

# Ethnic Minority Representation in UK Local Government

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## KEY FINDINGS

- 7% of local councillors in the United Kingdom are of ethnic minority background. This is lower than the proportion of ethnic minority Members of Parliament which is 10%, and lower than population estimates of 14%.
- Under-representation of minority women is on average in line with White British women's under-representation, but varies between minority groups.
- Female under-representation is highest among women of South Asian origin, and lowest for women of Black origin
- The majority of ethnic minority councillors represent the Labour party.
- In line with the distribution of ethnic minorities in the UK, metropolitan boroughs have the most diverse councils.
- London's councillors are still less diverse than they should be, given the diversity of the city's residents.
- Unlike for women, we lack historical data on ethnic minorities' representation in local government. We have to continue the scrutiny of local diversity in order to build an over-time picture.

## Introduction

At the national level, ethnic minority representation has been the object of close scrutiny, and perhaps relatedly steadily increasing over the years, with the 2019 parliamentary intake the most diverse cohort to date. In contrast, ethnic diversity of local councillors rarely comes to such attention, and the only available data is a result of estimates based on small, non-random sample surveys or partial census<sup>1</sup>.

The University of Manchester with the financial help of the ESRC (grant number ES/R009341/1) has conducted the first census of all sitting councillors in all four constitutive nations of the UK and found that 7 per cent of them are of ethnic minority background. Given the lack of comparable, historical data, it is

impossible to know if this represents progress, but it is certainly more than the last sample-based estimates of 4%.

We will look beyond these averages to see how these numbers are shaped and what might explain the under-representation. Firstly, we will look at how the different ethnic groups fare against the average, then we will examine the geographical distribution of ethnic minority councillors. Given significant demands in recent years to increase female and ethnic minority political representation, we will also compare the distribution of female councillors by ethnicity. As political parties are important gatekeepers who influence selecting candidates for council and funding campaigns, we'll also look to the political party affiliation of local councillors by ethnicity.

<sup>1</sup>Local Government Information Unit (1996) Report on the First All Party Convention of Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority Councillors. LGIU, London  
Michael Thrasher, Galina Borisyuk, Colin Rallings, Mary Shears, BAME Candidates in Local Elections in Britain, Parliamentary Affairs, Volume 66, Issue 2, April 2013, pp.286–304

Operation Black Vote (2019) BAME Local Political Representation Audit 2019 [https://www.obv.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/BAME%20LOCAL%20POLITICAL%20REPRESENTATION%20AUDIT%20final\\_4.pdf](https://www.obv.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/BAME%20LOCAL%20POLITICAL%20REPRESENTATION%20AUDIT%20final_4.pdf)

# Ethnicity of Local Councillors

We included all non-white ethnic minority origins, in accordance with the Census definition, though using our methods (see Further Information section) we cannot disaggregate beyond the very broad ethnic groups: South Asian , Black, Other. South Asians make up the highest number of

ethnic minority councillors at around 5%, while only 1% of local councillors in the UK are of Black background. There are fewer than 1% of councillors of other ethnic backgrounds . The proportion of ethnic minority councillors is lower than their share of the UK population (Figure 1).

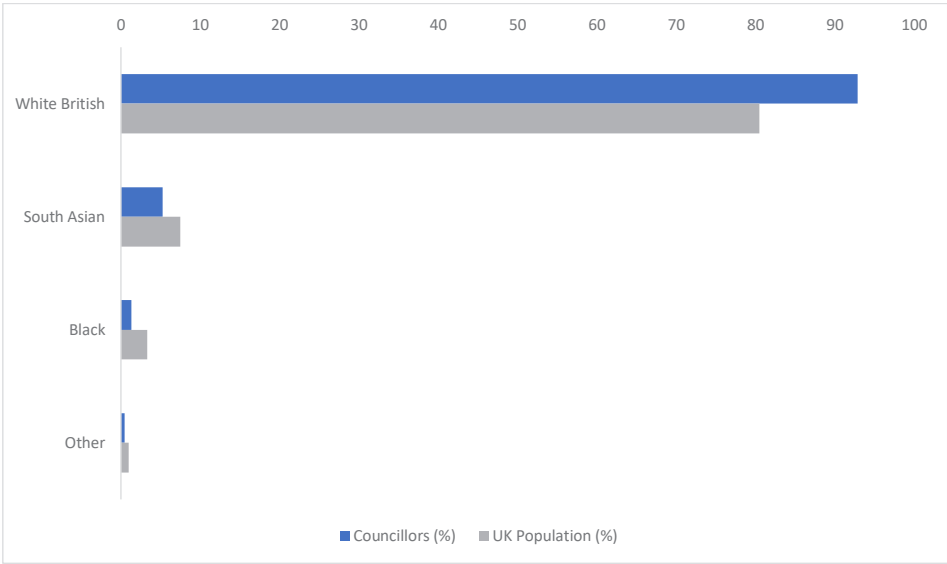


Figure 1

# Geographical Distribution of Ethnic Minority Councillors

Ethnic minorities are not evenly distributed in the four nations constituting the UK, with England the most diverse, and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland having fewer non-white ethnic minorities (see Figure 2).

Unsurprisingly, ethnic diversity of local councillors tracks closely with the ethnic make-up of local authorities, with cities being the most diverse, and thus metropolitan boroughs having more ethnic minority councillors. Of the five types of council in the UK (County, District, London borough, Metropolitan and Unitary Authority), London borough councils have the greatest proportion of ethnic minority councillors, followed by metropolitan borough councils. County and District councils have the smallest proportion of ethnic minority representatives on the council (Figure 3). This is largely due to the uneven distribution of the ethnic minority population

throughout the UK, who tend to be concentrated in urban areas in England and major cities, particularly London. County councils are based in more rural areas where there are fewer ethnic minorities, while all councils in Scotland and Wales are Unitary Authorities where there is also a lower ethnic minority population density. This means that in areas where there are fewer ethnic minority residents, there is a smaller pool of potential ethnic minority candidates for local government.

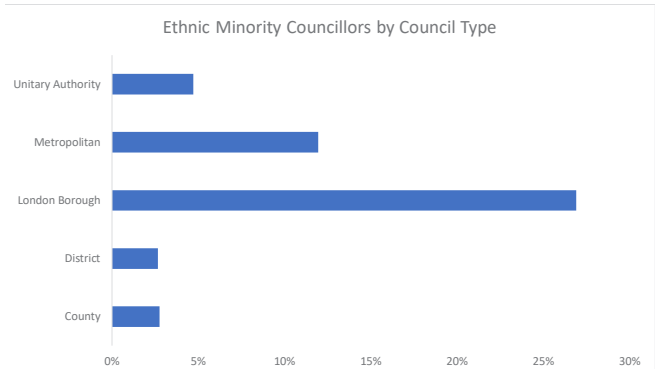
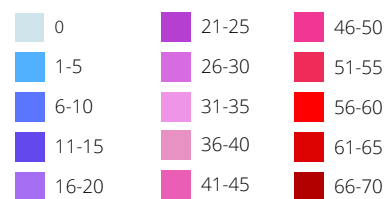


Figure 3

# UK: Ethnic minority councillors\* (2019)

% Ethnic minority councillors\*



## Greater London

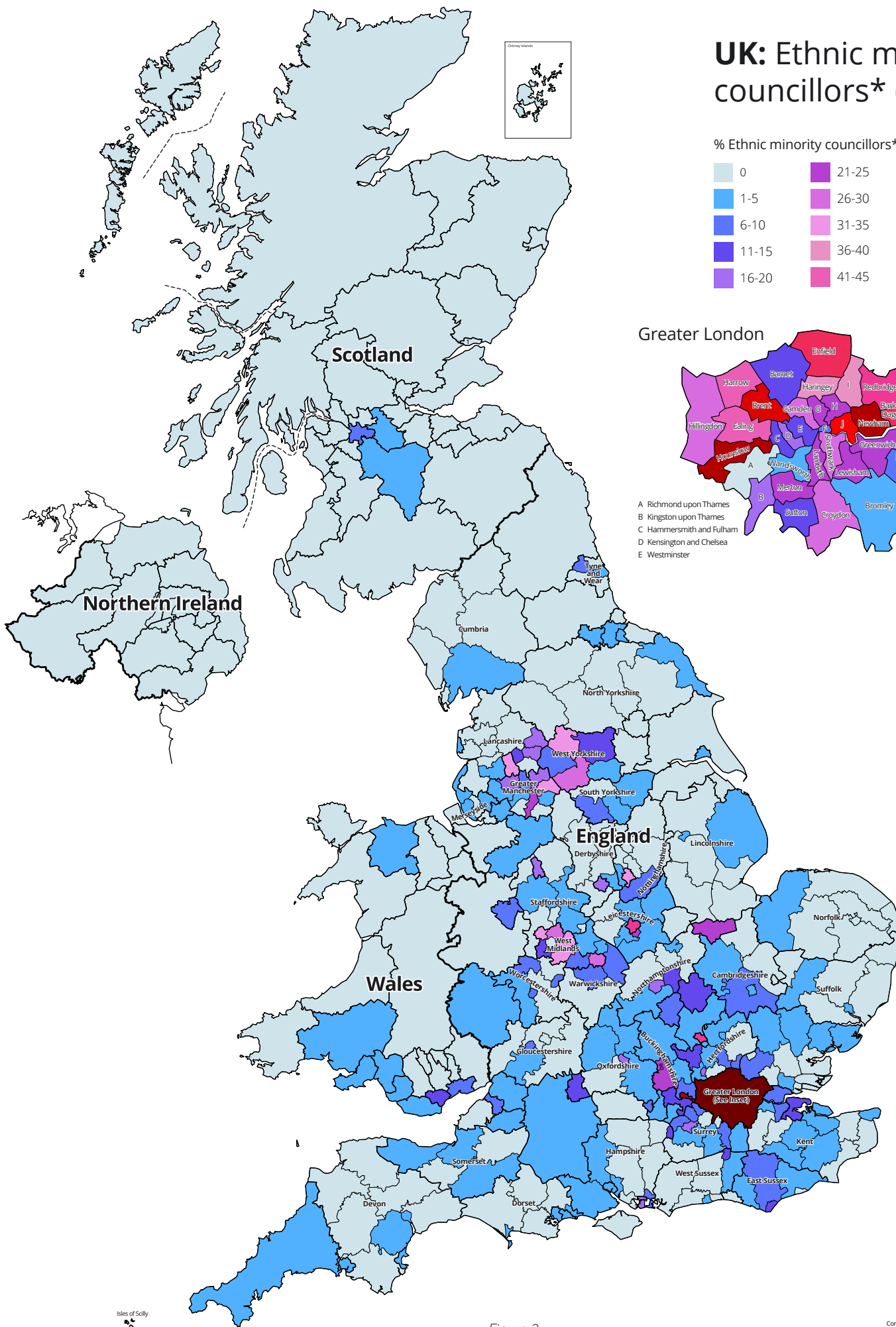


Figure 2

\* Excluding country councillors  
Contains OS data © Crown copyright 2018



Although council areas with a higher ethnic minority population have higher ethnic minority representation in local government, as Figure 4 shows, there is some variation. As the thin line below the yellow “box” in Figure 4 indicates, in the local areas where the ethnic minority population is above 40%, some councils have just over 20% ethnic minority councillors. In contrast, the thin line above the blue “box” in Figure 4 show that some of the least diverse local authorities, where ethnic diversity is below 10%, have as many as 15% ethnic minority councillors. Tables 1 and 2 below give some of the most prominent examples of both the most diverse, but unrepresentative councils, and the least diverse but most representative ones.

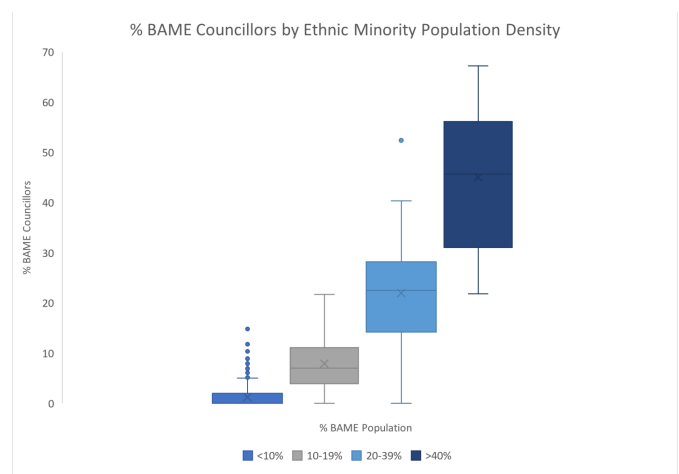


Figure 4

It is obvious that while the diversity of local councils tracks closely with the local population, geographical distribution of minorities is not a sufficient explanation for under-representation in local government. This mirrors national politics, which remains unrepresentative despite huge increases in minority-origin MPs in recent years. Also, unlike at the national level where the political

parties frequently now select minority candidates into less diverse places<sup>2</sup>, there are no signs of this happening at the local level. This might be due to the lack of public scrutiny on parties’ diversity at the local level, or the fact that being from the local area is seen as more important at the local level.

#### Examples of Over-Representative councils in the UK

Council	% non-white pop	% EM councillors	+/-
Hounslow	49%	67%	18%
Enfield	39%	52%	13%
Barking and Dagenham	42%	55%	13%
Slough	54%	67%	13%
Oldham	22%	33%	11%
Stoke-on-Trent	11%	20%	9%
Walsall	21%	28%	7%
Burnley	13%	20%	7%
Kirklees	21%	28%	7%
Northampton	15%	20%	5%

Table 1

#### Examples of Under-Representative councils in the UK

Council	% non-white pop	% EM councillors	+/-
Westminster	38%	13%	-25%
Lewisham	46%	22%	-24%
Barnet	36%	14%	-22%
Hackney	45%	24%	-21%
Hammersmith and Fulham	32%	11%	-21%
Reading	25%	8%	-17%
Cambridgeshire	15%	0%	-15%
Manchester	33%	22%	-11%
Brighton and Hove	11%	0%	-11%
Epsom and Ewell	14%	3%	-11%

Table 2

<sup>2</sup>Sobolewska (2013) “Party Strategies and the Descriptive Representation of Ethnic Minorities: The 2010 British General Election”, *West European Politics* Vol 36, 3:615-33.

# Ethnic Minority Female Councillors

It is often alleged that ethnic minority women suffer a double penalty in politics, and our research finds that this is the case for some, but not all minority women in local government. For the purposes of comparison, the percentage of white female councillors is 35% to 65% of white men. For minority women the percentage is 37%. This is also the case for Westminster, where minority female MPs constitute 57% of all minority MPs, and white female MPs only 31% of all white MPs. However, this average obscures important differences in gender balance between different minority groups. The most striking difference is that while male councillors outnumber female councillors in both the White and South Asian groups, there are significantly more Black female councillors compared to male councillors of Black background (see Figure 5). This might be reflective of the different cultural and socio-demographic issues around gender and gender roles in these different ethnic groups as well as different types of gendered racism faced by ethnic minority men and women in public life.

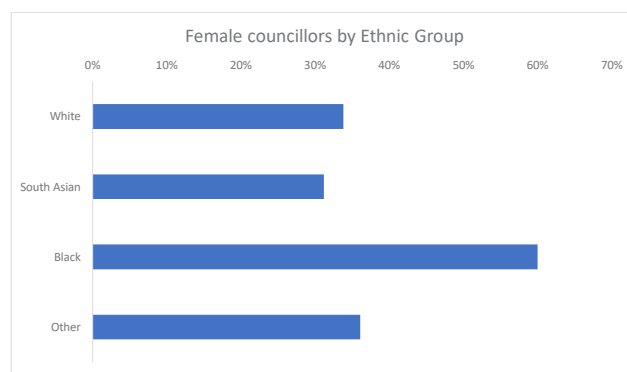


Figure 5

Why might there be such gender disparities within different ethnic groups? The inclusion of women in political spaces can be fraught with difficulty with informal 'old boys networks' excluding women and facilities and evening council meetings which are unsuitable for those with childcare responsibilities<sup>3</sup>.

Moreover, there is generally no salary for being a councillor, who are instead paid an allowance for expenses incurred. The amounts received also vary by local council, as there is no national standard. Women are more likely than men to be in low-paid, part-time work, while levels of economic activity are lower among ethnic minority women. Ethnic minority women can also face an intersectional jeopardy of discrimination on account of their ethnicity and gender.

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## Political allegiance of minority councillors

Historically, the Labour party has attracted the lion's share of ethnic minority voters as well as having greater ethnic minority representation. To date, most ethnic minority elected politicians have been representatives of the Labour party. Labour continues to be the party of choice for ethnic minority voters, gaining 77% of their support in the 2017 election<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, the Conservative Party have increased their share of ethnic minority MPs and have seen high profile Cabinet roles being filled by ethnic minority MPs including Rishi Sunak and Priti Patel.

Our data shows that this progress has not been replicated at the local level with the vast majority of ethnic minority local councillors in England

representing the Labour party. The Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and other parties are much further behind in their proportion of ethnic minority councillors (Figure 6). Partly, it can be explained by the fact that metropolitan boroughs have- on average- more Labour MPs of any ethnicity. Partly however, it seems to suggest that the effort to diversify the Conservative elites at the national level is not manifest at the level of local government.

Labour also has the largest number of ethnic minority women councillors at 40%, but again, it is a leader on representation of women on the local level in general.

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<sup>3</sup>Martin and Khan (2019) Ethnic Minorities at the 2017 British General Election  
<https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/2017%20Election%20Briefing.pdf>

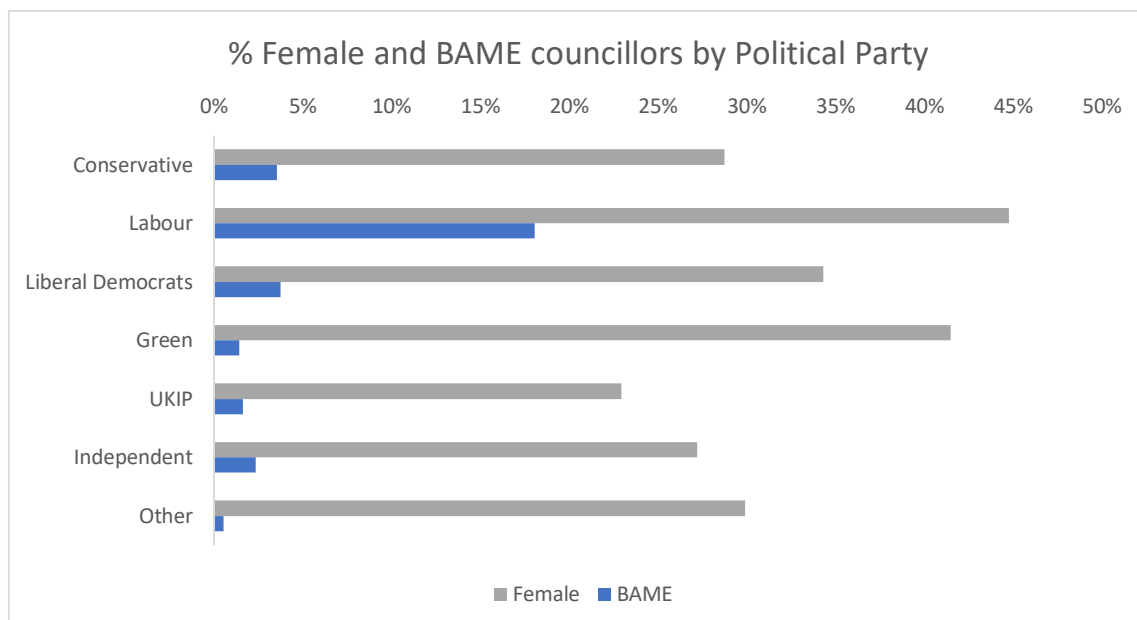


Figure 6

## CONCLUSIONS

Local government can come with much greater immediate power and control over resources than a seat in Westminster. Local councils have control over the allocation of millions of pounds, and the direct effect of the decisions made by the councils on their local communities are hard to over-estimate. Yet, largely, we do not know if everyone in these communities has an equal voice on the councils and therefore equal access to resources and decision making. This lack of scrutiny of equal access to local government office creates a potential for perpetuating and reinforcing racial inequality and disadvantage.

More frequent counting exercises are needed to provide over-time trends. Local government too often falls between the cracks of existing legislation and auditing practices. Protected characteristics of elected politicians are not tracked by law, as the government has never enacted Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, which obliges political parties to collect data on protected characteristics for political candidates<sup>4</sup>. Elected politicians were also not covered by the Government's Race Disparity

Audit in 2017, in contrast to public sector employment. While there is frequent scrutiny at the Westminster level, and intermittently at the devolved levels, assessments of ethnic equality of elected politicians at the local level is almost never attempted, and this would remain even if Section 106 were to be enacted, as it does not include local government election candidates. Extending and enacting audits in local government would also allow analysis of further intersectional disadvantages with other protected characteristics such as ethnicity and disability, or ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Parliament has become the arena for parties to signal their diversity credentials- the greater visibility at the national level means that having more ethnic minority MPs is symbolically more significant than grassroots diversity. At the local level, therefore, scrutiny of political parties is lower, there are lesser rewards for parties to increase representation, thus a similar demand for diversity may be lacking. Most local authorities remain unrepresentative, with many of the most diverse including London boroughs needing to do much more.

<sup>4</sup>The section 106 of the 2010 Equality puts a duty on political parties to collect and publish data on the protected characteristics of their candidates. Ethnicity, gender and disability are among the protected characteristics.

## Further information

This project on ethnic diversity in local government has been co-funded by ESRC (grant number ES/R009341/1) and School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester. All the responsibility for the content of this briefing lies with the authors.

The method of establishing minority origin relies on the collection and triangulation of publicly available data. Ethnicity of local councillors is therefore observed, and not self-declared. At the first step we hand coded all councillors' ethnicity based on pictures included on the relevant council website, in cases where we lacked pictures or pictures were not definitive, we performed an online search of local media and councillors' own professional websites. Finally, we used OriginsInfo software to auto-code the names of all councillors who we hand coded as ethnic minority, or unknown. OriginsInfo operates a proprietary algorithm to compare personal and family names with the ethnic, religious and cultural origin of 5,000,000 names from around the world. OriginsInfo matches forenames and surnames against a stored database of names and classifies them according to their most likely cultural origins by linguistic and religious affiliations.

For the next phase of the project we are conducting qualitative interviews with local councillors and politicians across the country (ethical approval number 2019-5607-9049). If you would like to participate in this phase of the project, please get in touch with: [Neema.Begum@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Neema.Begum@manchester.ac.uk)

## About the authors:

Prof Maria Sobolewska is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Manchester and works on the political integration and representation of ethnic minorities in Britain and in a comparative perspective, public perceptions of ethnicity, immigrants and integration.

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