a-voice-in-local-government> accessed 07.08.2016

<sup>5</sup> See Harriet Harman quoted in The New Statesman 24.05.2016 URL:

<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2016/05/harriet-harman-warns-brexit-debate-has-been-dominated-men> accessed 07.08.2016

<sup>6</sup> See Loughborough University analysis on women's voice in the campaigns at <http://www.referendumanalysis.eu/eu-referendum-analysis-2016/section-3-news/brexit-mansplained-news-coverage-of-the-eu-referendum/> accessed 07.08.2016

by male voices. Yet one of the outcomes of the referendum has been that the UK now has its second female Prime Minister: Theresa May. It is too early to say what impact if any this will have overall on the dominance of male voices in politics and the media.

At the beginning of this research MK Fawcett members had little or no experience of what went on at MK Council and decided that the best place to start work on the topic was to carry out a piece of exploratory research by observing a number of different Milton Keynes Council meetings that were open to the public; record the interventions that were made by those present and analyse whether gender inequality could be seen in operation in this aspect of MK Council activity.

The objective of the study was not simply to describe what was observed but to use these observations to help members of the Council and others understand the nature of any gender differences in observed behaviours and use this to help inform plans to support women to engage in local politics – in particular as MK councillors. However, we feel that council meetings that are open to the public are also a forum where members of the public observe the behaviour of councillors; what is observed can then encourage or deter people from deciding if they want to put themselves forward for elected positions.

### 3 A DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Members of MK Fawcett group attended the following 15 meetings as observers between July and December 2015.

Table 1: MK Council meetings observed by MK Fawcett members

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
Full Council	15.07.15
Full Council	16.09.15
Full Council	21.10.15
Cabinet	14.09.15
Cabinet	30.11.15
Health and Well-being Board	10.09.15
Health and Adult Social Care Committee	06.10.15
Parishes Forum	17.09.15
Overview and Scrutiny: Transport Innovation Task & Finish Group	24.11.15
Procurement and Commissioning	17.11.15
Overview and Scrutiny: Homelessness Task and Finish Group	26.11.15
Corporate Parenting Panel	22.09.15
Corporate Parenting Panel	17.11.15
Overview and Scrutiny: Landscape Maintenance Task and Finish Group	15.11.15
Development Control Committee	3.12.15

Each person worked in the same way with a set of observational guidelines and a recording grid so that data collected by different individuals and at different meetings could be compared, aggregated and analyzed. Observers noted when individuals spoke, whether they were male or female, and if possible the identity of each speaker (so that councillors could be identified separately from officers and members of the public). Observers were not concerned with the content of discussion per se but noted the nature of interventions, e.g., scripted, repetitive, making reference to other speakers etc., in order to have a better record of individual interventions and the progress of

dialogue, and so that qualitative as well and quantitative analysis could be carried out on the data collected.

In order to keep this Report as concise as possible the individual reports from all the 15 meetings observed have been collated and produced as an Appendix. This can be obtained by emailing [miltonkeynesfawcettgoup@gmail.com](mailto:miltonkeynesfawcettgoup@gmail.com) .

At the beginning of the study we deliberately kept a low profile because we thought that if the purpose of our presence was known it could have an impact on people's behaviour. However, as time went on and councillors noticed that we were turning up and taking notes we were sometimes asked what we were doing. When asked we always explained as fully as we could who we were, what we were doing, and why.

At the end of our data collection period we contacted the three main political parties with representatives on MK Council and asked if we could meet with women councillors and other interested women from each party (e.g. prospective councillors) to discuss our data with them and get their comments and feedback before we produced a public report. Councillors are very busy people and it was hard to find a time to do this. However, we gave presentations to women members of MK Labour Party and MK Conservative Party in February and March and MK Liberal Democrats in May. Their feedback has been taken into account in this report.

We hope this report will prove useful to all local political parties in thinking about how to encourage and support more women to take up elected positions. We are very happy to present and discuss our study with any interested group.

This Report and its associated Appendix will also be available through The Fawcett Society.

## 4 SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

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There were two main areas of Council business where we observed major gender differences: distribution of roles and activities; and participation in meetings.

### 4.1 DISTRIBUTION OF ROLES AND ACTIVITIES

- At the time of our study women were roughly one third of MK councillors. However, they were not evenly distributed across all Council committees.
- Women councillors were over-represented in committees in traditionally 'female' areas: corporate parenting, health and adult social care, health and well-being. They were under-represented in traditionally 'male' areas: audit and budget scrutiny. (This is discussed in more detail below.)
- It has been argued (e.g. Rustin, *Guardian* 07.02.16<sup>7</sup>) that experience of finance and planning helps women to rise to the most senior roles in local government.

In February 2016 this was the gender composition of MK Council's main committees. Table 2 (below) shows the distribution of male and female councillors across all Committees (Feb 2016)

There are three main issues with respect to the distribution of membership of committees: first whether overall male and female councillors are proportionately represented in committees. At the time of this study MK Council was composed of 20 women councillors and 37 men. Women councillors therefore made up 35% of the body of the Council and men 65%. We would therefore look for parity in participation in any Council activity if women and men were represented proportionally 35:65. That is the 'parity measure' we have used throughout this report. To have used a 50:50 parity measure would have meant expecting individual women councillors to work 'harder' than their male colleagues by taking on more committee work than men.

Individual committees have small numbers of councillors on them so it would be inappropriate to use a parity measure for membership of each committee. We have therefore analyzed patterns in overall committee membership, and in this case women councillors were proportionately represented. Out of the 125 members of the 14 main committees, 40 (32%) were women.

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<sup>7</sup> URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/feb/03/where-women-council-leaders-northern-powerhouse-english-regions> accessed 07.08.2016

Table 2: Gender Composition of MK Council Committees (February 2016)

Committees	Membership		Chair	Vice chair(s)
	F	M		
<b>1. Main Committees</b>				
Audit Committee	1	7	M	2 M
Budget Scrutiny Committee	2	9	M	1 F, 1 M
Children & Young People Committee	3	7	M	1 F, 1 M
Constitution Committee	0	3	M	
Corporate Parenting Panel	5	3	M	1 F, 1 M
Development Control Committee	3	9	M	2 M
Executive Scrutiny Committee	3	7	M	1 F, 1 M
Health & Adult Social Care Committee	5	5	F	1 F, 1 M
Health & Wellbeing Board <sup>1</sup>	4	3	M	1 F
Housing Appeals Sub-committee <sup>2</sup>	1	4	Elected	
Joint Negotiating Committee	3	4	F	1 F, 1 M
Licensing & Regulatory Committees <sup>3</sup>	5	9	F	2 M
Scrutiny Management Committee	2	8	M	2 M
Standards Committee <sup>4</sup>	3	7	F	2 M
<b>2. Overview &amp; Scrutiny Groups</b>				
Housing Allocation Scheme T & F Group	3	3	M	
Access to GP Services in MK Review Group	3	0	F	2 F
Homelessness T & F Group	3	2	Vacant	
Landscaping Maintenance T & F Group	2	4	M	
Transport Innovation T & F Group	1	5	M	
<b>3. Labour Group/Executive Committees</b>				
Cabinet <sup>5</sup>	2	6	M	
Procurement and Commissioning <sup>6</sup>	2	6	M/F	
<b>4. Council</b>				
Council <sup>7</sup>	20	37	M	1 M

## Table 2 notes

Figures for chairs, and vice chairs where applicable, are included in overall committee membership and also given separately. Not all committees have vice chairs listed on the Council web site.

1. The Health and Wellbeing board has a vice chair who is appointed, not a councillor.
2. In the Housing Appeals Sub-committee a chair is elected at each meeting. Minutes are not published, so it is not clear who chaired particular meetings.
3. There are also Licensing and Regulatory Sub-committees, with the same composition.
4. There is also a Standards Sub-committee, with the same composition.
5. At the time of our observations the Council was led by Labour. Cabinet membership was formed from the Labour Group only. All meetings were chaired by the Leader.
6. Labour Group only. The committee requires the presence of any three councillors. Of the 13 meetings held between June 2015 and January 2016, eight were chaired by men and five by women.
7. Council is chaired by the Mayor, with the Deputy Mayor as vice-chair.

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Overall, women were very well represented on the Overview & Scrutiny Groups, or perhaps over-represented. Out of 26 members, nearly half (12) were women. Yet **only one of the five was chaired by a woman** – the Access to GP Services Review Group. This is a small all-female group (3 councillors, 2 appointees), which met three times between May 2015 and February 2016.

Looking at the participation of individual councillors, there were some patterns. In general, members of the Cabinet were rarely members of committees/groups (apart from the Council of course). The Leaders of the political groups, male and female, were also less likely to be members of committees/groups than other councillors.

Excluding Cabinet, men were slightly more active on the main committees than women – the average membership count was 2.6 for men, and 2.2 for women. When Task and Finish groups are included, the averages were 3.0 for men and 2.8 for women.

Some councillors appear to be much more active than others in terms of committee membership (though of course membership of a committee or group does not equate with the quality or quantity of contribution). Without a lot of further research, we can't tell how often individual committee members attend meetings, or how much they contribute to the committee's work. At the time of our research, the most active of all the MK councillors (women and men) with respect to membership of committee and roles in them was a woman: she was a member of five committees and two groups, and chaired the Licensing and Regulatory Committees.

At the other end of the spectrum (again excluding Cabinet), there was one female councillor and two males who were members of only one committee (and no groups). In the case of one of the males, this was his first year on the Council. The other two councillors were first elected a decade ago. So committee membership is not simply related to longevity in the role of councillor.

**Looking at the types of committee /group to which women and men belong, it's clear that gender-based selection is at work.** The most obvious disparities are in the 'social' and the 'budget/finance' areas. But as can be seen from the above listings, the picture is by no means uniform. For instance, one female councillor was a member of four committees, only one of which (Children & Young People) would come into the traditional definition of the 'women's area'. Nor does the selection always go in the expected gender direction. For example, one male councillor was a member of 3 committees - Children & Young People, which he chaired; Corporate Parenting; and Health and Well-Being (all in the so-called 'women's area'). Presumably people end up on committees that lie within their sphere of interest, and to which they feel they can contribute skills/experience and there is often a gender dimension to this.

Why is it important that female councillors should be well represented on the 'financial' as opposed to (or at least as well as) the 'social' ('women's issues') committees? The obvious answer is: so as to achieve a gender-balanced perspective on all issues that come before the Council. But sometimes these two types of committee are talked about in a way that assumes differences in status or importance – for example, Rustin (see above) urged women to 'seek finance and regeneration experience and resist being pigeonholed in social care or children's service portfolios' so as to 'plot a course to the top'. However, in Milton Keynes this does not seem to be borne out in the past histories of MK Council Leaders.

Another way in which councillors get experience that leads to more senior positions is to chair committees and groups. From the documents available, we could not tell who chaired the Housing Appeals Committee. There was only one listed female member. Of the remaining 13 main committees, four were chaired by women – just under a third, which is our parity measure.

One male councillor chairs two committees (including the 3-person Constitution Committee). So altogether 8 of the 36 male councillors (mayor excluded) were committee Chairs (22%), compared with 4 of the 20 female councillors (20%). There was therefore an overall balance in the percentage of male and female councillors who held chairing roles.

One of the female-chaired committees (Health & Adult Social Care) had equal numbers of female and male members. The Joint Negotiating Committee was also fairly balanced. The other committees chaired by women were concerned with regulation, licensing and standards. While **women were under-represented as members of financially-focused committees they were not under-represented as Chairs of such committees.**

We have not done any analysis of our data by political party. We have treated all councillors as members of Council rather than of a party. However, we hope this data will spur each party to look at how it allocates roles to committees and check that gender stereotyping is not taking place – both through appointments by Leaders and through self-selection by gendered areas of interest.

## 4.2 PARTICIPATION IN MEETINGS

- We were pleased to report that we never saw explicit gender discrimination, disrespect or attempts to curtail women speakers. We had been led to expect this by others who had observed meetings of councils in other areas.
- We observed a number of occasions when women's work (by councillors, activists, and officers) was praised by male speakers.
- However, in all our data across a variety of meetings we observed a consistent under-participation of women councillors
  - as speakers (in proportion to their numbers present i.e. using our parity measure)
  - in the number of interventions they made compared with male speakers (using our parity measure)

A good illustration of this comes from the three Full Council meetings we observed. The pattern of participation in each meeting was the same: we take the data from the Full Council meeting of 21.10.2015 as an example. Pie charts 1, 2, and 3, (below) illustrate women's under-participation.

Women councillors made up 33% of those councillors present in the meeting (Chart 1).

But women councillors made only 19% of all interventions by councillors (Chart 2).

We also noted when officers or members of the public spoke. If we add these together and count how many women overall spoke in the meeting, women made only 20% of all the formal interventions in the chamber (Chart 3).

Although roughly equal proportions of male and female councillors did not speak at all (8 women - 50% of all female councillors present, and 16 men - 48% of all male councillors present) male councillors were much more likely to make more than one intervention.

Chart 1 Council meeting 21.10.15: Councillors present by gender

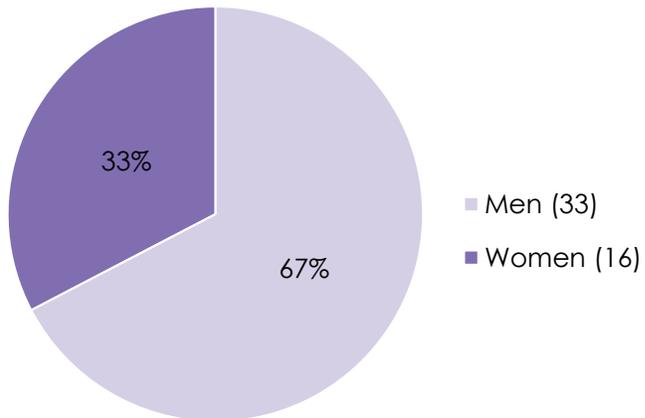


Chart 2 Council meeting 21.10.15: Councillor interventions by gender

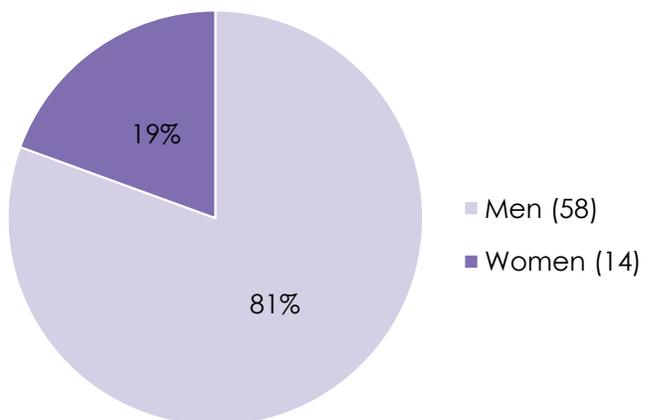
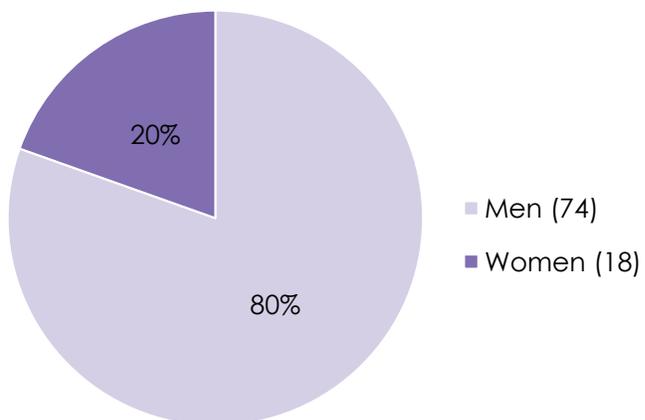


Chart 3 Council meeting 21.10.15: All interventions by gender



For comparison we have mapped the interventions by male and female councillors for the three Full Council meetings we attended in Charts 4, 5, and 6 (below). These charts show the number of interventions made by individual councillors on the horizontal axis and the number of councillors making that number of interventions on the vertical axis. The colours show the gender of councillors.

Chart 4 Council meeting 21.10.15: Individual interventions by gender

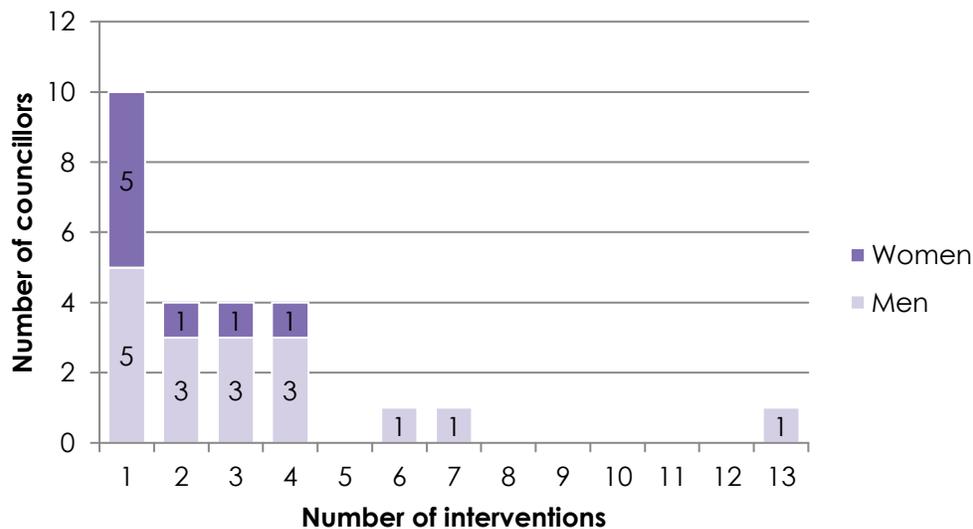


Chart 4 shows the interventions made by councillors at the meeting on 21.10.2015. From the left the tallest column shows that most councillors made only one intervention: in this meeting five male councillors and five female councillors made only one intervention. This was the only column with equal numbers of men and women. For all the other columns, showing multiple interventions, male councillors always spoke more frequently. The extreme column is that of the Leader.

In Chart 5 the distribution overall was slightly different but the pattern was the same. Chart 6 shows the same data but for the meeting on 16.09.2015. The distribution of the number of interventions is wider, with the Leader making 13, but for all the other columns women councillors were much less likely to make interventions.

Chart 5 Council meeting 17.07.15: Individual interventions by gender

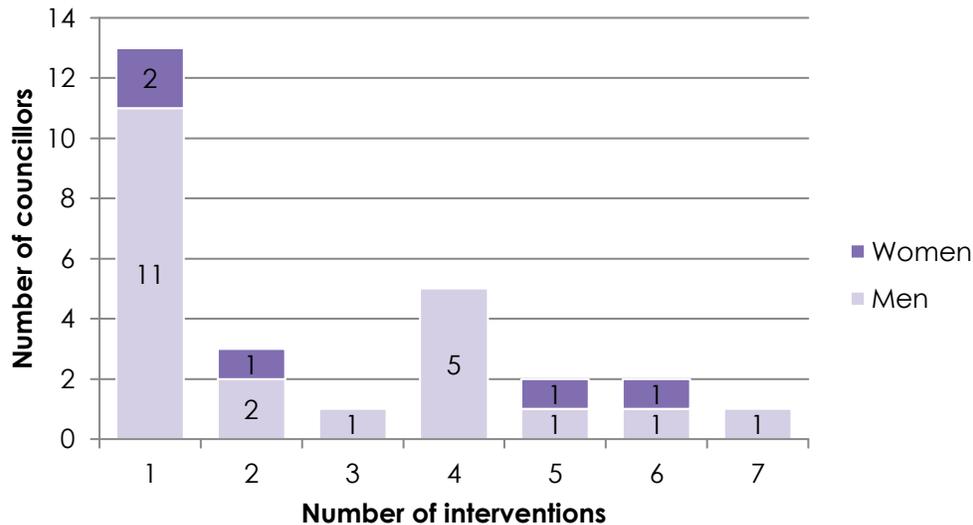
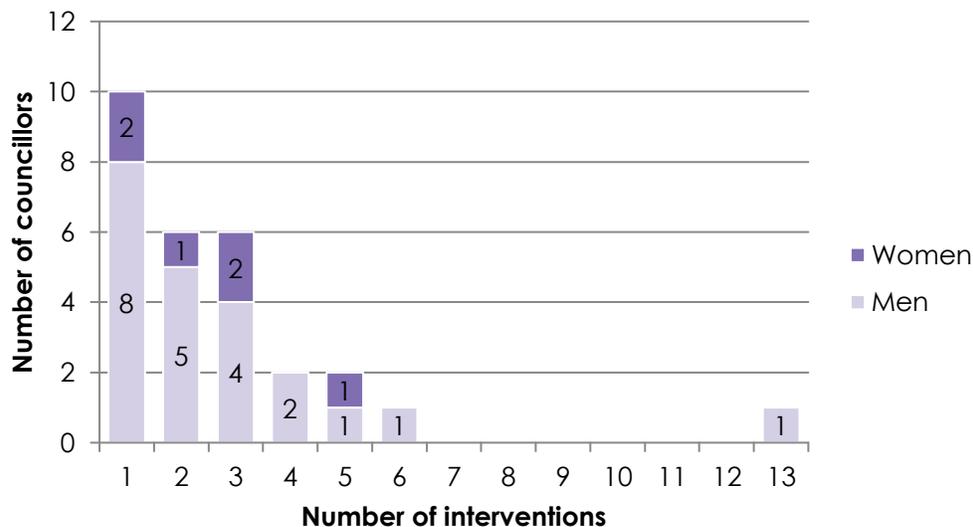


Chart 6 Council meeting 16.9.15: Individual interventions by gender



There were gender differences in the quality as well as the quantity of interventions, which combined to give the audience a sense of the male voice and presence dominating the chamber. Both the Leader and the Chair were male. Their roles entailed them in speaking more frequently than other members. Interventions from the Chair have not been counted in the above bar charts but if they were the gender disparity would look even greater. However, the public gallery and public visitors hear all interventions, and the dominant voices both in number and in positions of authority are male. This would lead to a presumption that women are not involved with Council decision making on a par with men.

Women often joined discussions late in the meeting. On 21.10.2015 we recorded the first female councillor speaking at 8.40 pm. The first female councillor to present an item was at 9.30 pm. By this time many members of the public had left the chamber.

Male councillors often engaged in friendly, cross-party 'banter' (observed across three Full Council meetings). This gives a strong sense of 'ownership' of the debate and shared history. We never observed this among women. Male councillors often read prepared 'speeches' that contained party political statements and did not always seem to contribute directly to the debate. We never observed women doing this.

Women seemed sometimes more hesitant or diffident in their interventions (e.g. prefacing an intervention with statements such as: 'I apologise if I've not read the papers correctly'; 'I don't understand - maybe I'm missing something'; 'I'm just learning').

The other meetings we observed were smaller and less formally structured than the full Council, but we saw similar patterns of gendered behaviour. Sometimes this was more extreme. For example, the Procurement and Commissioning Committee (17.11.15) had no women councillors – and six male councillors - present. There were also seven Council officers, four of whom were women. The discussions were professional and probing, but the presence of women and their contribution came from professional officers not from councillors.

With women so thinly spread across committees, their absence from a meeting can mean there is no female voice at all. For example, at the Transport Innovation Task & Finish Group (24.11.15) there were four councillors, two officers and one observer – all of whom were men.

Even when women were in the majority in the meeting men dominated the debate. The Health and Adult Social Care Committee (6.10.15) had an equal number of male and female councillors present. Women were in the majority among officers and members of the public. However, the male councillors spoke more often and at length, monopolising the discussion.

The Appendix to this report contains notes from all the meetings we attended. More instances of gendered behaviour are described there, however the above examples we feel are enough to support the argument that, for whatever reason, women councillors in Milton Keynes are not participating equally with men in Council committees and groups.

## 5 INITIAL REPORTING TO FEMALE COUNCILLORS

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At the time of writing this report we had met with and presented our findings to small numbers of women from the three main local political party groups. Our findings were well received, although women were shocked to see the actual observational data. They knew they made fewer interventions than their male colleagues but had been unaware of the scale of this difference numerically or of some of the qualitative differences in intervention patterns.

There was an argument made that women councillors were more active in their Wards, out and about doing Ward business, and that sometimes they felt that public meetings were something to be dealt with quickly since the actual work was being done elsewhere. This may be the case but the danger of women councillors working hard outside public meetings but keeping a low profile in them is that they do not receive an appropriate share of the publicity and credit for their work. At every Full Council meeting there was at least one local news reporter. It is through locally reported news that most people in Milton Keynes come to know who their councillors are and what they do.

There was also some discussion about lack of confidence to speak. New councillors in particular felt unsure about speaking, and were worried about saying something that other members of their party might find inappropriate. A few spoke of being intimidated by some male councillors who might ignore, or talk over them in meetings. There was also an assertion by some female councillors that the men wasted time 'grand-standing' and they wanted to press on speedily with business and saw no point in making additional interventions.

In the next section we make some recommendations, which we hope might address some of the gender inequality issues described in this report.

## 6 RECOMMENDATIONS

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We are hesitant to make detailed recommendations because we have only observed a particular aspect of MK Council activity, and most of us remain unfamiliar with other areas of Council work and of the pressures that councillors work under. However, we believe that the situation we have described needs to be addressed. If it continues, female councillors will be unable to participate as fully as men in Council activity, and they will continue to be seen by the MK public as not participating as fully as men. This situation will not provide an encouraging model for other women who might be considering becoming locally active. Our recommendations apply to all political parties, as the groups that councillors belong to and the groups that can offer support and mentoring as well as the ability to change how things are done at party level: e.g. who is given roles and responsibilities.

We would very much welcome the opportunity to discuss and develop our recommendations further with MK Council members and local political parties.

### **Recommendations.**

- 1. LOCAL POLITICAL PARTIES SHOULD EXAMINE WHO IS GIVEN ROLES ON COUNCIL COMMITTEES AND GROUPS AND LOOK FOR WAYS TO GIVE POSITIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY TO MORE WOMEN.**
- 2. LOCAL POLITICAL PARTIES SHOULD OFFER ADDITIONAL SUPPORT TO WOMEN WHO ARE NEW MEMBERS OF COMMITTEES AND GROUPS, TO IMPROVE THEIR CONFIDENCE AND ABILITY TO CARRY OUT THEIR ROLES.**
- 3. SOME MALE COUNCILLORS SHOULD REVIEW THEIR BEHAVIOUR IN PUBLIC MEETINGS IN ORDER TO ENSURE THAT THEY ARE MAKING SPACE FOR LESS EXPERIENCED AND LESS CONFIDENT COLLEAGUES: MEN AS WELL AS WOMEN**
- 4. FEMALE COUNCILLORS SHOULD MAKE GREATER EFFORTS TO MAKE INTERVENTIONS IN DISCUSSION IN PUBLIC MEETINGS; THEIR CONSTITUENTS WOULD NOT EXPECT THEM TO ENGAGE LESS ON THEIR BEHALF THAN A MALE COUNCILLOR.**
- 5. FEMALE COUNCILLORS SHOULD TAKE THE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY THEIR POLITICAL PARTIES TO BUILD THEIR CONFIDENCE AND DEVELOP THEIR SKILLS.**
- 6. LOCAL POLITICAL GROUPS SHOULD CONSIDER STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE MORE WOMEN TO STAND FOR ELECTION AS COUNCILLORS.**

## **MK Fawcett members would be available to:**

facilitate a workshop in AUTUMN/WINTER 2016/7, with local councillors and local political activists with the aim of accelerating an increase in women's involvement in politics in Milton Keynes.

The objectives of the workshop to be:

1. to share international research on strategies for engaging women in political activity
2. to devise an Action Plan of practical ways to take forward the learning from this local research as well as international and national recommendations on female empowerment, and in particular to concentrate on the 'audience' of younger people within schools and colleges
3. to agree the next steps and responsibilities for embedding any Action Plan and monitoring its progress

**SEPTEMBER 2016**

