

# Mums in Politics

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# ***Acknowledgements***

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As Fabian women we know we stand on the shoulders of giants - with far too many women to mention having paved the way for us. We pay special tribute to Baroness Helene Hayman, who in 1976 became the first sitting MP to have a baby and to Stella Creasy, the first MP to hire a locum while pregnant in 2019.

Thank you to all the women who appear in this booklet, for sharing their personal stories. This project would simply not have been possible without you.

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Lastly, for every woman who has ever been told pregnancy and motherhood are a time to hang up your boots and leave politics to others: thank you for not listening and for persisting.

In sisterhood, solidarity and service,

Cllr Kelly Grehan, Cllr Anya Sizer, Cllr Mumtaz Khan and Cllr Sara Hyde

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# Foreword

By Harriet Harman MP

***The misery of miscarriage, the roller coaster of IVF, the struggle with breastfeeding, the unpredictability of the “due date”, the commitment to your work, the challenge of childcare - all these are the daily experience of millions of mums in Britain today. That is why we need to have, in politics, women who have personal experience of motherhood. Government and council policies have a big impact on mothers, whether it’s housing or policing, childcare or maternity services. Yet our decision-making remains male-dominated. Too often there are still no women “in the room” when key decisions are made or the women who are there are not listened to by the male hierarchy. Public policy doesn’t work properly if it’s made by people who don’t truly understand the issue. So, mums-to-be and mums of children of all ages are necessary for our politics. We are not doing mums a favour by including them in politics, their participation is a democratic imperative.***

**Public policy doesn’t work properly if it’s made by people who don’t truly understand the issue.**

The legitimacy of our democracy is always being tested. People understandably forever doubt whether politicians understand their lives. Our democracy needs mums in politics so that women in the country raising their

children can see that in their councils and in their parliament there are women who truly do understand their lives because they share their experiences.

**We are not doing mums a favour by including them in politics, their participation is a democratic imperative.**

The underrepresentation of mums in politics is not evidence of mums not wanting to be in politics or not being able to. It’s the result of the persistent discrimination that writes off a mother as too busy or too distracted to be able to do her work properly. The same judgment is never applied to fathers. We’ll know we’ve ended that discrimination and got properly representative politics when the number of mums in politics reflects the number of mums in the country. And when men take equal responsibility for caring for children, and older relatives, the lives of all women including women in politics will be dramatically transformed.

We’ve made huge progress in ensuring that mothers are in there sharing power and decision-making. But we still have a long way to go.



# ***This House Needs to Change***

By The Rt Hon. Jacqui Smith

## ***The Government Chief Whip***

gulped as I explained to him that I was three months pregnant and wondered what arrangements might be in place for the following June when I was due to give birth. The answer was not a lot. The year was 1997 so our big majority meant that there could be some flexibility in my ability to miss votes and stay at home, but that was the extent of any maternity leave.

Given that it has taken more than twenty years since then for Parliament to recognise the needs of new mothers with maternity leave and proxy voting provision, it would be very easy to focus this piece on the difficulties combining parenthood with a political career.



However I want to focus on the positive impact that having mums as active front line politicians has - it makes our politics better and makes our decision making more relevant. Learning from my experience I made sure that the first words that left my lips when someone came to see me as Chief

Whip to tell me that they were pregnant were 'that's brilliant!'

But before I celebrate our progress, let's just reflect on how difficult it has been for mothers to play an active role in politics. My Mum is my political inspiration – she was a councillor and stood for selection as a parliamentary candidate.

**It is clear that it is mothers who are most under-represented in front-line politics, particularly Parliament.**

But with three small children, she had to accept that it would be impossible to combine motherhood and being an MP. We didn't have a nanny and my father was the breadwinner as a headteacher.

Not enough has changed since then. In 2013, a survey of MPs found that 45% of women MPs had no children, whereas only 28% of men did. On average, male MPs have more and younger children than women MPs do. So whilst both parents face barriers to political representation, it is clear that it is mothers who are most under-represented in front-line politics, particularly Parliament.

Of course, there is a crucial and self-reinforcing link between mothers' role in representative politics and their impact on policy. I discovered I was pregnant with my second son as Gordon Brown was announcing to the 1997 Labour Party

conference that Labour would introduce a national childcare strategy. It wasn't a coincidence that important policies like these followed the election of a record number of Labour women, and that mothers such as Harriet Harman, Tessa Jowell and Margaret Hodge had key roles in policy development and delivery. More mums on the political frontline makes it easier for other mums to follow. And it makes our policy-making richer.

As an Education Minister, I was able to bring my understanding of my own children's education to my portfolio. Anybody can be able to get a good understanding of education policy, but being able to add in the experience of the school gates and talking to my children's teachers gave new perspectives to policy-making.

**If you care about having another Labour government, you need to support mums being part of it.**

My next job was in the Department of Health. For the first time, the 1997 Labour Government recognised the specific health and care needs of children. I vividly remember going back to tweak the provisions of the National Care Framework for Children after a trip to hospital with my own child.

Later, there were some lively and eye-opening discussions with my teenage sons that definitely fed into the alcohol and drugs policy that we worked on whilst I was Home Secretary.

Coming up to the present, I'm utterly convinced that the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic would have been less flawed with more women involved in high level decision-making.

They would have surely recognised the unequal way that lockdowns, namely home schooling, and the removal of caring support from disabled children, would disproportionately impact mothers and the most vulnerable children. A Mum in the room might have suggested to the Prime Minister that telling people to go back to work the next day might be tricky for those with childcare responsibilities.

Despite the clear and obvious benefits of having mums on the frontline of our politics, there's still a long way to go. Interviewing Labour women MPs first elected in 1997 and Conservative men and women MPs in the 2005 Parliament, gender and representation expert Professor Sarah Childs found that the House of Commons is still inhospitable to MPs with family responsibilities. Parliamentary hours; living and working in two locations; the rise of constituency workloads; and work/life balance all work against mothers being willing and able to work as MPs.

Parliament needs to look and feel like the country it represents and Labour will be more effective and electable with policies based on the direct experiences of those we need to vote for us. If you care about having another Labour government, you need to support mums being part of it.

**The Right Honourable Jacqui Smith was the Member of Parliament for Redditch from 1997 until 2010, the first female Home Secretary and the third woman to hold one of the Great Offices of State, after Margaret Thatcher and Margaret Beckett. She is a mother of two.**

# ***The Mother of Parliaments Should Work For Mothers***

By Ellie Reeves MP

## ***Whilst great progress has been made***

in getting more women into Parliament, and I am proud that the Labour Party now has 50% gender parity, as a workplace Parliament still has a long way to go to make it a family-friendly environment.

Before my election in 2017, I was an employment rights lawyer specialising in maternity discrimination. Upon entering Parliament, I found it striking that our political system remained vastly outdated compared to many other workplaces. Since then, I have tried to campaign for change, not just for those of us already in Parliament, but so that other women are not discouraged from standing due to the challenges of balancing being an MP and being a mum.



Some progress has been made - for example converting a bar into an on-site nursery in 2010 in the face of a great deal of opposition. Without it, I am certain that it would have been almost impossible to put myself forward for election as an MP. In 2019, proxy voting for new parents was introduced, something that enabled me to have a second child.

Whilst it is remarkable that it took until 2019 to introduce a form of maternity leave for parliamentarians, it doesn't go far enough. There is still a lot more to do. Under the scheme, new mums are only entitled to a proxy for six months, starting on or before their due date.

**Proxy voting needs to be extended to a full year to reflect the workplace standard in wider society.**

So if your baby comes late, it doesn't even cover 6 months at home with your baby. Following a recent review, the scheme has been amended so that expectant mothers can take an additional two weeks before their due date. I welcomed this having been forced to struggle through the voting lobbies in the later stages of pregnancy to try and maximise my time away from Parliament after my baby was born. So although these improvements are welcome, given that Statutory Maternity Leave outside of Parliament is 52 weeks, it is clear that this is only incremental reform.

Proxy voting needs to be extended to a full year to reflect the workplace standard in wider society. Whilst not all MP parents may wish to take a proxy for this long, it is important to allow MP parents the ability to dedicate the time they feel appropriate according to the needs of their baby and family life.

Or, if the length of maternity provisions continues to be considerably worse for MPs than in other professions, we risk continuing to deter many women from standing for Parliament in the first place.

In my case, the day after I activated my proxy and went on maternity leave a General Election was called. I found myself back at work, nine months pregnant, planning my general election campaign and losing a significant chunk of my maternity leave.

Of course, contending with a snap election is to some extent the nature of politics, which is inherently unpredictable, and you can't change this. But we can change Parliament's sitting hours which remain some of the longest in the world, and very unsocial for many parents.

caring responsibilities. Given the clerks who record parliamentarians' votes already do so on an iPad, this doesn't seem like too far a stretch. We should also look at reforming the parliamentary timetable so that late-night votes can be deferred to the next day so they can take place at a more accessible time.

I absolutely love my job and I would recommend it to anyone who wants to serve and represent their community. But if we are serious about making Parliament more accessible, representative and diverse, we need to urgently review our practices and procedures so that we are a modern and family friendly workplace. Parliament makes the laws and we should be leading by example rather than falling so far behind.

**If we are serious about making Parliament more accessible, representative and diverse, we need to urgently review our practices and procedures so that we are a modern and family friendly workplace.**

Votes tend to come late in the evening or night-time, precisely at the time when many mothers will wish to be at home with their children. Each vote can take around 20 minutes, if we have eight or nine in a row this means 650 MPs are left walking around in circles through the voting lobbies over and over for hours on end. That is not an efficient use of anyone's time. I believe a digital system would work much more effectively. MPs could register their votes instantly using electronic booths in the voting lobbies. Not only would this speed up the time it takes to vote, but it would make a huge difference to those with

For me, the steps we need to take are clear, practical and not complex. Increase the proxy voting period for new mums to 12 months, digitise the voting process to speed it up and reform the parliamentary timetable so there are fewer unnecessary late-night commitments. The 'mother' of parliaments should work for the mothers working in it.

**Ellie Reeves is MP for Lewisham West and Penge and Shadow Solicitor General. She is a mum of two.**



# ***Our Daughters Deserve Better***

By Tulip Siddiq MP

## ***Our local GP recently asked***

my four-year-old daughter what she wanted to be when she grew up. She answered with a flourish 'I want to be a politician like mummy'. I winced inwardly but tried to maintain a smile through clenched teeth. When I retold the story to one of my friends, they asked why I wasn't thrilled with the idea of my daughter following in my footsteps.



I thought long and hard before responding. It's the same way I feel when I go into local schools to speak to young, impressionable women who ask me what politics is really like. I'm caught between a rock and a hard place - on one hand I want to encourage more women into politics. We're still dismally underrepresented in the UK Parliament, where just 34% of MPs are women. Research by the Fawcett Society in 2019 showed that just 35% of councillors are women, and we have only one female Metro Mayor.

On the other hand, I wonder if politics really will change by the time my daughter is old enough to vote. I joined the Labour Party

as a teenager and I interned for Oona King, the former Labour MP while I was studying at University. At that time, the rules for MPs when it came to family life were terrible. There was no proxy voting, no electronic voting, no parental leave and no creche facilities in Parliament. I distinctly remember seeing a Labour MP coming into work right after giving birth because of a knife-edge vote that we were in danger of losing. She was clutching her stomach and said she was told told she "had to come in because we could lose this by one vote but my stitches haven't dried yet." It made an impression on me but in a distant, peripheral way.

**Just 34% of MPs are women. Research by the Fawcett Society in 2019 showed that just 35% of councillors are women, and we have only one female Metro Mayor.**

I knew I wanted children but I felt confident that things would change by the time I got elected for my home seat of Hampstead and Kilburn in 2015 and I became pregnant a year later. After telling my office staff that I would probably need to be away for a bit from the office, I rang IPSA (The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority) to ask for their advice. The staff member who answered seemed shocked to hear me ask about maternity leave. I was told in no uncertain terms that there was no maternity leave in Parliament. When I questioned why, I was told in vague terms

that most women who came into Parliament weren't of childbearing age, like my predecessor Glenda Jackson who became an MP in her mid-50s. I was fairly astounded by this response and decided to speak to a few women MPs in the House. After several conversations which seemed to reach no clear conclusion, I tabled an Early Day Motion (EDM) to allow MPs on maternity or paternity leave to vote by proxy with the assistance of technology and asked MPs to sign it.

Imagine my amazement when I got taken aside in the voting lobbies by a senior MP from my party, who proceeded to shout at me about the EDM I had tabled. He told me it wasn't "party policy" and that it would never be. He said I shouldn't have tabled such a drastic "policy change." I asked why it wasn't Labour policy, and what the reasons were for not wanting to modernise Parliament and drag it into the 21st century. His only response was that this was the foundation on which democracy was built, that it would never change and that I should stop campaigning on this contentious issue.

**It seems that the pace of change is slower in Parliament than everywhere else, and these important issues keep coming up time and time again.**

By the time I actually had my daughter, I still hadn't achieved my goal. I felt under pressure to return to Parliament six weeks after giving birth despite having a fairly traumatic emergency C-section. My body hadn't recovered, I was still breastfeeding and, as a result, I developed mastitis and got very sick. I distinctly remember one part of my birthing experience. I was on the hospital bed and received a message from one of my staff that there was an urgent piece of casework that required my attention - a constituent of mine had been imprisoned in Iran while on holiday and was in solitary confinement. He was extremely apologetic

about contacting me, but it was an emergency for my constituent Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and he had no other choice. There was no-one covering my role. Years later, my colleague Stella Creasy MP admirably managed to get a locum MP to replace her while on maternity leave, but it still hasn't become official policy to provide a locum at the time of writing this.

One of the worst things was that while I had been giving birth and staying at home for six weeks on doctor's orders, my voting record merely said 'absent'. It didn't explain why I hadn't turned up for work and it looked like I hadn't been representing the constituents of Hampstead and Kilburn because I couldn't be bothered, not because I physically hadn't been able to.

In 2018, I got pregnant with my second child in the midst of the Brexit negotiations. As incredible as this sounds, as soon as I found out I was pregnant I started calculating whether my birth might clash with any crucial votes, because I knew there was no option of casting my vote without physically being in Parliament. As it turned out, the date of my C-section did clash with an extremely important Brexit vote. I made the decision to delay the birth of my child because I thought it was worth bringing my son into the world a day later if it meant we had a closer relationship with the EU in the future. It was a big decision, but I knew it was the right thing to do. It's a pity I had to do it, but I really felt I had no choice. Just before the vote, Jo Swinson's pairing arrangement had been broken by a Conservative MP and I really didn't feel I could take that chance of that happening to me. Some of the Brexit votes had really gone down to the wire, and I knew I wouldn't forgive myself if we lost because I hadn't been there.

Shortly afterwards, proxy voting was introduced and I am proud of the part that

little Raphael and I played in ensuring that archaic rule was scrapped.

It seems that the pace of change is slower in Parliament than everywhere else, and these important issues keep coming up time and time again. Earlier this year, a Maternity Bill was rushed through Parliament to allow the Attorney General to take maternity leave. While I welcome any progress on equality, it's unfathomable that this only applies to Secretaries of State and 'normal' MPs will still have no automatic right to maternity cover. In practice, it means that high-ranking Ministers will be allowed to take maternity leave but not those in lower ranks.

I guess if my daughter really wants to be an MP and have children when she's older, I'll have to tell her that she'll need to be a Cabinet Minister!

**Tulip Siddiq is Labour MP for Hampstead and Kilburn and Shadow Minister for Children and Early Years. She is a mother of two.**



# ***Balancing Being a New Mum And a New MP***

**By Alex Davies – Jones MP**

## ***We've all heard the narrative***

around women's underrepresentation in politics and the rumours of an 'Old Boys' club. Sadly, even in 2021, these rumours of a Parliament where sexism and misogyny is commonplace are still accurate, at least to a certain degree. As a young woman who found herself in politics in the most unusual circumstances (let's not dwell on the snap 2019 General Election!), it has at times been difficult to reconcile motherhood and my role as a Member of Parliament.



The first train journey to Westminster after being elected in 2019 is one of my own stand-out moments. It's hard to put into words the combination of excitement and nervousness I felt when making my way to Parliament or the first time as the MP

representing the place I was born in, love, and still live now.

The House staff were genuinely brilliant; so warm and welcoming when internally I was a nervous wreck. Sadly the same can't be said for colleagues across the House. I've been lucky as I've never directly (at least not to my face!) experienced sexism but I have heard some horror stories, and it cannot – and should not – be allowed to continue. What I have experienced however, are the unique challenges of being a new mother. From the start, there were situations that I never imagined I'd find myself in. I spent the first month or so of commuting from Wales and living in various hotels across London.

**Sadly, even in 2021, these rumours of a Parliament where sexism and misogyny is commonplace are still accurate, at least to a certain degree.**

The nights I spent with my barely eight-month-old son Sulley were undeniably tricky. For example, I'd never considered the challenges around breastfeeding on the move. I certainly hadn't thought about how I'd refrigerate my milk in a hotel with no mini bar (a travesty on more than one account!). I'd also never thought about how I'd go about feeding my child while at work, as a pre-coronavirus world obviously required MPs to be physically present in the Chamber to raise any contributions.



I remember early on feeling torn between not wanting to disappoint the people who had put their trust and faith in me to represent them in Westminster by missing a debate versus the needs of my child which were (and still are!) unpredictable at best. I was however extremely fortunate that in my first few weeks I managed to meet with the Speaker of the House of Commons to outline my concerns as a new mother. Our conversation was frank. We acknowledged that the Commons needs to modernise, but I was pleased when it was confirmed that, should mothers need to, we would be supported when breastfeeding in the Chamber.

I also recognise that we have made progress in other areas in Westminster over the years too. For example, the on-site nursery makes it easier for parents to balance their commitments – and the mother in me takes great pleasure in knowing that the nursery in Parliament occupies a site that was formerly a bar. As a proud Welsh Valley's woman it'll come as no surprise when I say that I'm not usually one to turn down a drink but it's absolutely right that childcare provisions were prioritised.

**The recent Maternity Bill that rapidly proceeded through the Commons was the first time that these issues have really been given the attention that they deserve.**

The situation is however very different for those who are expecting or trying to conceive. I had a well-documented struggle with getting pregnant, and my husband and I were lucky enough to be able to successfully pursue the IVF route – but I know my situation is rare. My former employer was flexible and able to accommodate time off for appointments and scans. It is concerning how different Parliament is in comparison to that.

The recent Maternity Bill that rapidly proceeded through the Commons was the first time that these issues have really been given the attention that they deserve. It shouldn't be that an MP – whether in a Ministerial or opposition backbencher position – misses out on career progression due to pregnancy and I'm pleased to see this legislation being brought forward.

However this Bill really does only begin to scratch the surface, and if we are to encourage more young women into politics we must make sure that protections are in place for other circumstances and for other issues that can crop up; such as paid leave for neonatal births, support for those seeking fertility treatment and improved rights for partners too.

The Government must recognise the challenges surrounding both getting pregnant and pregnancy itself and how important flexibility and protections are. I sincerely hope that this new Bill is taken as an opportunity to reflect on current practices that are outdated and certainly act as a barrier to participation.

I hope that any woman interested in politics – whatever your age or family situation – will see that it is possible (with the support of a fantastic team!) to have a child and fulfil the responsibilities of an MP. And who knows, I may very well see some of you reading this on the green benches at some point in the future. Here's hoping!

**Alex Davies-Jones is the Labour MP for Pontypridd. She has two step sons and one son.**

# ***We Need to Better Support Mothers and Mothers - to - be in Local Politics***

**By Cllr Alice Perry**

## ***I had this idea that when I***

had a baby, life would be different, but not too different. I would be able to express a load of breast milk and go off to the town hall to attend council meetings. I'd seen other women in politics manage to have a family alongside their political career. I'd heard that one female leader was out on the doorstep a week after giving birth. I had a plan. Everything was going to be fine.



Maybe some people's lives do work out like they plan. Mine didn't. Getting pregnant in the first place turned out to be a lot harder than I had expected. I had to juggle work and council commitments with IVF. I'd have to pop out of evening council meetings to inject myself with strong hormones. I missed the annual budget meeting one year when

I was chief whip because I was having a miscarriage. Looking back, it was a lot to go through.

I learned a lot from being pregnant. I have always been passionate about trying to get more women (and BAME, disabled, LGBT and working class people) selected and elected. I wrote our Labour Group's maternity leave policy. I ran and attended training for candidates. I participated in the Fawcett Society report about sexism in local government. I thought I had a good idea about some of the barriers women in politics face and what can be done to remove those barriers, but I saw everything with a new perspective after my own pregnancies.

**Labour's traditional model of campaigning ... can be inaccessible for pregnant women and parents of young children. As a result, many people are excluded from politics and their voices silenced.**

"You are pregnant, are you standing down?" No. "You should stand down from the NEC." No. Why did people think it is ok to say these things? In 2018? In the Labour Party?

I was genuinely fortunate to have a very supportive Labour Group, Leader and local party. People were great. But despite this there were still challenges.

One unexpected challenge was around campaigning. There is a strong campaign culture in my local party. I completely support this – it is extremely important for us to be actively and regularly speaking to the people we seek to represent. But when you have a high risk pregnancy, you can't carry on door knocking like nothing has changed. You need to do things differently. You need more support and empathy. I realise that this is also true for candidates with disabilities or other protected characteristics. I have also heard heart-breaking stories from mothers who wondered if doorstep canvassing in early pregnancy contributed to miscarriages. I wondered the same thing myself.

**Women should not lose their voice because they become mothers. We should get louder.**

Labour's traditional model of campaigning (which is closely linked to candidate selection) can be inaccessible for pregnant women and parents of young children. As a result, many people are excluded from politics and their voices silenced. This should not be the case. People can do telephone canvassing at times which suit them. People can phone members and help with other campaign activities.

As an NEC member, I became involved in a large local authority's council selections. One of the candidates, a woman, had a gap in her campaigning record. She was asked to explain it. She said it was because she had postnatal depression.

She was told that as a result she was unsuitable to stand to be a councillor as she lacked campaign experience. This was obviously totally unacceptable and we helped her overturn this outrageous decision. But I was shocked that this kind of

thing could happen in the modern Labour Party. A culture change is happening slowly but much more is needed if we want to achieve our goals of increasing diversity of political representation.

Being a councillor and NEC member with a new-born baby was also an interesting experience. We had been allowed to dial-in to NEC meetings but this was suspended after someone leaked audio records from a meeting. There is still a stain on the Southside carpet from when my two-month old baby, attending seven hours on an NEC, was sick all over me. "She speaks for all of us," my friend whispered.

I know many councillors with young children are really grateful for the normalisation of online meetings. This is definitely making politics more accessible. I hope when life eventually returns to normal, we keep the opportunities for people to dial-in or join meetings online.

I look back at the last few years and wonder how I managed everything. I know if I did, you can. If you are reading this and thinking of getting more involved in politics, or standing to be a Councillor, you definitely should. It will be an amazing decision. I am so proud of what I and my colleagues have achieved for our communities and what we are achieving in the Labour Party. Women should not lose their voice because they become mothers. We should get louder.

**Alice Perry is a councillor and Deputy Whip of LGA Labour. She represents Local Government on Labour's NEC and is a mum of one.**

# ***Mothers Must be Able to Participate in Local Democracy***

**By Cllr Cathy Cordiner – Achenbach**

***“Well, how’s she going to do***

*that with a baby then? I can’t vote for her!”* was a comment I overheard at my selection meeting, 14 days after giving birth to my fifth child. Some might class that as a fair question, but when my male partner attended his selection meeting the next day, no such comment was made.

It is well documented that women are less likely to enter into politics than men and with attitudes such as those represented above, this is not surprising.



There appears to be conventional wisdom that women are less engaged with or knowledgeable about politics. Frustratingly I have heard this talking to women in my local area as they say - “I don’t know about politics and voting; I leave all that to him” or “He decides all that” (indicating to their husband or partner). In the words of Marian

Wright Edelman, “You can’t be what you can’t see”. Until we have more women, more mothers, at the forefront of politics, it will continue to be harder to engage women into the political arena and it will continue to appear as irrelevant to them or their everyday lives.

Yet political decisions impact every aspect of women’s daily lives - the schools their children attend, the medical services they use, their local environment from parks, to town centres, to housing developments. Our lives are immersed in politics. We need mothers as councillors, as part of the decision-making process to affect change, but also to encourage more women to realise that they too can be a voice to represent others and impact on the world we live in.

I passionately believe that the better the political representation, with elected officials reflecting local communities, the greater the understanding of the needs of the community and the most effective decisions will be made in terms of local services and resources.

I was selected at the meeting mentioned above, and then elected to represent a ward for our borough council (and re-elected a year later). I am able as a busy working mum to organise my time and childcare to enable me to meet with local residents,



attend meetings and fully participate in the work of the council (most of the time!). The majority of our borough council meetings are held in the evenings. So once a babysitter is booked (and self-funded), I am able to attend and play my part. If I were elected to our local county council, meetings take place in the daytime, at 10am.

**Whilst I am grateful to my retired, supportive colleagues for standing in it still means my voice, the voice of a mother, has been removed from the discussions and decision making.**

Luckily I would be able to attend having dropped my children off to school and nursery. The difficulty with these meetings though is slightly hidden. Before each meeting the party groups meet, so suddenly your start time is not 7pm but 6pm, not 10am but 9am which is more challenging with a young family. However with enough notice it is still workable - the notice is key.

As briefly mentioned above most of my councillor allowance pays for the childcare to enable me to undertake my councillor duties. This allowance is also taken into consideration when I claim my tax credits so my award is lower. This financial penalty can be a real barrier to many mothers even considering entering local politics.

Meetings have been very different during 2020 and 2021 and for some reason, less notice has been given for committee meetings (usually laid out a year in advance) and the times have been moved to 3 or 4pm. This has meant myself and other parents, who have been on the school run at this time, have had to ask supportive colleagues to stand in for us. Whilst I am grateful to my retired, supportive colleagues for doing this, it still means my voice, the voice of a mother, has been removed from the discussions and decision making. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began all the council meetings

have been held virtually. This might seem to be ideal for mothers, but actually has proved far more challenging.

When your meetings start at 6pm none of the children are in bed. Older ones may be happy with a movie download and a bag of popcorn to keep them entertained whilst you are in the next room but when the three-year-old and his four-year-old sister need you, they need you.

You can't have a babysitter in the house, so you have to simultaneously be both parent and councillor in the meeting and whilst they may well be happy to sit quietly next to you watching Peppa Pig on repeat on a tablet as the meeting runs past their 7pm bedtime, then past 8pm, 9pm. But, if you leave the screen, you are unable to vote on the item being discussed.

In rural areas such as the one I live in, the broadband may also not be able to manage myself, my partner (also a councillor) in the same meeting on another device, and whatever technology is keeping the children entertained.

**We need more women, more mothers and more diverse council chambers. We need to change the systems and remove the barriers that stop them from being able to fully participate in local democracy.**

In the main, most other councillors are sympathetic to children occasionally appearing beside you asking for a drink or a biscuit or a cuddle. However I have experienced a monitoring officer stating before a meeting that other people should not be seen on your Teams screen and a councillor from another party chastising a colleague of mine when her five year old son came over to her for a hug. This should not be happening.

It makes an already challenging situation even more stressful. Whilst it is important to maintain a level of professional behaviour in an official meeting, a small child wanting to hug a parent hours after their bedtime during a global pandemic is surely not a problem.

We need more women, more mothers and more diverse council chambers. We need to change the systems and remove the barriers that stop them from being able to fully participate in local democracy, a result we would all benefit from.

**Cathy Cordiner-Achenbach is Deputy Leader of the Labour Group, Great Yarmouth Borough Council and a mum of five.**



# ***Mums Should Not be a Rarity in Local Government***

**By Cllr Kelly Grehan**

## ***Some years before I was a***

councillor I went along to an event known as 'The Big Latch on.' It was a community event where breastfeeding mothers and their children meet and celebrate breastfeeding. I had a torrid time breastfeeding my eldest child and sought help from a lactation supporter. It turned out my son had a tongue tie, and although I pursued feeding him, I eventually gave up when he was four months old. My younger son breast fed easily and I fed him for over a year. As he latched on for the first time I felt a tension and feeling of failure I had not known I was carrying melt away.



At the time I attended 'The Big Latch on' I had long since stopped feeding my own children - but - knowing that the county council was looking to make 'changes' (aka cuts) to the breastfeeding support services I went along to show support. Some of the mums were articulately stating their case to a county councillor about the difference the support had made to them. This councillor there was a very kind lady, some years post retirement.

She said she herself had very good experience with health visitors and so felt that they would be able to take over giving breast feeding support. I asked her more about this and she admitted that her experiences dated back to the 1970s.

With just 15% of councillors aged under 45 and with only 36% being women<sup>1</sup> it is perhaps not surprising that there were very few women with direct experience of the current services to which cuts were proposed and - unsurprisingly - voted through.

**With the average councillor being a 59 year old white male, councils simply do not take into account the needs of those who are caregivers.**

It is hard not to conclude that the fact the central reason why services aimed at young people and caregivers have been decimated in recent years is that so few people elected onto councils have dependent children.

For example, over 600 youth centres have closed since 2010 with 1,000 Sure Start centres and almost 350 playgrounds closing since 2014.<sup>2</sup>

The irony of mothers being missing from the council chamber is that it is typically mothers running our communities in other ways. 78% of council workforces are

<sup>1</sup> <https://lgiu.org/local-government-facts-and-figures-england/>

<sup>2</sup> Triple Whammy' Women's Budget Group

female.<sup>3</sup> A quick look at any school volunteers list will show it is mothers who are running Parent Teacher Associations and holding places on governing bodies - indeed I think my experience on both was ideal training for being a councillor. Like the mums I mentioned at the beginning of this article who were campaigning to save the breastfeeding services, towns are filled with mums fighting to save childcare facilities and parks, to have safer roads, better care homes and all manner of other things. Of course there are men doing this too - but for some reason the contribution of women - particularly caregivers - is not valued as highly.

Councils, like Parliament, run on tradition and established procedure and so, with the average councillor being a 59 year old white male, councils simply do not take into account the needs of those who are caregivers.

In 2019 only 7% of councils had a maternity policy in place that covered ordinary councillor roles.<sup>4</sup> In 2017 a report by the Fawcett Society<sup>5</sup> recommended that "technology such as Skype could be part of the solution in allowing more women to access roles on councils through, allowing more efficient use of people's time, and allowing more people who work full time or have caring responsibilities to participate."

**Councils and party groups need to ensure that a culture is developed where having caring responsibilities is not seen as a negative or a liability, but is actually an asset.**

They stated the law which restricts councillors from attending or voting remotely needs rescinding. This law was temporarily rescinded on 4th April 2020 by the Government to remove the requirement for the public to have physical access to local government meetings.

For me, as a working mum, being able to access meetings without having to travel was great. I am furious that this has been removed and shows the need for diversity in councils was never taken seriously. I also find that there is an assumption that - by nature of their rarity - women in councils are continually called upon to defend their position. I have been asked on numerous occasions if my husband minds me being a councillor, and if my children lose out by my being out at meetings. I've also seen women criticised for bringing children to meetings, having them appear on Zoom and for missing events when their children are unwell. I don't see the same reactions when men are missing for other reasons, including sporting commitments.

When I became Deputy Leader of my group I rearranged the office so that there was a changing mat, colouring pencils and tampons in the office in an attempt to bring in a more female friendly culture. I believe councils and party groups need to ensure that a culture is developed where having caring responsibilities is not seen as a negative or a liability, but is actually an asset. This is partly about bringing in changes like maternity leave and childcare policies, but it is also about the words we use, gestures like having changing mats and colouring books in offices for councillors' children, and us going and making the case to potential councillors about why mums are needed in the chamber - importantly because we need people advocating for the local services they use.

**Cllr Kelly Grehan is a borough councillor in Dartford and a member of Kent County Council. She is also a member of the Fabian Women's Network Executive and a mother of two.**

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/local-government-commission>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/local-government-commission>

<sup>5</sup> 2017 Does Local Government Work for Women? Final Report of the Local Government Commission July 2017

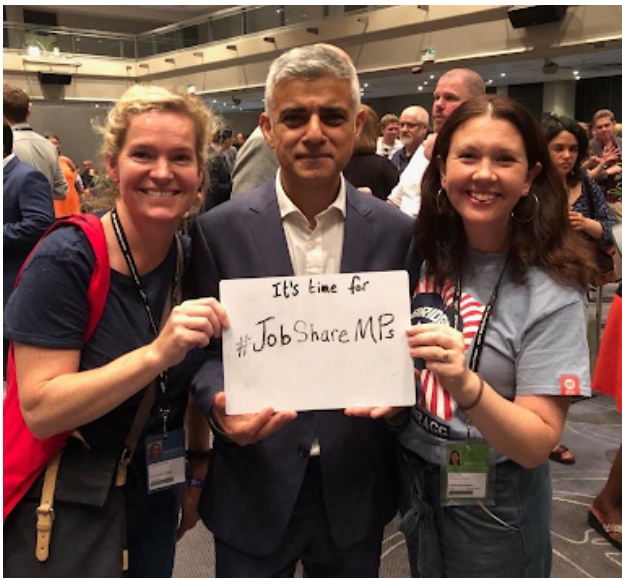


# ***Increasing Diversity Through Job Sharing the Role of MP***

**By Cllr Anya Sizer**

***If we have learnt anything from*** the last few years in the post-referendum, post-Trump era it is that our political structures urgently need review.

We need to change how we represent people within Westminster and indeed who should be representing us. If Labour is truly to be a party that champions diversity from minority groups, not to mention facilitating access for women and mothers, then we



need to challenge the current structures and barriers to allow this to happen.

Small signs of such progress have been seen from Professor Sarah Childs' Good Parliament report to the introduction of proxy voting, baby leave and Stella Creasy's campaign and subsequent use of a Locum

MP. It is within this context that a Labour party friend and I launched a campaign to allow MPs to be able to job-share. In some ways this may seem a radical concept but actually it is one which would ultimately allow for more diverse representation within Westminster.

The idea for me personally grew out of my experiences in politics over the last few years - as someone who has worked for three MPs, who has received incredible training from both Labour Women's Network and Fabian Women's Network, and who has had a desire to stand as Labour candidate for most of my life.

**If Labour is truly to be a party that champions diversity from minority groups, not to mention facilitating access for women and mothers, then we need to challenge the current structures and barriers to allow this to happen.**

The reality however is I am a mother of three, one of whom is adopted with significant additional needs. My reality was not matching with desire, and my ability was not meeting with availability. A throwaway comment to a Labour colleague about sharing the role of an MP led to a journey of discoveries. Much work had already been done on this issue from John

McDonnell's 2012 Private Members Bill, to the Fawcett Society's 'Open House' report, and even a court case on behalf of the Green Party. These people had already come to the same conclusion - that job-sharing the role would increase diversity, would help to alleviate some of the enormous pressures individual MPs are under and ultimately could mean even more potential to better serve their constituencies. The main arguments against the idea fall into two categories:

Firstly, the practicalities. There are a couple of issues around how the various components of an MPs' role would need to be divided. For any one MP the role is certainly multi-faceted with demands from the constituency, Westminster and specific internal Labour party responsibilities.

However, there are a variety of ways that job-shares can be managed and can work to accommodate the needs of both individuals and constituents alike. Examples of logistics could be the job sharers working on different days throughout the week or working a parliamentary session each. One might be Westminster-based, the other based in the constituency. The key is that many other roles outside of Westminster have successfully worked through this issue and the job sharers have worked out viable options.

Secondly, there is potentially an issue of voting intention and what to do should there be disunity within the partnership. Much of this would need to be addressed prior to the job share role commencing. The two job share candidates would need to ensure that the partnership is from the start progressing along very similar political lines, that there is a sense of 'one voice' being spoken from and, if needs be, finalising this via some sort of contract. However, there would of course need to be a mechanism for when this potentially breaks down, or when unity cannot be assured within the role. In such circumstances the advice would be to defer

as MPs already do, to the party whips line. Therefore there could be occasions when one or other would have to compromise on issues of principle. However this is an experience many MPs would already attest to having to do and one which can be resolved. The other key argument against job sharing is that the public perception of an MP is that of a sole representative of an area and the face of a constituency.

The Fawcett Society investigated this as an issue via a public survey and found that once the arguments had been shared around increasing diversity and allowing for greater representation that nearly half of all people agreed it would be a good idea.

**These people had already come to the same conclusion - that job-sharing the role would increase diversity, would help to alleviate some of the enormous pressures individual MPs are under**

In progressing the concept of job sharing advocates will have to focus on helping the public to understand and realise the merits it holds. This may be a case of needing to practically demonstrate what this would look like in reality such a cultural shift can be fully accepted.

Ultimately, I want to see the House of Commons as a place truly representing the people it seeks to serve, fit for purpose, reformed and modernised. Alongside other changes, this could be exactly what is needed after the political difficulties of the last few years. Sharing the role of an MP may well be just the change that our politics currently needs.

**Clr Anya Sizer is a mum of three children, two from many years of fertility treatment and one from adoption. She has over 15 years experience working in the fertility sector and is often in the media as a champion for the patient perspective. She has worked for three MPs and is currently senior office staff for David Lammy MP as well as a local councillor for Hoxton East and Shoreditch.**

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**This is to recognise and honour all our sisters who wanted to be a mum, a mum involved in politics, for whom that has never happened. Your story is an acknowledged and important part of our collective journey. Thank you for the rich life experiences and wisdom you bring.**

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# ***Crumbs and Crayons***

**By Cllr Sarah Russell**

## ***I call it 'second child syndrome'***

the phenomena where female councillors have a second baby, and, faced with the prospect of re-selection and re-election alongside the exhaustion of a baby and a toddler, choose not to re-stand. Some make it to a third child, some disappear after their first. I can't find any statistics on it – no-one is even measuring this problem – but anecdotally, it happens quite a lot.

The problem is invisible because all women shortlists ensure that those mothers are rapidly replaced with older or younger female candidates without childcare responsibilities.



Nationally only about 36% of councillors of all parties, both male and female have caring responsibilities for children of any age. Female councillors with young children are a tiny minority. Labour may have immense power in local government, but Labour mothers don't tend to wield that power.

This is surprising. Many of the areas that

local authorities are responsible for include parks and leisure centres, Sure Start, health visitors, education, special educational needs and nursery provision – all areas that parents/carers of young children are frequent users and tend to be interested in. It is a real loss that women who were motivated enough to become councillors in the first place give up when their experience of council services would potentially make them even more valuable to the communities whom they represent.

Some of the solutions to this problem are simple, and free. I'm extremely lucky that the leader of Manchester City Council, Sir Richard Leese, has always defended the right of any councillor with caring responsibilities to bring a child to any council meeting if they wish or need to. My string of little blonde tots have left a trail of crumbs and crayons around the Town Hall from when they were six months old. Eyebrows have been raised from time to time.

**Female councillors with young children are a tiny minority. Labour may have immense power in local government, but Labour mothers don't tend to wield that power.**

I have ignored them. I had little choice given that the erratic scheduling of council meetings doesn't align well with regular childcare, but it was comforting to know that I had senior backing. A baby change was provided, a highchair was bought for the members' room. Many leaders across the country should make these sorts of statements.

Manchester has also, for the first time this year, scheduled our scrutiny and council meetings to keep them out of school holidays as far as possible. This has meant shifting some of the municipal year by a week. It makes a massive difference to me and other parents on the council, moving whipped meetings out of May half term, August, and Autumn half term and freeing us up to care for our children.

Sadly, I have missed more bedtimes than I care to remember. Video conferencing has proven much more feasible than anyone could ever have imagined. After COVID-19, we need to retain a digital-first policy for policy briefings and informal meetings. This would make it much easier for parents, and especially single parents, to participate in democratic proceedings.

Some more structural change is required. Only 7% of councils have a maternity leave policy. While the Labour model maternity policy has been around for years, the party should be mortified that there are still Labour groups of councillors who have not adopted it. The NEC could change party rules so that the policy is automatically adopted by every Labour group, allowing Labour groups to deviate only if they wish to make better provision.

**Only 7% of councils have a maternity leave policy. While the Labour model maternity policy has been around for years, the party should be mortified that there are still Labour groups of councillors who have not adopted it.**

There also needs to be protections for women who take maternity leave. Re-selection can be daunting. Doing this when you are exhausted from looking after a baby, trying to do a day job, and may be 'out of the loop' with your Labour group and the branch, is an extremely worrying prospect. It is easy to see why some good female councillors simply don't re-stand, or

fall by the wayside when they try to.

During the last re-selection process for MPs, a welcome change was made by the NEC to ensure women would not face a trigger ballot when pregnant, on maternity leave, or for one year following maternity leave. However, no equivalent rule change was made for female councillors, and it should have been. Councillors typically face a full re-selection process at each election. Changing the rules for us too would show that Labour cares about working mothers at every level within the party, not just when their de-selection would potentially make the headlines.

Children are a joy, and I've seen their presence humanise politics and remind everyone in a room what really matters. As we recover from COVID-19, I hope to see more crumbs and crayons in Town Halls across the country, and I hope to see the party ensure this.

**Sarah Russell is Chair of Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee on Manchester City Council and is a mum of three.**



# ***We Must Lift in Order to Rise***

**By Shavanah Taj**

## ***Nothing has ever changed,***

or was worth winning without a firm fight. I was raised by strong women and men who encouraged me to believe in the importance of using my voice for the greater good, and to inspire others.

As the American political activist Angela Davis once said, the aim for a woman trade union leader should be to "lift as you rise." Because a woman's place is in her trade union, and particularly, leading her trade union.



As a mother, a feminist, a working class, Welsh Muslim woman of Pakistani decent, I know too well that our work is never done. I understand how complicated life can get and the layered intersection of discrimination and inequality faced by women and mothers on a day to day basis – whether that be at home or in work. I took on the role as Acting General Secretary of

the Wales TUC at the end of January 2020. I was the first woman of colour to hold such a role across the TUC, joining other phenomenal trade union sisters leading UK, ITUC and soon thereafter STUC. Our leadership represented a long-standing pursuit for visible change and I had the utmost privilege to be a part of it. In this role I realised that I had smashed serious boundaries and my young daughters had witnessed a key bit of trade union herstory in the making.

Union leaders and campaigners for social justice have a long and fascinating herstory of organising and fighting for equity and justice, including within our own movement as mothers, feminists and activists.

**But it's not just the recession that has demonstrated women's economic vulnerability. After over a decade of austerity, women are again being failed by the UK Government.**

Traditionally unions argued that men needed to earn a sufficient "family wage" to take care of his wife and children and that this should not be undercut by women by claiming men's skilled jobs and equal pay. Employment was and still is often segregated by gender. For example, there are still more men in well paid, good quality jobs in manufacturing and construction and more women in lower paid, insecure work in sectors such as hospitality and non-essential retail.

As a female General Secretary at the forefront of organising and campaigning to protect workers' rights, I feel immensely proud of how far we have come, but equally determined to end inequalities like sexism that mothers and women face once and for all.

Many have recognised that economic inequality of those who are already excluded or held back by the jobs market has been worsened and exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. This is especially the case for women - more women have lost jobs than men in the economic downturn following the pandemic. And as ever, this is worse for those women who face multiple forms of discrimination. For example, 1 in 20 women are now unemployed, but this rises to 1 in 10 for women of colour.

**Mothers deserve a gender-equitable, intersectional recovery, but it will only be achieved if we are at the heart of recovery plans and at the decision-making tables**

And while the furlough scheme has been very successful in protecting jobs, it could still go further to protect mums' jobs in particular. A recent TUC survey showed that 7 in 10 working mums had a furlough request turned down during the latest round of school closures. 9 in 10 reported increased stress and anxiety, and around half were worried that they would be treated negatively by their boss because of their childcare responsibilities. The Government's failure to respond to our calls to introduce a temporary right to furlough for parents and those with caring responsibilities shows a total disregard for many mother's experiences in this crisis. But it's not just the recession that has demonstrated women's economic

vulnerability. After over a decade of austerity, women are again being failed by the UK Government.

No one is in doubt about the tremendous role that NHS and social care workers played to keep the country safe during this pandemic, but the most recent Budget last March failed to recognise and reward their contribution and sacrifice. Women are overrepresented in the NHS, making up 77% of the total employees and 89% of nursing staff. With around one million women working for the NHS, it is one of the single biggest employers of women worldwide. All of these key workers, those who we clapped, and our kids drew rainbows for, deserve a decent pay rise, and we won't stop fighting until this is achieved. There is a sense of optimism emerging thanks to the very successful vaccination programme the NHS is delivering. But we can't lose sight of the commitment to build back better from the pandemic. We need public investment throughout the UK which delivers jobs, but explicitly high quality, equitable jobs for women and mothers.

We are starting with the right foundation in Wales. We have ground-breaking law already in place with the Future Generations Act. We have enacted the Socio-Economic Duty and we strongly welcomed the publication of the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Bill last month. Again, Wales will be leading the way to make sure public bodies create a fairer, just society. But passing this legislation is just the start of what we need to do to challenge a jobs market that continues to discriminate against women and mothers. We need to manage every step of the recovery effort in order to grab hold of every opportunity to challenge inequality. For example, we have called for Wales's recovery to be driven by green infrastructure investment. Jobs like these are still usually held by men so we need to work as unions, Government and employers to make sure that we have a diverse pool of

candidates applying for the relevant training, and fair and inclusive recruitment practices in place. Without this, we risk a green recovery built on sexism and exclusion. We also need to challenge some of the misconceptions about people's experiences in the pandemic. Home working does not always equate to flexible working, and confusing the two does a particular disservice to many mothers' experiences over the course of the crisis. It comes as no surprise that juggling care work and paid employment has disproportionately hit mothers. Every worker deserves a genuine right to flexible work.

Mothers deserve a gender-equitable, intersectional recovery, but it will only be achieved if we are at the heart of recovery plans and at the decision-making tables. We are calling on leaders everywhere to recognise this and work with trade unions to make sure we rebuild our economy to recover from both the pandemic and entrenched inequality.

**Shavanah Taj is Wales TUC's first General Secretary who is a person of colour.**





# ***My Experience of Being the UK's First Locum MP***

**By Kizzy Gardiner**

## ***In 2019 I was recruited by***

Stella Creasy to provide maternity cover for her constituency and campaigning work. I didn't have political ambition, but my background is in community engagement and I had spent the past two years in a successful job share arrangement. There were a lot of things I thought I could bring to the role of a "locum MP".

However, I was daunted by the thought of political attention. Before my name was out in the public, I spent a Saturday evening making my social media private, and quietly taking down a personal blog about my disabled daughter.



I had seen the sort of bile that gets thrown at female politicians (especially those who are People of Colour) and, as a mixed-race woman, I found myself bracing for it.

I was both relieved and surprised when the onslaught didn't come. A lot of thought had gone into working with the constituency to explain my role as a locum MP. Yes, I am based in the constituency office. Yes, I am

holding surgeries and doing casework. Yes, I am working with local organisations and pursuing campaigns about issues important to the people of Walthamstow. No, I will not be voting in Parliament, Stella has a proxy MP to cast her vote.

**When the role had been announced, Stella had been challenged on a number of occasions that constituents would not accept an unelected locum standing in for her. Thankfully, that was not my experience.**

"So it's more a fancy title for an office worker who also makes speeches" noted one of my detractors. That tweet, and another dozen or so like it, were the sum total of the pushback on Twitter. When the role had been announced, Stella had been challenged on a number of occasions that constituents would not accept an unelected locum standing in for her. Thankfully, that was not my experience. People in Walthamstow were incredibly constructive and supportive of the role. They were grateful to have someone who could represent them and their interests in engagement with the council and the Government. Four months into my role, COVID-19 hit and overtook everything else, but I was able to communicate and collaborate with constituents to support the amazing and urgent community response to the challenges so many of our neighbours were facing. This was much more than a glorified office manager role. I was doing the constituency-facing work of

an MP. I don't pretend that I was an MP, or that my experience would be representative of the work of many other MPs in the UK. But what I did do was stand in the place of the job-holder, while she was able to take a period of maternity leave. That is exactly what maternity cover is there for. Had I not been doing that role the situation for Stella would have been very different.

When constituents wanted to speak to the MP, I was able to stand in that position, and that meant something to them. When constituents contacted Stella, as some of them did during her maternity leave, she was able to direct them towards me. With me there, this was not a case of shirking her responsibilities, but of supporting and upholding my role.

**If we are truly committed to enabling increased representation, we have to keep pushing forward with policies on making Parliament more accessible.**

Not only is this work important for enabling increased representation for constituents, it is also important for our democracy. It is important that MPs engage with constituents, to truly listen to what they have to say and to recognise the challenges their constituents are facing. Yes, an MP's role is to vote in Parliament. But how MPs exercise their vote and what they focus on is shaped by insights from their communities. Constituency-based work is vital and my fear is that if the response of Parliament to an MP taking maternity leave is only to provide a proxy voting system, then it diminishes the importance of that connection between the MP and their community. Those connections are not easy things to turn off and on. In Walthamstow Stella works incredibly hard to both establish and maintain relationships with pretty much everyone, so that she can represent the

whole of her constituency.

Having maternity cover ensures that there is someone whose job it is to maintain those relationships and ensure the community's voices are represented.

If we are truly committed to enabling increased representation, we have to keep pushing forward with policies on making Parliament more accessible. This must include policies like parental leave, job-sharing, and family friendly hours. Simply getting women elected is not enough. We saw in the 2019 general election the concern around the number of women MPs standing down and choosing not to stand again. Yes, we have to get women to stand as a first step. But we must also make sure that when they do, they are properly supported so that it is possible to have a family, and be a politician. Our politics will be richer for it.

**Kizzy Gardiner made history as the UK's first Locum MP in 2019 covering the maternity leave of Stella Creasy MP. When not in politics she works in international development. Kizzy is mother of two.**

# ***Three Things That Need to Change.***

**By Cllr Josie Channer**

***I was elected as a councillor in***

2010 and over the years I've loved playing an active role in my community. My community has changed over the years and so have I. Back in 2010 I was one of the youngest councillors to be elected in my borough - a mantle I definitely can't claim any more. During my time on the council I have also had two children, although this joyful experience hasn't been without challenges in respect of my council role.



Before becoming a mother, working full-time whilst also being a councillor and being on a number of non-executive boards wasn't a problem. I remember speaking to a non-executive board member who said "I gave it up being a councillor when my first child was born." This experience was not a one-off - since then I've spoken to a number of women who felt that they have

had to stand down as councillors after they have had children. It would seem this is an area where more focus and data are needed. There are three things that I can see from my own experience that we need to focus on if we want to stop women resigning once they have children.

## **1. Changing the law**

There is a 'six month rule' in local government that states that a councillor who doesn't attend meetings for six months is removed from office, unless otherwise agreed by the full council or Cabinet depending on the constitution. We need to change the culture in local government so that the pressure to conform to an outdated way of working is phased out and there is an environment where councillors can talk freely about the challenges of the role openly.

**We need to change the culture in local government so that the pressure to conform to an outdated way of working is phased out**

We also need to improve accessibility by continuing to give the option of online meetings, but the Government rescinded these in May 2021.

I was chair of my Labour Group and also chair of my council's Corporate Parenting Board when I had my first child four years ago. I found it impossible to continue with either appointment. Unfortunately, at the time there was no option for job share, maternity cover nor flexible working. After my second child was born I chaired a scrutiny committee.

Although I had a supportive deputy that was able to cover one or two meetings for me, it was still extremely difficult. With no set process in place I had to rally the support of my ward colleges and my Labour Group. Given how factitious local politics can be this leaves women in a vulnerable position. And nor should basic maternity rights be dependent on relationships within or outside of a political group, it's too fundamental for that.

One of the things that concerned me the most was my attendance record. The attendance record that is published on the council website made no mention of being on maternity leave and I was still expected to attend meetings with a newborn. Both this, and the 'six month rule' mean that a woman can be removed from office for not attending a council meeting during maternity leave. This must change. While the relevant body defined in the council's constitution can (in a public meeting!) agree to an extension to the 'six month rule': it's extraordinary that women on maternity leave are treated in law in the same way as an errant councillor who faces removal for non-engagement for a host of other reasons.

**Unfortunately, the support a councillor will receive after she has had a baby will depend on her asking for arrangements to be put in place.**

## 2. Changing the culture

Being a councillor is not like being an employee - there is a lack of hard and fast rules of what is expected of either the councillor or the council. Unfortunately, the support a councillor will receive after she has had a baby will depend on her asking for arrangements to be put in place. This can be difficult for a range of reasons, and as a result many women stand down or some may do their best to try to fit into an environment that no longer fits them.

While colleagues might not say anything if you don't attend evening council meetings while nursing a baby, depending on the politics of your Labour Group, I've found that many still have unrealistic expectations around canvassing and meetings. We need to start speaking up for a family friendly environment that both men and women will benefit from.

## 3. Staying Online

Lockdown has in fact made council meetings much more accessible, with the pandemic forcing the Government and local authorities' hand, with the rapid introduction of online meetings. The challenges of multitasking and technology aside, it should be no surprise that many women with children have found it easier to attend meetings in this new setting. My council is hoping to introduce a hybrid system of meetings going forward. This will be a massive step forward, opening up the door to greater diversity in our council chambers. At the FWN Councillor Network meetings the overwhelming feedback from women is that online meetings have been a positive move that has improved their work-life balance as councillors.

While we've still got a way to go to the 50/50 representation in local government, in recent years I've been encouraged by the diversity of women putting themselves forward. However, getting women selected, then elected is only half the battle - if we want to keep these women in local government, making these changes is the next vital step. Getting more women to stand for elected office requires planning and preparation, and a culture of openness where people are actively asked to come forward, not just depending on who is invited to be round the table.

**Josie Channer has been a Labour councillor in Barking and Dagenham since 2010. Her working career has been dedicated to transforming the criminal justice system and the rehabilitation of offenders. She is a mother of two.**



# Carers Count Too

By Cllr Emma Ben Moussa

## ***"You are all on the take."***

"You only care about the money." "I bet you live in a big house." All comments I have heard that couldn't be further from the truth: since I was elected as a borough councillor in 2019 I have not earned one single penny, and with the council chamber a bus ride away and disability stopping me driving, in reality it costs me money to be a councillor.



Whilst councillors do get an allowance - of around £5,000 per year in my council, my status as a carer in receipt of benefits means I am ineligible to take it. Both my children have additional needs. Aymane is eight and has ADHD, with my younger son Sami having severe Autism and Pica which means he eats inedible things like poo and wood, is mute, incontinent and given a learning age of less than two. It's very hard to find anyone to look after Sami besides myself and immediate family. There are many times I have appeared on zoom meetings in a panic that he will be seen behind me taking off his clothing or breaking something.

I find the fear of judgement on this really difficult. But this is my reality. I also find that people expect so much because I am home during the day but they don't realise I need to sleep where Sami does not at night but I don't get the chance because the case work just keeps coming in.

**The lack of councillors from backgrounds like mine is very telling... Families with disabilities need to be provided for and thought about.**

I also have a range of disabilities which affect my mobility and immune system, so my two children and I are fortunate to live in local authority accommodation. This makes me unique in my council, but gives me a commonality with those I represent and means that, when council officers tell me about the services they are supplying to tenants I often know more about whether these services actually work than they do.

The reliance my family have on services also gives me better clear insight into issues faced by families like mine.

The lack of councillors from backgrounds like mine is very telling in the way policy decisions are made and evaluated. Families with disabilities need to be provided for and thought about. Things like adequate toilets to change a child who is as tall as Sami is is not something people generally consider until they need them - which is probably why they are so few and far between. Someone needs to be advocating for these things, to make sure we can be part of the community.

I've encountered some negativity to my being a councillor, including from within my own party with suggestions that it's not

appropriate to bring my children to meetings - including online during the lockdown as 'this is not a creche' and that 'maybe you are not cut out for this' when I have raised inappropriate comments. However, my attendance at meetings is much higher than many other councillors and, so is my work rate in terms of case work. I think it speaks to the way society expects carers to show gratitude and then stay quietly out of the way. But why should I? I worked before I had children and I like representing my residents. Carers are part of society and actually, should be recognised and valued and are entitled to a voice. I am glad that I am able to be that voice here at least.

**Emma is a town and borough councillor in Swanscombe and the mother of two children with additional needs.**



# ***Politics, my Teenager and me***

**By Ashley Dalton**

## ***Being a lesbian mum I***

constantly worried that people might bully my daughter for having a gay parent. I have worried about that and tried to prepare her for it all of her childhood. As it turned out she never experienced any of that and I would have done better to think about what it was like to have a mum involved in politics.



When my daughter was small, being involved in politics often meant juggling childcare, dance classes and endless birthday parties with meetings and campaigning. Sometimes she would end up sitting at the back of a draughty church hall with her portable DVD player and a Happy Meal. Sometimes, when I had planning or administrative work to do, I would sit her at a PC next to me and she'd go on barbie.com whilst I typed up the branch minutes.

As she grew up the logistics became much

easier to navigate. She didn't need me with her all the time and she was striding out into the world and being more independent. This frees up a lot of time! They soon develop a place in the world that doesn't have you in it. I knew that but I didn't realise that the world she was in, was also the world in which I was campaigning, and that that might impact her in ways other than not being driven to activities and having home cooked meals.

When my child was 16 I became a Labour Parliamentary candidate in the seat where we live. I worried that she'd be embarrassed. I worried that I wasn't paying her enough attention or being present in her life enough as I was campaigning almost all the time. Reflecting on that time I worried that it impacted on her negatively.

**She said that when I stood for Parliament, she was proud of me and that she considered me a great role model.**

So, I asked her how she'd felt. I asked her what it was like and had she felt neglected in any way. I expected her to talk about the things I feared had caused her pain. Being so tired and distracted by campaigns that I was short tempered and difficult. Making her eat junk food in the car because there wasn't time for a proper dinner between meetings. It being embarrassing that I was standing on stages talking, posting videos on Facebook

and my face was going through every letterbox in town. But she said that was all fine. She said that when I stood for Parliament, she was proud of me and that she considered me a great role model. That she was thrilled to say "Yes, that's my Mum" when school friends WhatsApped her my election address. She said that more than most people in her friendship groups, because of me, she knows how the world works. Whilst she isn't passionate about party politics, she knows it's important that she votes. She has and expresses opinions and, if an issue is really important to her she'll pick up a placard. She'll even come to a CLP meeting if there's a vote that's important.

**We have to stop the tide of abuse not only to protect women involved in politics but also to stop our teenagers being caught in the cross fire.**

What she found most difficult as a teenager was what other people said about me on social media. She saw people attacking me. She saw people on Twitter calling me names and making accusations. She saw people trash talking her Mum. These things hurt her and she felt she couldn't answer them back because she thought that could hurt the campaign. She felt she had to keep quiet. It's only now, looking back, I realise that the logistics were only ever superficial inconveniences. She barely noticed the junk food and the late arrivals. It was the things I hadn't even thought she'd notice that affected her most. Because whilst she is my child, she is also a young woman that lives in the world and I cannot protect her from the things she will see on Twitter.

When someone defaced the Vote Labour garden stake outside our house with offensive graffiti, she knew what the words meant. She noticed when we had to put up security cameras in the front garden.

So, being a political mum to a teenager is actually pretty easy. They are old enough to get the bus to dance class and walk back from school without you. They would happily eat KFC or pizza every day and rather be alone in their bedroom on TikTok than be spending loads of quality time with you. So, as long as you are there for the important stuff like the school show and parents' evening they won't worry. Being the teenager of a political mum is what's hard.

As adults we can choose to stand up to the bullies. We can defend ourselves. We can have perspective. But, when someone on Twitter abuses you, your teenager will feel it acutely and the very nature of being a teenager in the 21st Century means your life is lived online and it is almost impossible to escape that.

The decline in the quality of political discourse isn't just harming our politics, it is harming our children too. That's why we have to challenge social media companies to identify and remove abusive posts. We have to stop the tide of abuse not only to protect women involved in politics but also to stop our teenagers being caught in the cross fire.

**Ashley Dalton is a Labour Party activist and CLP officer, was a Labour Parliamentary candidate in 2017 and 2019 and is mum to a 21 year old.**



# ***Being me: a Mum and a Politician***

**By Carol Mochan MSP**

## ***I stood in Scotland's May 2021***

elections in my home constituency of Carrick, Cumnock & Doon Valley and as the second placed candidate for Scottish Labour on the South Scotland list. So today I write as a Scottish Labour MSP for South Scotland. There has been much written over the years about women in politics and there are some stark statistics and personal stories about the difficulties and prejudice towards women and women with children. I have observed it and been subject to it, this article I hope will give you a flavour of my journey but also some determination to keep breaking down barriers and advance women's representation in parliament and even more importantly women's active engagement in politics.



The truth for most of us is that being committed to the Labour movement is a labour of love, unpaid, hard work and at times frustrating! The truth for women with children is that many of the systems and processes mean that they can also feel and

be excluded from the full spectrum of political activities. I hear many women with children speak about how they feel the contribution they can make seems like a second-class contribution. This should never be the case; we can certainly do things in a way to include and value the contribution mums in politics make.

**The truth for women with children is that many of the systems and processes mean that they can also feel and be excluded from the full spectrum of political activities.**

I was asked very early on after being elected what I have seen written about myself and my reply was that most articles I have read, say Carol Mochan mum of two. My reply? I am a mum of two and I love it, but I also do other things.

The truth is being a woman in politics with young children is a juggle. For me there have been as many ups as downs and I use that to encourage myself and other women to stay active in the movement.

In many ways I feel I was confident and established in my experiences of politics when I became a parent, I was an older mum with years of activism. But, although confident I did not anticipate the challenge ahead to ensure I could still play an active role in my branch, CLP and later be in a position to stand as a candidate. It is true

that my children, 11 and 14, could now run a CLP themselves! When they were little, I would joke that if we could make the business meeting no longer than it would take Buzz Light Year to save Woody, I would be able to participate. Pre meeting preparation was portable DVDs and headsets.

My husband works long shifts and so if I had not taken the kids with me, I would never have been able to attend CLP meetings. The kindness of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley members to my kids will not be forgotten but I am sure many did not recognise just how difficult a balancing act it could be. As the kids got older the school run and after school clubs made evening meetings even more of a challenge.

**Mums out there please join in, your contribution to the Labour movement is invaluable.**

Activity around door knocking and canvassing, often seen as a measure of your commitment to the party, is a further challenge. In particular during elections the expectation that the most valued activity is being out on the doors made me feel under constant pressure. I have heard my kids say to friends we don't usually go away at Easter school holidays as elections tend to be in May when mum has door knocking. It mostly makes me giggle that my kids understand election cycles, but it does sometimes make me question that politics/family balance.

Standing as a candidate when the children were school age raised issues around childcare, this is not just financial, people without children do not realise it's not just paying for childcare it is finding it!

It's not easy to get someone to childmind on a Saturday afternoon or a Thursday evening to let you do a hustings or a radio interview.

Now as an elected MSP the next part of my journey begins. I am excited but also nervous, the Scottish parliament was billed as a family friendly institution, committed to family friendly policies, I hope this is true and I certainly acknowledge it appears more so than Westminster at first glance. My biggest fear for family life is the amount of time I will spend away from home. I am realistically required to stay in Edinburgh and as a mum working from home for 14 years this is a big step for me and the kids. So far Covid 19 has meant a hybrid approach to parliamentary days. I have not therefore been fully forced into my three days away from home, so watch this space.

My approach has been 'have children and they will be with me' other women might need it to be 'have children need notice' or 'have children need jobs from home' But whatever it needs to be our party can and should accommodate and value that contribution. The truth is, we will be richer for it now and in the future. My final words would be "mums out there please join in, your contribution to the Labour movement is invaluable."

**Carol Mochan MSP is an MSP for South Scotland. She's the Shadow Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Women's Health and Sport in the Scottish parliament and has two children.**

# ***Fabian Women's Network***

Founded by Labour MP Seema Malhotra in 2005, we have over 2000 members across the UK. Women of all ages, and all levels of experience, are welcome, and we are run by a committee of elected volunteers.

What we stand for can be summed up in three words: sisterhood, solidarity, service.

***Sisterhood*** Creating space for and elevating the voices of those women given the least space to be heard. Working collectively to support and enable each other in our goals.

***Solidarity*** That we identify and name hidden power dynamics, then stand alongside and take action with women to address these. We lead by example.

***Service*** That we look to serve other women's goals, dreams and visions first, seeking the good of the whole community. We can only thrive as individual women if all women are able to thrive.

To find out more about the work we do and how you can join our network visit:  
[FABIANWOMEN.ORG.UK](http://FABIANWOMEN.ORG.UK)

If you have a question or want to make a comment about our work you can get in touch at:

Email - [FABIANWOMENFWN@GMAIL.COM](mailto:FABIANWOMENFWN@GMAIL.COM)

Twitter - [@FABIANWOMEN](https://twitter.com/FABIANWOMEN)

Facebook - [FACEBOOK.COM/FABIANWOMEN](https://facebook.com/FABIANWOMEN)

YouTube - [FABIAN WOMEN'S NETWORK](https://youtube.com/FABIANWOMENSNETWORK)

We are a volunteer led organisation. Your support can make a real difference not only to the women who work so hard on behalf of FWN but also to the many communities across the UK that our members work with as councillors, MPs and otherwise. You can support us by:

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