POLICY BRIEFING

Achieving gender equality in local government

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Summary

• According to the Centre for Women and Democracy less than one third of councillors in the UK are women, and while women make up three quarters of the local government workforce, most are employed in junior roles and middle management, concentrated in sectors like caring and support services with very few in top positions.

• This briefing draws on research including the Fawcett Society’s research on sexism in local government, the Centre for Women in Democracy’s analysis of women as elected members and good practice from the 2014 Times 50 Best Employers for Women list to assess where women stand in local government and what can be done to improve the position of female politicians and staff.

• This briefing is of interest to councillors and those working in democratic services and HR.

Briefing in full

Introduction

Women make up over half the population. Over three quarters of Council employees are women. But, as a 2012-13 LGA Workforce Survey found only 43% of the top 5% earners are women. For many women a job in local government offers the opportunity to work flexibly and locally. Yet a survey by Iris Consultants found a high degree of gender occupational segregation. So while 85% of residential social workers are women only 37% of environmental health, 43% of trading standards, and seven per cent of building control officers were female.
The situation is even worse for elected members. According to the Sex and Power report released last year by the Counting Women In campaign, only 32 per cent of councillors, 15 per cent of elected mayors, 13 per cent of Police and Crime Commissioners and 12 per cent of council leaders are women.

This briefing draws on research and good practice examples from local government and beyond and makes a range of practical suggestions for ways to improve the representation of women in local democracy, and encourage more Council workers to take up senior roles and enter occupations where they are currently under-represented.

**Women as councillors, council leaders, mayors and police and crime commissioners**

*Why is it important?*

As the Fawcett Society pointed out in its recent report Sexism in Local Government local authorities wield an enormous amount of power.

The report says: “Local government budgets make up a quarter of all public spending (over £100 billion) and deep cuts to local government spending are having a hugely disproportionate impact on women. Lack of female councillors will only exacerbate this situation.”

Also, becoming a councillor is often a route into more senior office such as becoming an MP or MEP. If we are serious about increasing representation of women in Parliament we must provide more opportunities for women to become councillors and take leading roles as elected members.

*What are the barriers?*

**Cultural:** As the Fawcett Society point out, women who choose to stand for election for one of the main parties must get the backing of their party, which may involve spending weeks networking with party officials. Selection panels can be male dominated, opting for ‘safe’ candidates.

There is no mandatory collection of demographic data for candidates either before or after selection. Before the May’s local elections the Women’s Views on News website asked all the main political parties to provide the percentage of female candidates. None were able to do so. This makes it is very hard to see the patterns of candidates who are successful.

The Fawcett report also cites several examples of sexist behaviour by male councillors towards female members, staff and residents. It calls for the reinstatement of the National Standards board, with additional powers to sack councillors, which it believes would provide female councillors with a more independent avenue for redress, as now complaints are investigated by other councillors.

Fawcett also wants the public to have the right to recall serving councillors.
POLICY BRIEFING

Financial: Councillors are not paid enough to live on, so those who are not retired or with independent means must have a job. Council meetings still take place mainly in the evenings – which makes it hard for those with jobs or caring responsibilities to maintain their commitment. Fawcett cites one female councillor who said she was deselected because she could not afford childcare to attend meetings. Councillors are self-employed so cannot access maternity leave and flexible working. There is no facility to job share.

Fawcett calls for councillors to receive proper remuneration and for council meetings to take place at more convenient times.

What can be done to encourage more women to become, and remain councillors?

The role of political parties According to Tulip Siddiq, former cabinet member for culture at Camden Council, it is up to the political parties to encourage more women to stand and support them to get elected and remain councillors for longer than one term.

“Existing research suggests that women are less likely to decide to stand in local elections on their own than men, acting only when asked by a political party. Political parties, and the networks within them, need to acknowledge this by making women feel valued as members of their organisation and political community,” she wrote in a blog for Birkbeck University.

In a recent discussion on this topic on Mumsnet several women felt that they did not feel attached enough to one particular political party to warrant that level of commitment.

In a Mumsnet poll, testing women’s attitudes towards Parliament and politics more generally, over 80% of respondents felt that ruthlessness and being well-off were pre-requisites for political success, over 90% said having connections and 78% said being male.

The role of Councils Authorities like Lincolnshire County Council ran campaigns to encourage more women and residents from black and minority ethnic communities to become councillors. People who were interested could contact the Democratic Services Manager for a discussion. Black and minority ethnic candidates standing for election in the City of Lincoln were profiled in the local newspaper. Lincolnshire County Council also pioneered the use of CrowdHall a social media tool which allows politicians to conduct virtual question and answer sessions with their electors, local people can vote on the priorities which are most important to them and share ideas.

More controversially Lincolnshire voted to increase member’s allowances by £2,000. Part of the motivation for some members voting for the increase was to prevent finance from being a barrier to prospective councillors. However, this has not been welcomed by all councillors and the increases will cost the county a reported £250,000.
POLICY BRIEFING

Promoting women in public life more generally

Areas like Wales and Bristol have run Women in Public Life events to give women who are interested in entering local politics an opportunity to hear from experienced local politicians, network and learn practical skills. Three councillors from Bristol have set up a women’s commission, with broad membership from institutions like the Police and local universities to investigate the lack of female representation on the Council in particular, and formulate practical solutions.

Tower Hamlets Council spearheaded a Women in Public Life campaign some years ago. It organised roadshows in public places like libraries, where women were encouraged to consider a range of public roles such as school governorships, ley membership of health boards and participation in local community forums.

Women in the workforce

Changing the culture

Women dominate the Council workforce, but less than half the highest earners are female.

There are no councils listed in the 2014 Times top 50 Workplaces for Women list. Among the public bodies on the list is the Royal Air Force. The British Army, Royal Navy and Leicestershire Police were among the top 10 public sector employers for women in a Opportunity Now survey in 2012.

It may be that organisations with a macho image have had to work harder to attract women and are less complacent. Commenting on the results Opportunity New director Helen Wells, said: “Some of the organisations may seem a bit of a surprise...It’s fairly obvious that some organisations have diversity challenges. That they tend to be a macho, male environment for instance... Sometimes you can look from outside and make assumptions about what it feels like to be in that organisation. But a lot of organisations are trying to create cultures that really mainstream equality.”

A look at the brochure which accompanied the publication of this year’s Times list suggests that research is vital in identifying the scale of the problem and what is needed to rectify it.

After that it is necessary to recognise the scale of bullying and harassment women face. Last year Opportunity Now launched Project 28 - 40 to look at the concerns and career aspirations of women aged 28-40, because this is the time when women’s pay and promotion starts to fall behind men’s. Over half of the 21,000 respondents said they had been victimised and had their work deliberately undermined. Respondents also believed flexible working meant longer hours and resentment from colleagues and feared for their career progression if they decided to have children.

Beyond that, it may be more helpful to think in terms of inclusion, rather than diversity. Ernst and Young trains employees to avoid unconscious bias. And
according to financial services company State Street, all employees are happier if
they feel engaged.

Eversheds runs a scheme called FlexAble where any employee can informally ask
their manager for flexible working arrangements as and when they need them.
Eighty five percent of employees have used this facility.

At Norton Rose Fulbright a woman returning from maternity leave can request a
maternity buddy, often a woman who has children herself who can talk them through
the experience.

*Encouraging more women into leadership roles*

Citigroup has three rules: to hire more women, to promote and develop more women
and to lose fewer women. They also try to encourage women to take a ‘glass half
full’ approach to promotion.

“If a man has six out of ten attributes needed to undertake a job he will feel he is well
suited. A women is more likely to worry about the four points and may not put herself
forward. Women are more self-critical,” said James Bardrick, Head of UK
Operations.

Group interviews may be better for identifying the full range of skillsets required for a
job, whereas judgements may be limited to a person’s personality or identity when
interviewed one on one.

Women need support networks. Companies like KPMG and Visa have set up in-
house Lean In groups, inspired by the book by Sheryl Sandburg, chief operating
officer at Facebook. Royal Mail operates a scheme called Springboard for 1,000
women in non management roles. Over 40 per cent have taken on extra
responsibilities as a result.

*Breaking down gender role segregation*

The challenge for some organisations in traditionally male dominated areas like
investment banking, engineering and defence is to recruit women in the first place.

Goldman Sachs has a policy of ensuring that half its graduate intake is female. They
encourage English and psychology, as well as maths and economics graduates to
apply. When a senior woman leaves, it endeavours to fill that position with another
woman. Organisations like the RAF and Diagio offer work experience placements to
girls as young as ten.

**Comment**

*Elected members*
Diversity among elected members is at crisis point. Last week it was revealed that that councillors’ average age is now 60. So in many areas elected members fail to reflect the communities they are supposed to represent.

The lack of female councillors still comes as a surprise to anyone who works with voluntary organisations or tenants and resident’s associations. These are full of powerful, capable women. So why do so few of these local activists find their way into the council chambers?

Many argue that paying councillors more would help to attract a younger and more diverse group of people. Others suggest that this would lead to more career politicians and that the additional cost cannot be justified at a time of swinging cuts to frontline services. There have been suggestions that we should consider having fewer councillors and ensure the ones we elect are properly rewarded and given more opportunity to participate in decision making.

There also seems to be something about the way politics operates that women find off putting. Political parties and councils have tended to become more centralised in the last 30 years. In an attempt to present a more professional and united face to the electorate parties of all colours have tended to curtail the ability of ordinary members to challenge and influence policy at party conferences and other events. Most councils work to cabinet or mayoral structures, so decisions are concentrated in the hands of a few hand-picked members.

This leaves the impression that to enter politics candidates have to swallow an entire set of policies whole, or there is no place for them. Politics is even less appealing if they find they have little real scope to shape those policies.

An important factor for women in particular is time. The Fawcett Society calls for council meetings to be held at more sociable hours. Clearly the need to involve women, many with caring responsibilities, needs to be balanced with the need for transparency, allowing the public to attend meetings if they wish. Perhaps greater use could be made of new technologies like Skype or CrowdHall which lessen the need for members to be physically present at every meeting. Councils could also experiment with weekend meetings.

We need to see women’s involvement in politics as part of a much wider drive to involve women in public life more generally. There are lots of opportunities for involvement, such as school governorships, trusteeships of voluntary organisations. These could be seen as a training ground for those who want to become councillors. Political parties should proactively seek out women who are already effective in these arenas and encourage and support them to progress to elected office.

The council workforce

Even though we have an army of female workers in local government, their number are not reflected at senior level. The absence of local authorities in the Times’ list suggests that local government may be guilty of some complacency on this issue.
There is increasing data available about the barriers women face and how to overcome them. The Project 28-40 survey provides a wealth of information on women’s concerns and career aspirations, for example. There is also plenty of innovative practice being implemented within other public bodies and the private sector.

A recent survey by the National Childbirth Trust found that nearly half of women were cutting short their maternity leave because they feared they would lose their jobs. Women in local government are bound to be feeling this kind of pressure, given the scale of job losses and reduction in real pay over recent years. Local Government has, in the past been at the forefront of female friendly working practices such as part-time and flexible working. We must not fall behind.

For more information about this, or any other LGiU member briefing, please contact Janet Sillett, Briefings Manager, on janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk