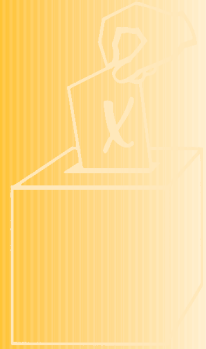




Service Quality



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**OFFICE OF THE
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER**

**LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT
RESEARCH PROGRAMME**

Executive Summary

Equality and Diversity in Local Government in England: A Literature Review

Summary

This report provides an overview of recent literature, which examines how local authorities in England have dealt with issues of equality and diversity. Three themes are covered in relation to equality and diversity: representation and participation; employment; services. The review has found a wide range of literature dealing with ethnic minorities and women and their experiences of local government and a small body of literature dealing with young people's participation in local government. In contrast, little or no literature was found dealing with sexual orientation, disability, and class in the context of local government. While there is a large body of literature dealing with housing and social services provision, and which is beyond the scope of this overview, there is little which looks at equality in service provision holistically and across the range of local authority activity.

Local Authorities and Equal Opportunities

By the early 1980s, many local authorities had developed equal opportunities policies. The impetus for this arose from new legislation (1975 Sex Discrimination Act; 1976 Race Relations Act), as well as lobbying by community and women's groups. The focus of these policies was often, but not exclusively, on women and ethnic minority groups and particularly their access to employment within local authorities. Programmes of awareness training were also developed by some local authorities for their staff.

By the end of the 1980s, equal opportunities policies in local government had been partly discredited; in particular, equal opportunities were associated by some with 'loony left' councils. However, while the success of equal opportunities policies in local government were questioned, it should be acknowledged that local government was in

advance of the private sector in addressing these issues. By the 1990s, the commitment to equality was placed in a different context. The Macpherson Report, 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and the 2000 Race Relations (Amendment Act) all placed new and different pressures or duties on local authorities in terms of delivering equality and diversity.

The Government's commitment to modernising local government includes the promotion of a meaningful equality and diversity agenda. This is based on the assumption that local authorities which are representative and inclusive are better able to deliver satisfactorily to their local communities and will demonstrate better and more inclusive leadership styles. The 2001 Local Government White Paper *Strong Local Leadership: Quality Public Services* emphasises the need for democratic accountability, community cohesion and civic renewal. Specific mention is made of the need to recognise that 'Local areas are becoming more diverse' (2001: 13) and the need for councils to hear all voices. New legislation dealing with the Employment Directive and the Race Directive will also impact on the range of local authority activities including employment practices, consultation with communities and, service delivery and procurement.

Representation and Participation

At present, and despite concerns raised in a number of reports, dating back to the Maud Committee in 1967, there has been little change in the socio-economic profile of councillors. In 1997 and 2001 the Employers' Organisation undertook a survey of councillors in England and Wales. Women, ethnic minorities, young people, people in paid employment, and non-professionals are under-represented in the council chamber (see table below). Widening the pool of people from which councillors are drawn would appear to be a necessary step in broadening the representativeness of elected members, if actual representation is a desirable outcome. While this review has not specifically examined the role of the political parties in this, it is apparent that, as the main conduit for elected members, they continue to have an important part to play in efforts to enhance the representativeness of elected members in local councils.

	1997	2001
Average age of councillors, years	55.6	57.0
Women councillors, %	27.3	27.9
Ethnic minority background councillors, %	3.0	2.5
Disabled councillors, %	10.8	13.1
Councillors aged under 25, %	0.2	0.1
Councillors who are also retired, %	34.9	37.5
Source: Local Government Census, England & Wales, Employers' Organisation (2002)		

Barriers which deter participation as elected representatives in councils, are wider than any which may reside in the political parties, and in part reflect modern society and its demands. One of the biggest challenges for local government is to overcome the high levels of disinterest in both local elections and local authority activities generally. It appears that many people feel that the time demands of acting as a local councillor are too onerous, and difficult to fit in with the burdens of work and home. The traditional time of council meetings (evenings) may preclude participation for some people. Council expenses may impact negatively on means-tested social welfare benefits.

More women stood down at the last set of local elections than were newly elected as councillors; the proportion of ethnic minority councillors also decreased between 1997 and 2001. The larger body of work available on the experiences of women councillors and councillors from ethnic minority groups indicates that within councils there are issues of sexism and racism which impact negatively on experiences of being a local councillor, and which may contribute to decisions to stand down. The question of representation, however, must be examined more broadly than mere election of members from a wider pool of candidates, if it is also important that the structures of councils are representative of local populations. Whether the changes to councils' constitutions (that is, the development of executives and overview and scrutiny) has any effect on this remains to be seen.

The literature review found that the experiences of women and ethnic minority councillors were relatively well-documented. There is a small body of literature dealing with young people's experiences of participation in local government. However, in terms of other under-represented groups, the literature is sparse. Disabled people may find access to the most basic element of the democratic process - voting - difficult when they choose to vote in person, rather than by postal ballot or proxy. Employed people find

it difficult to fit in council duties with work and home life. Nothing in the literature surveyed deals with sexual orientation and elected membership.

Employment

Women comprise the majority of local authority employees, at just under three quarters of the workforce. In contrast, ethnic minority employees are, on average, under-represented in local authority workforces relative to their population size in England. Both women and ethnic minority local authority employees report more barriers in climbing the career ladder, compared to men and white colleagues.

The literature identifies a 'glass ceiling' through which many women and ethnic minority employees in local government find it difficult to pass through. There are very few women or ethnic minority chief executives and there is also under-representation at chief officer level. In addition, problems remain if promotion is secured: the evidence cited here is that senior women and ethnic minority staff do face discrimination, including direct discrimination. This has a negative impact on those who have not broken through the glass ceiling: for women there is evidence that the attitude of male senior staff and elected members towards senior women staff is a factor in deciding against applying for promotion. Both vertical and horizontal segregation (lack of promotion; over-representation in particular departments) is apparent across the different sectors of local authority employment. For part-time women manual workers, there is a tendency for neglect in the implementation of equal opportunities policies, and flexible working may be something which is imposed rather than chosen.

In terms of recruitment, both women and black officers have expressed concern about the role which elected members play in selection of officers, which they believe is to the detriment of candidates who are from ethnic minorities. In addition, while ethnic minority managers do have aspirations to reach the top (chief executive), this is tempered by concerns about becoming isolated as the career ladder is scaled.

Overall, it should be noted that local government has achieved much that neither the private employment sector nor national government have achieved. However, the gains made by women and ethnic minorities in local authorities have been made at a relatively slow pace. Having said that, the equal

opportunities policies of local authorities, and their commitment to implementing them meaningfully are obviously still attractive features of local authority employment for women and ethnic minority people.

Service Delivery

Local authorities are an important deliverer of services to the local communities they serve. As a major provider of services, either directly or indirectly through sub-contracting, local government has an important role in the promotion of equality and diversity. Demographic information can be used to identify sub-groups of the population, which may have different or particular service needs compared to the general local population. The replacement of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) by Best Value (from 2000) enables local authorities to give consideration to wider issues than just cost in service delivery. The development of performance indicators, including those based on user satisfaction surveys, provides local authorities with baseline data on their services. Data from the user satisfaction surveys shows that, overall, ethnic minority users tend to express more dissatisfaction than do white British service users, while women and disabled people tend to express higher levels of satisfaction than men or non-disabled people.

Reducing social exclusion implies that services should meet the needs of the most disadvantaged in order to ameliorate or alleviate that disadvantage. But there is scant evidence that local authorities have moved to a position of implementing equality and diversity in order to promote social inclusion. Policies to promote social inclusion have tended to focus on housing and the areas of worst deprivation. This may mean that some areas and some groups, such as owner occupiers in deprived and run-down areas, miss out from initiatives.

By the 1990s, the shift to consumer oriented services did deliver changes in service delivery, including monitoring of service users in order to ascertain need and quality of service received. A flaw with this approach is that it cannot deliver any information about who does not use a service and why. The business case for diversity emphasises a match between employees and service users: however, this approach to equality and diversity could mean that employees are assumed to be able to deliver appropriate services because of their social characteristics, rather than ability or training.

Conclusions

It is important not to see the three themes examined in this review (representation, participation and leadership, employment, and service delivery) as separate from each other. Policies, including those on equal opportunities or equality, are developed by officers and approved by elected members. While the three strands do overlap and can be mutually reinforcing, this does not necessarily imply a positive or negative relationship among them.

Local authorities have been trailblazers in the field of equalities and there are many examples of good and best practice to be found in this sector. Local authorities are important sources of employment for women and ethnic minority people, for example. Flexible working policies can be important for employees which have family and/or caring responsibilities. However, good practice in recruitment has not always been followed through to ensure equal opportunities in promotion and development. There is also some evidence that there are some problems of sexism and racism for staff within local authorities, coming from both fellow staff and members. These problems cut across the three themes examined in this literature review.

There is a public sector case to be made for equality and diversity which is analogous to the business case, but different from it. As with the business case, this encompasses issues of fairness in employment practices (recruitment, retention, development and training), having a good reputation, access to a wider client or customer base and the avoidance of expensive litigation as a consequence of discrimination. However, for the public sector, there are also issues of equality of access and representation which are not apparent in the business case.

Further information

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