



Bristol
Business School

"Gender Isn't an Issue!"

Case studies of exemplary practice in
promoting gender equality and diversity
in local authorities

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Foreword by Wendy Thomson, Chief Executive, Leadership Centre for Local Government

It's great to see research that engages sympathetically with leadership practice, as this does. *Gender isn't an Issue!* takes five councils, which are led by women politically or managerially, and looks at how they are improving the position of women by their behaviour, and the policies, values and processes they have put in place. It is interesting to note however that two out of the five councils included in this study are led by male chief executives working with women political leaders.

Some of the lessons point to employment policies that one would expect – flexible working, child care support, open recruitment, rewarding performance, and so on. But personal leadership is what comes through as the single most important ingredient. This conclusion is welcome recognition for good leadership in public service reform, and is what we advocate in the Leadership Centre for Local Government. It also shows what can be achieved when elected members and senior officers work together to set the direction and style for the authority. The impact of this 'top team' extends far beyond their direct activities, to influence the way services are offered and all staff work.

You might say that this is fine for councils lucky enough to feature women prominently in their leadership. But what about the rest, the majority of councils where men dominate the leadership cadre?

This research suggests that if women do not feature, their communities, and not just their internal organizations, might well be losing out. At the risk of falling into stereotypes (for this is tricky terrain), the research shows that an outward-looking, customer focused service culture is closely associated with women-friendly environments - at their best, leadership promoting accessibility that is empathetic and experienced with the detail of family and community life.

That these leadership behaviours, and their appreciation, can be learned and adopted, is the clear message. It is not genetic or socially determined. The councils studied demonstrate commitment to developing their people's leadership, and see it as a key mechanism for transmitting values. Leadership is best when it is attuned to its environment, rather than fixed to a set of formal competences - again, views that the Leadership Centre would endorse.

I hope that this good news story of best practice will receive at least the same media attention as the previously hard-hitting research. It is always easier to criticize, so let's recognize an area where local government has made achievements of which some can be proud.

Wendy Thomson

Executive Summary

Inquiry aims

- 1) Develop case studies which demonstrate exemplary practice in progress towards gender equality in five selected local authorities.
- 2) Identify the systemic and cultural factors, working styles and practices and processes that contribute to good practice in gender equality and diversity.
- 3) Point local authorities to best practice so that they might learn from a process which has identified and celebrated achievement.

Case studies

Through an “appreciative inquiry” methodology, five in-depth case studies that identified good practice were developed with Havant Borough Council, Gloucestershire County Council (Social Services Directorate), St. Helens Metropolitan Borough Council, the London Borough of Brent, and Bristol City Council.

Main lessons

- 1) The pivotal importance of organisational and political leadership –
 - The symbolic importance of the sex of the organisation’s leaders. The fact that there is a woman leader and/or chief executive can hold high significance for the organisation and the community.
 - Good gender relations are reinforced by the modelling behaviour of managerial and political leaders, both men and women.
 - A clear consensus between senior managers and elected members about the importance of gender diversity and equality holds high significance for good practice.
 - An aggressive promulgation of gender equality is generally thought to be counter-productive.
- 2) Gender equality and diversity seen as embedded social and cultural constructs –
 - In sites of exemplary practice the assertion that “*Gender isn’t an issue*” represents an authentic belief that gender equality is taken for granted, is culturally embedded, and informs in a naturalistic way human resource and management policies and action
- 3) The legitimisation and encouragement of dialogue about problematic issues in gender equality and diversity –

- Good practice manifests itself as a determined concern to address inequality and discrimination, coupled with the legitimisation of different kinds of conversations and dialogue about equality through the organisation to encourage critical thinking.
- 4) A strategic concern with sustaining momentum with gender equality progress –
- Key players saw the task of sustaining gender equality and diversity progress as a long-term one, to develop policies, cultures and practices which were resilient and impervious to the exigencies of political and financial turbulence.
 - There was a belief that the mere establishment of policies that encouraged diversity was not enough in itself.
- 5) An association made between gender equality and seeing the authority as a community-oriented “open system” –
- Exemplary practice appears to be closely associated with an outward-looking and community-focused mentality held at political, managerial and operational levels.
 - A healthy organisation is associated with a healthy community, with a desire to serve that community effectively, and to be effective.
- 6) Strong connections between gender exemplary practice and effective performance and change management –
- Good performance management did not mean an obsession with measurement but rather an attitude of good management being closely associated with the empathetic treatment of staff along with a collective determination for effective service delivery.
 - Case study authorities emphasised the need to see equality issues as integral to wider change strategies.
- 7) The continuous struggle for gender equality –
- The authorities were not complacent about gender equality and felt that, despite their progress, there were issues to be addressed, e.g. pay inequalities, tackling pockets of “traditionally male” resistance, boosting the confidence and skills of less senior women.
 - They have engaged in a long-term struggle to *re-vision organisational culture*. Some are further ahead than others, but what unites them is a conscious attempt to address deep-seated assumptions and practices that historically have been antithetical to diversity and gender equality.

Implications: how to make progress on gender equality

- 1) Recognise that there isn't a ready-made "tool-kit".
- 2) Recognise the crucial role of effective leadership in culture change.
- 3) Encourage critical review and dialogue.
- 4) Support staff, management and elected member development.
- 5) Work on the remaining inequalities.
- 6) Have hope, keep faith.

Conclusions

The research has delivered some unexpectedly powerful messages about the role and nature of leadership of local authorities. It eschews the common tendency to seek a set of generic competencies for leaders in local government and to stress the technical aspects of leadership roles. Instead we propose that those who are successful in achieving improvement on gender equality are attuned to the environment in which they are operating: they are good *transformational* and *situational leaders* who seek to drive improvement by connecting with their colleagues and the communities that they serve. This conclusion holds direct implications for those whose responsibility it is to develop leadership capacity in local government.

Acknowledgements

It is a normal courtesy to acknowledge the contributions of colleagues and organisations in making research such as this possible. However, we want to go beyond a ritual expression of gratitude because this study demanded considerable time and effort on the part of colleagues in the five local authorities which offered themselves as sites for case study development. Over 100 officers and elected members across participating authorities participated in our research. In some ways it is a pity that we can't name them, but a promise is a promise. The fact that these events happened at all was due to the organising abilities of colleagues in the five councils, and to the preparedness of participants to give up their precious time to contribute to this inquiry. We were struck by the candidness of all our interviewees and participants, and maybe this itself says something about the organisations concerned and their leadership.

We also recognise the contribution of representatives of SOCPO, the IDeA and SOLACE to the work of our inquiry steering group, and thank them for their support and ideas. The members of the Steering Group were –

- Val Brook, Head of Equality and Employment Policy, Wolverhampton City Council (representing SOCPO)
- Danny Chesterman, Senior Consultant, SOLACE Enterprises
- Ruby Dixon, Head of Programmes Beacons and Services, IDeA

Finally this was a difficult piece of research to organise, and we are certain the study would not have happened had not Mandy Wright (Associate Director Employers' Organisation for local government) held it (and us!) together.

Introduction

In May 2001, Bristol Business School published a report¹ that set out the findings of a research study of the experiences of women local authority chief executives. The report demonstrated that not only do women have a tougher time than their male colleagues, but also that many of the blocks and barriers they experience result not from any lack of skill or expertise on women's part but from the nature of the organisations in which they work. The report showed how women are disadvantaged by what amounts in some places to "institutionalised sexism" both in the process of becoming senior managers and in achieving their full potential when they do.

The study concluded that, although there is a part to be played by strategies which support and develop women managers specifically, real progress would only be achieved by challenging and changing the cultures and values that disadvantage women and limit the potential of local authorities to address key social issues such as social inclusion, diversity and community regeneration. The report went on to suggest that creating opportunities for dialogue between key stakeholders in local authorities would be a powerful contribution to bringing about the necessary changes.

The research received a great deal of attention. At the instigation of the (then) Local Government Minister, Dr. Alan Whitehead, a national steering group was set up under the auspices of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM or DTLR as it was at the time) to oversee the implementation of the recommendations set out in the research report. In addition, an ODPM Task Group has also been addressing the problem of bullying and harassment in local government that our report identified.

Although it appears that progress on the ground has been limited, and many recommendations remain to be addressed, there is a growing awareness that attention to gender, race and sexual orientation diversity is a crucial component of local government improvement. Local authorities that are run by people who all think the same way, reinforce each other's views and who are not open to new thinking and new ways of doing things will have limited capacity to improve.

While there is a growing awareness of the need to act, it is thought that some authorities lack the capacity to take forward diversity initiatives. Recent research carried out for ODPM by the Office for Public Management (OPM)² pointed to the tendency in local government to equate diversity with race, especially in rural areas where ethnic minority groups tend to be less visible. Although some authorities have successfully implemented equality or diversity projects, it appears that few are taking a strategic, co-ordinated and corporate approach. It appears that many authorities are unclear how to integrate equality and diversity into mainstream activities and service provision.

¹ Fox, P., Broussine, M., 2001, *Room at the Top? A Study of Women Chief Executives in Local Government in England and Wales*, Bristol Business School, May

²ODPM, 2004, *Equality and Diversity in Local Government in England*, London, ODPM

To help address this situation, this study was commissioned by the Employer's Organisation for Local Government, supported by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), Society of Chief Personnel Officers (SOCPO) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) in early 2004. The task was to identify cases of exemplary practice in local authorities that were pursuing gender equality, and to disseminate such cases in local government as a stimulus for action.

Room at the Top? was presented in 2001 and it was felt that the time had come for another study, to assess what progress has been achieved. However, rather than re-running the earlier research, we proposed that a different kind of study be carried out - an "appreciative inquiry." This proposal was made in the belief that, because of our earlier work and of further studies carried out since by, for example, the Audit Commission and OPM, the lack of progress on gender equality was by now well documented. However, if local authorities could be pointed to exemplars of best practice, they might learn from these and move on through a process which identified and celebrated achievement.

It may seem paradoxical to give this study the title *Gender Isn't An Issue!* As will be seen, we found that a number of people across the case study authorities maintained that "gender isn't an issue". We became intrigued by such assertions because in our experience these statements can be made by those who hold power in organisations as a way of avoiding or denying the reality that, actually, gender is a big issue. However, these cases pointed to another meaning of the phrase – that they had achieved, or were working towards, a systemic or cultural state in which gender equality and diversity was taken for granted at many levels in the organisation. What this appreciative inquiry sets out to do is to understand more about the journey towards this goal.

Aims of the Research

The study's aims were to -

- 1) Develop case studies³ which demonstrate exemplary practice in progress with gender equality in selected local authorities.
- 2) Identify the systemic and cultural factors, working practices and processes that contribute to good practice in gender equality and diversity.
- 3) Make recommendations to enable the Employers' Organisation, IDeA, SOCPO and SOLACE to link the study's findings practically with their policies and strategies concerning the leadership and organisation of local government in England and Wales.
- 4) Provide a learning process for participants in the research.
- 5) Access contemporary research concerning gender in organisations.
- 6) Produce a report and other publications for dissemination in local government and more widely in the public services.

How the inquiry was conducted

Choice of participating local authorities

There was a range of ways by which our five case studies were invited to take part. We worked closely with members of the study's Steering Group to develop a strategy to get a sample of appropriate authorities on board. We began by looking at the latest BVPI statistics on the representation of women in management. An article by Mandy Wright in *Local Government Chronicle*, and a similar introduction to the study on the Employers' Organisation web site⁴, were published in January 2004. Both invited nominations of authorities "which you consider to be examples of good practice in gender equality that local government can learn from". The Steering Group was keen to achieve a spread of different types of authorities (or significant parts thereof) in different regions. We felt it important to include in the sample authorities in which men and women respectively played a significant leadership role, e.g. as chief executive, leader of the council. By and large we succeeded in these aims through a combination of direct contacts with authorities that seemed to meet these criteria, and some offers from chief executives in response to the publicity introducing the study.

³ The original plan was to develop six cases. However a sixth proved to be one too many within our time and budgetary constraints.

⁴ http://www.lg-employers.gov.uk/press/2004_news/gender_3001.html

Inquiry phases

The study involved the following phases -

- A survey of local authorities which appeared to do well in the Best Value Performance Indicator relating to senior women (the percentage of top 5 per cent of earners who are women), to elicit information on how these authorities have managed to make progress in appointing and supporting women in senior posts.
- Five in-depth case studies to identify good practice in the following local authorities -
 - Case Study 1: Havant Borough Council
 - Case study 2: Gloucestershire County Council (Social Services Directorate)
 - Case study 3: St. Helens Metropolitan Borough Council
 - Case study 4: The London Borough of Brent
 - Case study 5: Bristol City Council

The development of these cases studies was achieved in one-day visits by both researchers through -

- interviews with a range of stakeholders in the authorities selected (the chief executive, the human resources manager, the Council Leader)
- a focus group with a cross-section of “front-line” officers
- a focus group with a cross-section of elected members
- a focus group with a cross-section of middle and senior managers
- a review of relevant supporting documentation

As with our previous study, we sought to pursue a collaborative approach. The Employers’ Organisation established a Steering Group made up of representatives from relevant bodies and sponsors of this research. In addition, we sent a draft of each case study back to the local authority concerned as a check on validity. As a result of this process the case studies as presented in this report have been approved as authentic representations of findings in each of the five local authorities.

The inquiry methodology holds two main characteristics -

- Case study method
- Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Case study method

Our approach to this research was to assume that the data would be best formed out of direct accounts of people’s experiences on the ground and in

their roles, using these as a focus for reflection and analysis. We anticipated that there would be a range of experiences, attitudes and values about gender equality, and our methodology needed to be sensitive to capture such varied data. We proposed, therefore, to use the *case study approach*. Case study is the study of the particular -

*an extensive examination of a single instance of a phenomenon of interest*⁵

and,

*a research study which focuses on understanding the dynamics present in a single setting.*⁶

What is it about *these* five local authorities, containing *these* people, under *each* organisation's prevailing conditions that lead to certain outcomes and not others? We have studies of the general – for example, theories concerning the influences of gender and inequality upon organisational effectiveness (a lot of which we reviewed in *Room at the Top?*) – and these provide us with a broad repertoire of explanations. But the study of local contexts and cases allows us to test out theory and to fashion it to the needs to understand particular situations. Where existing theories just don't fit, local studies, with their emphasis on conversation and reflection, provide a base from which to generate explanations specific to the context. Case study combines knowledge and action.

The case study method is also a way of linking inquiry to development. In seeking local explanation, case study works close to research participants, engages them in reflection on what they do, think and value. Proximity draws participants into the process of theorising – in this instance, about what might constitute good practice with regard to gender equality – and gives them a stake in the inquiry. Case studies can engender ownership – both of the problem and of options for change. Where people have a voice in articulating the problem and in theorising about it, they are more likely to invest in solutions.

The use of case studies has its challenges. The hope in case sampling is that we may gain some important insights into the experiences and attitudes of a cross-section of stakeholders that we might not otherwise have. Our approach was based on two considerations. The first was pragmatic – gaining access to staff and elected members in local authorities that hold the potential to be thought of as exemplars of good gender practice. We discussed with sponsors and members of the inquiry's steering group which authorities (or parts thereof) might fulfil this criterion.

Secondly, case studies can be vulnerable to the criticism that it is difficult to generalise from a limited number of cases. It was of course inevitable that the numbers of cases would have to be limited because of time and resource

⁵ Collis, J., Hussey, R., 2003, *Business Research*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2nd Edition), p. 68

⁶ Eisenhardt, K.M., 1989, 'Building theories from case study research', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 532-550

constraints. We have tried to avoid exaggerated claims of generalisability while at the same time to have faith that local government can learn something about best practice with regard to gender through these case studies and that this may contribute to systemic improvement. Each local study broadens the repertoire of explanations and analyses that are available for all to review and to use as appropriate.

Appreciative inquiry

Appreciate Inquiry (AI) has been called -

a new approach to organizational change that dramatically improves performance by encouraging people to study, discuss, learn from, and build on what's working, rather than simply trying to fix what's not⁷.

an approach within organisation development and action research which focuses on the best of 'what is' in a system, rather than problems to be solved, and works at engaging organisational members in envisioning and realising its future⁸.

The origins of AI are closely associated with David Cooperrider⁹ and colleagues at the Case Western Reserve University in the United States who argued that that the way we think and talk about organisations is often to see them as problems to be solved, and we can get trapped into an endless cycle of problem definition and solution. The risk of this is that organisational members can feel criticised. The challenge of AI is to try to see organisations as “miracles to be appreciated”¹⁰. If we can see organisations in this way, the argument runs, we can begin to understand what’s working well and how this is being achieved. Within an action research frame, the amplification of positive factors gives the potential for learning, development and change.

Three underlying assumptions of AI have been described¹¹ -

- organisations are responsive to positive thought and knowledge;
- a positive image of the future, and the process of creating that image, create the energy to drive change;
- change is based on a belief in the “power of affirmations.”

⁷ Whitney, D., Trosten-Bloom, A., Cooperrider, D.L., 2003, *The Power Of Appreciative Inquiry - A Practical Guide to Positive Change*, Berrett Koehler

⁸ Cooperrider, D.L., Sorensen, P.F., Whitney, D., Yaeger, T.F., 1999, 'Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization toward a Positive Theory of Change', Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Co..

⁹ Cooperrider, D.L., Barrett, F., 1987, 'Appreciative inquiry in organizational life', *Organizational Change and Development*, Issue 1, pp. 129-169

¹⁰ Goldberg, R.A., 2001, 'Implementing a professional development system through appreciative inquiry', *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, pp. 56-61

¹¹ Johnson, G., Leavitt, W., 2001, 'Building on Success: transforming organizations through appreciative inquiry', *Public Personnel Management*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 129-136.

The somewhat evangelical tone of the (mostly) American literature on AI may not appeal to post-modern British sensibilities. The claims for the methodology seem over-optimistic, and implicitly seek to exclude the political, emotional and complex realities that are involved in organisational change. Nonetheless we have found that a critical adoption of the approach presents questions and insights which may have been difficult to achieve in a problem-centred approach that AI proponents would suggest as “orthodox.” Our principal question of interviewees and focus groups in the five case studies was “What works and why?”

Entering a case study site with an AI orientation did indeed require us to hold a somewhat different view of the kinds of data we were seeking. We needed to hold an assumption that the local authority in question held the potential for being an exemplar of good practice, and this influenced both the questions we asked, and how we listened to research participants’ reflections. A particular challenge was what to do with contra-indicating data, i.e. views expressed by participants who questioned the organisation’s “qualification” to be regarded as an exemplar. Given that none of the case studies portrays a “perfect” exemplar we needed to adopt a balanced critical view of the local authority while all the while seeking out case studies from which other parts of the system could learn.

The need to adopt the AI approach in this follow-up study of gender issues in UK local government arose, we suspect, from the need to move away from the sometimes pessimistic results coming out from *Room at the Top?*. The earlier study contributed to awareness of the need to address the serious sexism that was uncovered in some places. This current study is intended to help address this situation by seeking to identify good practice in pursuing gender equality which could be disseminated through local government as a stimulus for action.

This report continues by presenting the five cases studies in turn. The final sections pull together the lessons from the case studies and provide an overall analysis of what has emerged from the research.

Case Study One: Havant Borough Council

About Havant Borough Council

Havant Borough is situated on the south coast in the south east of Hampshire. Its main communities are Havant, Waterlooville, Emsworth, Hayling Island and Leigh Park. Its population of 116,800 is relatively old (45 per cent of residents are aged 45 years and over compared to national average of 40 per cent). It has a high level of deprivation relative to the region and nationally (it is the 11th most deprived out of the councils in the South East).

The Council has a Conservative administration, which was elected in 2002 following a period of no overall control. The seven-member Executive has delegated decision-making powers. The Council employs about 460 staff, a large proportion of whom have worked for the Council for many years, and has a net revenue budget of £15,291,000. It outsourced its housing stock in 1994 and has been debt-free since 1996.

Havant is in the middle of a far-reaching programme of organisational change (the Change Development Programme). Eighteen months ago a new Managing Director was appointed who instigated a major restructuring of the authority as well as cultural change designed to make the authority more customer-focussed, to generate capacity to make significant improvement in service delivery and more effective use of resources. As one interviewee commented-

“No male organisation could perform well. A large component is personal values in performance, and a mix of values (male and female) is needed. To be a good high performing, customer-focused organisation, you have to have gender diversity.” (Woman senior manager)

Overview of gender policy and practices

Traditionally managerial posts in the Council, particularly senior ones, have been occupied almost exclusively by men who have worked for the authority for a long time. This male domination is perceived not only to have set a male tone to the authority, but also to have blocked career progression for women coming up through the system.

By the time of our study the position has changed dramatically. Three of the five-person management team appointed following the restructuring are women. The appointment of a new Managing Director has provided the opportunity for-

“A real shake up and an opportunity to get new blood into the organisation.” (Woman senior manager)

Several interviewees attributed the changing gender balance at the top of the organisation to concerns voiced (*“in a low key way”*) by leading women

members. However, both members and officers were at pains to point out that the new women senior managers were appointed first and foremost because of their professional abilities rather than because they were women, although being a woman was an “added bonus” -

“Although there is a feeling that it is important to get the right people at the top of the organisation, it is even better if they happen to be a woman.” (Woman senior manager)

“They are all bright, efficient and motivated. They can’t be criticised on gender terms, because professionally they are very good.” (Woman middle manager)

One of the women members of the Corporate Management Team was appointed to a Chief Officer post prior to the recent major restructuring of the authority. She was explicitly appointed to promote cultural change, but she was only able to achieve a limited amount because she was largely working in isolation. However, what she did succeed in doing was to demonstrate new ways of working and apply new types of skill (partnership working, networking, etc.) within the area for which she had responsibility, and members recognised this would benefit the wider organisation.

Havant has an equal opportunities policy, but this is not pursued in a high profile way. There is quite a strong feeling in the authority that it would be counter-productive to pursue gender equality in “*an up-front kind of way*” as this would only be to court opposition -

“Challenging dyed-in-the-wood attitudes is very sapping and takes a long time. But I’m in ‘the let’s do it’ school rather than ‘let’s have lengthy debates’.” (Woman senior manager)

However, the authority does have a long history of introducing arrangements to support women (and men) with childcare or other caring responsibilities. These have been updated regularly and improved (e.g. recent changes to the flexitime system to reduce core hours to enable staff with children to start later and finish earlier) -

“The Council has always gone out of its way to make it easy for people to be at work and to get them back after they have been away.” (Woman senior manager)

It appears that these arrangements were originally introduced as the result of a paternalistic concern for the welfare of staff rather than a positive commitment to promote gender equality. However, they do provide a solid infrastructure for a now more explicit desire to achieve workforce diversity as a key means for increasing organisational effectiveness.

What does it feel like to work for the Council?

Most interviewees were very enthusiastic about working for the Council and there appeared to be a general mood of optimism about the authority's improvement. A few interviewees commented themselves or reported on comments being made about there now being too many women managers and the perceived difficulties of getting on in the authority unless you were a woman. However, most were enthusiastic about the changes being brought about by the new appointees, particularly women staff who felt that there were now opportunities to participate in more visible activities outside their substantive jobs.

Although people are clear that the senior women now in post were not appointed simply because they were women, they are seen as being good role models. When they were first appointed there was a degree of apprehension that the authority would be "*overrun by women*" and some people felt a little threatened by having dynamic women around because this was seen as calling into question their traditional working practices -

"Some men felt that since they had been doing their jobs for a long time they didn't need to be told about new ways of doing things."
(Woman senior manager)

"When she was first appointed [a senior woman manger], people played up for a while because she was different." (Male middle manager)

However, most interviewees appeared to feel that the environment in which they are now working is much more dynamic and that the skills of both men and women being more fully utilised. There is now "*a real buzz about the place*" and the atmosphere is more relaxed -

"It's always been friendly, but management's more laid back now. It used to be very formal, a "them and us" culture, even colonial."
(Front-line officer)

"I enjoy it. It's laid back, less formal than it used to be." (Front-line officer)

What is your personal experience of the ways in which gender equality is promoted?

The issues most frequently raised by participants were -

- Positive comments on supportive working practices. Although the Council has always been sympathetic to flexible working, it is now becoming even more so. There is now a more corporate approach rather than flexibility varying from manager to manager.

- The shift that has taken place in working practices. The perception is that there is now a much greater emphasis on cross-cutting working, on active 'people management' and the use of ICT, to enhance customer focus and that this shift in emphasis will provide more opportunities for women -

"Women are generally more empathetic and that translates well into customer service focus." (Woman senior manager)

"There are more opportunities for women in a customer focused organisation." (Woman senior manager)

- How the traditional paternalism of Havant is being eroded and it is now "safer" for women to *"put their head above the parapet without fear of repercussions"*, to think of themselves of women and to work in *"a womanly way."* For example, interviewees said -

"The environment is now much more comfortable for you to be yourself if you are a woman. Women who ask questions are seen as being a positive challenge rather than as being 'difficult'." (Woman manager)

"Women were previously seen as being mavericks if they wanted change. Now there are positively cultivated for wanting change." (Male manager)

"There is now a greater degree of openness and directness about the organisation and women are not so frightened to ask for what they want." (Woman manager)

- There is now a more open discourse around issues affecting women, e.g. the "Women in Local Government" lunchtime sessions, which are helping women to have more confidence and feel more valued.

What works and why?

There was a consensus among participants that Havant is now taking a more proactive approach to pursuing gender equality and that it is doing so in an unequivocal but non-confrontational manner. A more confronting approach was thought to be counter-productive -

"My philosophy is that it is better to do it than say it. There is a risk that if you engage in too much discussion about issues such as gender equality you will be drawn into 'enemy territory' and raise people's immune system." (Woman senior manager)

In explaining the successes, interviewees felt that the main contributing factors were -

- The positive role models being provided by senior women managers who are generally seen as having outstanding inter-personal skills. They were seen as being good at articulating what it is they want to achieve (*“everybody is now much clearer on where they stand”*), and in challenging opposition and inappropriate behaviour such as overtly sexist statements, rudeness and aggression. For example -

“They are all very bright, efficient and motivated. They are very good role models. They can’t be criticised on gender terms because professionally they are all very good.” (Woman manager)

“The new Managing Director is making a big difference. She is modelling the right way of doing things and things are being driven through like never before. As successes become evident, the momentum for change is increasing. There is now much more communication.” (Woman middle manager)

“The new managers are very open, very honest and very up-front.” (Male middle manager)

- The fact that the Council’s most senior managers now work as a team and take a co-ordinated and corporate approach to issues such as equality and diversity. Previously, equality issues were pursued by individual managers, but their impact was limited to the areas for which they had responsibility.
- The restructuring of the authority enabled “new blood” to be brought in to challenge traditional thinking and enabled women to be appointed to senior posts. In the past it was difficult for women to achieve career progression because of the lack of turnover amongst senior managers -

“We’re tending to find that shortlists these days consist of more women.” (Elected member)

“Since the restructuring there has been a much greater momentum for gender equality.” (Woman senior manager)

- Havant’s employee profile reflects the changes that are taking place in wider society (the increasing number of women in the labour market).
- The high proportion of women elected members (about 33 per cent of members are women). As one woman member commented -

“If only men dominated the membership, there would only be one way of looking at things, and we would be hampered.”

A woman senior manager added -

“There have been in the past some very strong women members of the Council who have raised the profile of gender issues, but not in

an up front kind of way – more in a subliminal way. They were very concerned about the gender imbalance in the officer structure.”

- The strong mandate for change that has been given by members to the new Managing Director and the continuing support that she has from them as she implements change.

What else could be done?

Although interviewees reported that a lot had been achieved in a short space of time, there was still a great deal to be achieved -

“There are still many people at all levels, particularly those that have been here a long time, who remain intransigent about change.” (Senior woman manager)

“There are pockets of wholly male preserves which have been traditionally so. Some in these pockets find it difficult to accept having women in senior management roles.” (Male senior manager)

The particular areas in which interviewees felt that there was scope for further improvement were -

- ***Increasing member support and understanding of the need for gender equality.*** According to some interviewees, many members do not see gender issues as something needing concerted attention (*“They feel that there are more important things to be done”*).
- ***Increasing the proportion of women at Service Head level.*** At the time of the research, only one of the eight Service Heads was a woman. There was felt to be a need to encourage women generally to move into management roles and tackling those pockets in the organisation that remain male preserves -

“We really ought to be doing more to encourage professional women to move into management roles.” (Woman senior manager)

“We know where the male bastions are. We need to do something about them.” (Woman manager)

- ***Ensuring that policies and practices relating to gender equality are applied consistently.*** Although there have been improvements in this respect, there are still some concerns about the differential treatment of and support for women.
- ***Changing the hierarchical nature of the authority*** that is seen as detracting from cross-cutting working and organisational learning. Many women do not feel comfortable with hierarchy -

“When you make a suggestion about an improvement, you have to go to your boss, who has to go, to his [sic] boss and so on up the hierarchy. We’re a bit too hierarchical here, and the answer always comes back that it will cost too much.” (Front-line officer)

- **Breaking down the fear of change** that still exists in some areas parts of the authority and which is hampering progress –

“I’m aware that there’s a fear of change in some quarters, and this can be an impediment to change. What I do is to ensure that I communicate and that I’m visible, seen to be leading the change. Fear is linked with gender because the change is being led in a clear-cut way by us at senior management level.” (Woman senior manager)

Main learning points about good practice in gender equality in Havant Borough Council

- 1) The Council has had in place over several years the infrastructure, e.g. flexible working arrangements, support for childcare, etc., necessary to support women working for the authority. Although this infrastructure has not stemmed primarily from an explicit desire to promote gender equality, but more of a paternalistic concern for staff welfare, it does mean that there is a good basis for the more concerted approach that is now being taken to gender equality.
- 2) Senior officers have been given strong backing from members for cultural change and the cultural change that is being implemented is one that many women find more conducive and supportive.
- 3) The new leadership style being pursued by the recently appointed Managing Director and her Corporate Management Team helps women in the organisation. The new leadership style, which is epitomised by a high degree of visibility and consistent communication, not only facilitates change but provides a strong signal that change is intended.
- 4) The case study was conducted at a time when Havant was part way through a change process and it was obvious that the changes taking pace were impacting on some parts of the organisation faster than on others. However, it appeared that there was a growing warmth for change because it was becoming evident that the changes would benefit men as well as women.
- 5) There was a general appreciation of the link between customer focus and gender equality. However, this appreciation was clearer for some people (mainly women) than for others.

- 6) A great deal of emphasis was being placed on gender equality being pursued as part of an overall change strategy rather than as a stand-alone policy goal.

Case Study Two: Gloucestershire County Council (Social Services Directorate)

About Gloucestershire County Council

Gloucestershire is a large County. It has a population of about 565,000 and covers approximately 2,700 square kilometres. It has two main centres of population - Gloucester (population 107,421) and Cheltenham (population 105,823). The rest of the County is largely rural, served by a number of medium-sized market towns such as Tewkesbury, Stroud and Cirencester. Key features of the population of Gloucestershire are -

- A lower than national proportion of 0 to 15 year olds and a higher proportion of retired people, an imbalance that is projected to grow.
- The ethnic minority population is 2.5 per cent, which is significantly lower than the England and Wales estimate of 7.2 per cent. It is concentrated in Gloucester City where the proportion rises to 6.7 per cent.
- A population that is currently growing at an average annual rate of about 2,500, which is higher than the national average but the lowest growth amongst shire counties in the South West. Much of this growth is due to net in-migration that is largely being accommodated in and around Gloucester and Cheltenham.

The economy of the County is relatively buoyant and has sustained a level of prosperity well above the national average. However, although the County is predominantly prosperous there are some areas of deprivation, e.g. the inner city area of Gloucester contains wards that score poorly on the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

At the time of our study Gloucestershire was run by a joint Labour/Liberal Democrat administration. This administration recognised the need for major change in the organisation and appointed a new woman Chief Executive in December 2000 who was given a mandate to lead the change process and restructuring. The approach taken to change was described as -

“An appreciation of the need to give people reflective space, giving space and support to directors and heads of service, underlining the ‘golden threads’ - of communication, performance, customer access.” (Woman senior manager)

The new Director of Social Services was appointed in April 2000 and a joint Audit Commission and SSI review that produced highly critical findings took place a year after her arrival. At around the same time the Directorate had to tackle a big budget overspend crisis. The new Director was able to influence the final inspection report, including gaining recognition for some of the Directorate's successes. However, it was obvious that fundamental changes were needed to bring about a shift from low to high performance.

Despite some undermining of, and resistance to, the change programme, it involved the setting of a clear vision and the introduction of structural changes which were seen as having been very successful.

Overview of gender policy and practices

Since the appointment of the new woman Chief Executive, the authority has been taking a concerted approach to removing the “glass ceiling” that had existed: three members of the six-person corporate management team and one-third of service heads are women. The change process on which the authority embarked has created a culture and climate in which it is possible for people to progress. It was felt by a number of interviewees that this environment is very encouraging for women -

“The culture and climate here is such that if you want to get on, it's possible to achieve. It encourages women.” (Woman chief officer)

The corporate approach to gender equality was described as one that has been committed and sustained but quite “low key.” Gender equality is seen as being an integral part of a wider programme of change; it was based on a guiding principle that was referred to as “emotional intelligence” rather than an overly aggressive approach -

“There's a subliminal communication through the organisation, at least I hope so. Gender equality is part of, and just a part of, the wider and deeper culture change that includes openness, non-hierarchical, risk-taking and innovation.” (Woman chief officer)

This approach is mirrored in the Social Services Directorate, where the way in which gender equality is being dealt with was described as follows -

“There is no up-front and overt drive to promote gender equality in the department. It is embedded in day to day management practice, such as in the very inclusive way in which meetings are run - managers make sure that everybody gets the opportunity to contribute. The traditional approach to gender equality bordering on positive discrimination tends to be counter-productive because it makes people feel that they are losing out.” (Woman senior manager)

“Truly I don't think that gender is an issue here. It's about performance.” (Male middle manager)

“The Directorate and local government generally need more people who are listeners and good at partnership working and that tends to be women. You're more likely to find women in these roles nowadays, and today's competencies that are needed are more associated with women. But this hasn't been a reverse crusade, the

place isn't anti-men: the SSD DMT consists of two women and three men." (Male senior manager)

"The Council, especially SSD, is very good at promoting equalities. It hasn't pushed this, it hasn't proselytised, and it's come about naturally." (Leading member)

This approach is seen as having been very successful and as now being embedded in the Directorate -

"When I was made manager in the [area] office, there were only women in the job at operational level, but the implicit notion was the real stuff is done by the men - women were OK for the fieldwork, but men ran the offices. But now there's been a great change, there are a lot of senior women managers. At first it was a bit of a joke, but now it's embedded." (Woman middle manager)

Although there had traditionally been a good balance of men and women managers at middle manager level, as is often the case in social services departments, the Directorate had few women at more senior levels. Explicit attention has therefore been given to addressing the glass ceiling. For example, one senior manager described how she had been given the opportunity to recruit a new management team and did so in an awareness of the need to have a balance of men and women on the team.

The Directorate has also sought successfully to recruit women to professional roles that have traditionally been held by men, e.g. posts in IT and procurement. To demonstrate the Directorate's success in pursuing gender equality, some interviewees cited the fact that there have been no recent male/female discrimination cases.

"We get very few cases of sexual discrimination or harassment cases now. The gender issue is not a problem here. There's been a concerted effort. Indeed some men may be feeling a bit marginalised now!" (Woman senior manager)

However, there have been some other issues that Gloucestershire Social Services has had to tackle that are quite specific to the Directorate, most notably the imbalance of men and women in front-line positions and in caring roles -

"The caring jobs in the department are very dominated by women, so promoting gender equality has involved the active recruitment of men to enable the department to be more responsive to male service users." (Woman senior manager)

What does it feel like to work for the Directorate?

Because the Directorate has been through a major restructuring, a number of people in key posts are newly appointed and therefore well placed to comment on the atmosphere prevailing in the Directorate. One recently appointed senior manager said -

“When I arrived I was very struck by the feel of the place, which is very informal and relaxed. Women seem to feel very comfortable here.” (Male senior manager)

And a middle manager commented -

“Gloucestershire is the most inclusive authority I’ve worked for compared with [previous employing LA]. There’s a nice atmosphere in Gloucestershire.”

Although front-line staff not based in Shire Hall feel somewhat detached from what is going on, they still describe the culture of the Directorate as being “friendly”, “comfortable” and “informal” -

“It’s a place where you can say things and get listened to.” (Front-line officer)

“There’s a lot of listening going on.” (Front-line officer)

However, another interviewee drew attention to a downside of the Directorate’s success in removing the glass ceiling -

“The fact that there are so many women around in senior management roles is sometimes a bit daunting for men lower down the structure. They show their discomfort by referring to the woman-dominated departmental management team as ‘PMT’.” (Woman senior manager)

In addition, although Gloucestershire Social Services is felt generally to be a comfortable place to work, it became obvious during the interviews that there are pockets where people feel very uncomfortable indeed -

“In general this is not a fearful place, but there are significant pockets of this going on, in both Shire Hall and in establishments.” (Woman front-line manager)

Participants cited that in a recent staff survey in the Directorate 11 per cent of staff said that they had experienced bullying behaviour. This bullying was attributed to lack of management skills -

“In some teams in SSD, there are areas where it’s difficult to work – sometimes managers can’t cope.” (Woman middle manager)

Where bullying exists it is perceived that it very much militates against gender equality.

What is your personal experience of the way in which gender equality is promoted?

The consensus amongst interviewees and focus group participants was that the Directorate has gone a long way towards eradicating discriminatory practices and that women are now operating on “a level playing field.” For example, participants said -

“My gender and sexual orientation (I am a lesbian) haven’t made any difference to my promotion to service manager. I didn’t expect to get the post at that time. But, to be fair, I was recruited.” (Woman middle manager)

“It [the Directorate] used to be male-dominated, not just numerically, but also in attitudes. There is though now a desire to care here – my personal problems have never been brushed aside.” (Woman middle manager)

“They [senior managers] set out very clearly what is and is not acceptable. You don’t expect to be treated unfairly.” (Woman middle manager)

They compared the situation in the Social Services Directorate favourably to other parts of the Council -

“I’m not sure about the rest of the County Council. In some areas which are more male-dominated I find I can be dismissed.” (Woman middle manager)

People were also quite clear that gender equality was not just being pursued for the sake of increasing women’s representation in the Directorate, but that there were real service improvement imperatives for doing so -

“In this Directorate, we’re managed by both male and female managers, and it’s really good. In Children’s Services we try to have a good gender mix in homes to reflect clients’ needs.” (Male middle manager)

However, it was recognised that promoting gender equality amongst front-line staff was quite challenging because of societal attitudes -

“A lot of men out there are into the macho thing, believing that working in social services is not for them.” (Elected member)

“Men have a more difficult time in the field than women, e.g. in working with very vulnerable families. But on the other hand, they are good with young lads.” (Elected member)

What works and why?

The response of interviewees to this question was unequivocal. Above all else, the successes that have been achieved in terms of gender equality were attributed to strong leadership and the way in which that leadership is exercised: a visible and open style with a great emphasis on communication and dialogue -

“Management is very approachable and communicates well.”
(Woman front-line officer)

“The leadership style is definitely not macho. The women in senior management posts don’t try to be tougher than men.” (Woman senior manager)

“She [the Director] gets out a lot.” (Woman front-line officer)

One interviewee drew attention to the fact that in a recent inspection of Children’s Services, the (woman) inspector commented on the strength of leadership of the authority and of the Directorate and the impact that it has on the quality of the services. She made an explicit link between the leadership style of the effective women at the top of the organisation and service improvement.

While success is largely attributed to senior managers and the way in which they model behaviour, recognition was also given to the leadership provided by key elected members, including the woman Cabinet member with responsibility for social services who was described as providing a *“powerful lead”* on gender issues and as being very *“pro women”* -

“Leading members, including the Cabinet member for social services are very proud of having so many good senior women managers around. They don’t make a song and dance about this, but it’s nevertheless obvious that they are keen to encourage women to succeed and to feel valued for their contribution.” (Senior woman manager)

It was also suggested that it has been helpful that many initiatives in the Directorate are mandatory and universal (particularly training initiatives such as the Foundation Management Course), which means that women have to go through it rather than *“men elbowing their way in to take the hog’s share of what is on offer”* (male senior manager) There is a limited range of specialist initiatives, but they are available if women prefer them, e.g. Women in Management courses provided by external agencies.

Other reasons cited for Gloucestershire Social Services' success in achieving gender equality included -

- Good recruitment processes which apparently feel comfortable for women because they are informal and because there are so many women around to signal that the authority is serious about appointing women and that women candidates are competing on a level playing field.
- The authority is flexible as an employer, e.g. encouraging home working, nine-day fortnights, etc.

"The emphasis is on getting the job done rather than when and where people work." (Senior woman manager)

- The fact that the Directorate had experienced a major restructure which presented opportunities for appointing new people that hadn't existed previously.

A number of interviewees pointed out that "success breeds success" - once there are a number of women around in high-profile posts this encourages other women to apply for more senior jobs -

"The more women there are around the more confident women are about applying for jobs and feeling that they can progress. Freedom also breeds freedom. The more space that they are given to perform in their own way the more they can show how different ways of doing things can work." (Male senior manager)

"When you appoint good women and they do well perceptions about women change and more women get appointed." (Elected member)

What else could be done?

While fully recognising the Directorate's success in its approach to gender equality, some interviewees sounded a note of caution. In particular, they pointed to there being a risk of complacency because there are so many women in senior positions. They cited the need for a sustained and vigilant approach to gender equality -

"My concern is that it may have become complacent. There is some evidence for this. We have to ensure that gender relations remain good. It won't just happen. There has been some very good practice, not to be pushed to the extreme, but not just left either." (Leading elected member)

Interviewees also highlighted some areas for further improvement including -

- **Addressing gender imbalance at less senior levels in the Directorate -**

“We’re short of male care staff. They don’t apply for those jobs and therefore there’s a shortage of male staff, which is a problem operationally. We need to make staffing as diverse as possible.” (Woman middle manager)

“We’ve got used to women at the top of the organisation. But I went to a qualifications ceremony recently, and only about 2 per cent were men. Gender equality also involves men.” (Elected member)

“The next job is to convince men that they are needed in this place.” (Elected member)

- **Equal pay issues -**

“There still are some barriers about women getting on, and we’re dependent on, and collude with, the employment of low-paid part-time women.” (Male senior manager)

- **Issues around work/life balance and more flexible working for more senior managers.** It was felt that the flexible working patterns had benefited more junior staff but were less available as people progressed up the ladder -

“For women to get on here, women still have to work long hours, and give up evenings and week-ends. It is significant that a lot of the recent women managers appointed are of people with few significant domestic ties. But women with no ties get to work long hours. The work/life balance needs to be tackled, and to have part-time and job share managers’ posts.” (Woman middle manager)

“A big question for me is whether we make it hard to appoint women in middle management who have family or other caring responsibilities at home. I’ve defended the restructuring of some jobs to enable this to happen, but been under some criticism, sometimes from other women, in the sense of ‘I’ve made it, why do you have to make allowances for them?’” (Woman senior manager)

“The fact that senior managers in the Directorate have no caring responsibilities sends unfortunate messages.” (Senior woman manager)

- ***Raising confidence levels to encourage even more women to come forward for promotion***, particularly those that feel unconfident about doing so because they have previously been discriminated against.
- ***Ensuring that front-line staff understand and support the Directorate's approach to gender equality -***

"It is a real challenge in a big dispersed department such as this one to ensure that everybody knows what we are trying to achieve and to role model behaviour so that everybody will see it."
(Senior woman manager)

Main learning points about good practice in gender equality in Gloucestershire Social Services

- 1) Promoting gender equality in a service department where women have traditionally predominated and which is operationally dispersed, raises particular challenges and calls for different types of approach, e.g. the need to change attitudes and break down stereotypes in local communities as well as within an authority.
- 2) The concerted and consistent approach that has been taken to gender equality over a number of years means that it is now quite firmly embedded in the way in which the Directorate operates. However, there is some concern that because this is the case and there have been some obvious successes, particularly in respect of breaking the "glass ceiling", there is now risk of complacency. The Directorate therefore needs constantly to "refresh" its approach to gender equality to ensure that progress continues and to address issues that remain to be tackled, e.g. work/life balance and flexible working for more senior staff, pockets of bullying, low wages, etc.
- 3) "Success breeds success." Once there are women around in prominent and senior positions who are demonstrably successful, this not only breaks down stereotypes of what women can and can't do and builds support for the appointment of more women, but also encourages other women to come forward for promotion.
- 4) Role modelling by senior managers and leading members is vitally important in giving momentum to programmes of gender equality. Equally important is the leadership style they adopt. A leadership style characterised by informality, openness and communication are both seen as being crucial in creating an environment in which women can flourish.
- 5) Although people emphasised that discrimination no longer occurs and sexual harassment is a thing of the past, there is still a propensity towards a long-hours culture, which means that as women in more

senior posts are not able to enjoy the work/life balance available to their less senior colleagues.

- 6) Approaches to gender equality involving attention to softer issues such as making staff feel valued and empowering them, can be more successful than programmes emphasising more “technical” initiatives such as programmes of training, etc.

Case Study Three: St. Helens Metropolitan Borough Council

About St. Helens Metropolitan Borough Council

St Helens lies within the Merseyside region, between Liverpool (12 miles) and Manchester (25 miles). It has a population of nearly 177,000. The number of under-16s in the borough is in decline, while there is a growing elderly population. Unemployment levels are improving, running at 4.1 per cent for males and 1.4 per cent for women. Despite growing levels of affluence, the borough continues to face environmental problems from older or declining industries, including significant areas of dereliction and areas of poor building stock. St Helens ranks as the 42nd most deprived authority in England.

The Council has placed considerable emphasis on its ten-year City Growth Strategy (CGS), the intention being to give a “fresh momentum for innovation, growth and enterprise, fuelled by new partnerships dedicated to stimulating wealth creation.” Partnership working with the community and the private sector are intrinsic to the strategy. The central tenet of “Transforming St. Helens” rests on four themes – transforming the business base, achieving a cultural transformation, achieving a physical transformation, and transforming perceptions of St. Helens. For example, within the third of these, priority is being given to revitalising the town centre. The CGS proved to form an important context for learning more about the Council’s exemplary practice in gender equality.

At the time of our visit in 2004, a 33 strong Labour Group led the Council. Liberal Democrats held 15 seats and the Conservatives 6. The Council’s Executive was a single party executive while the LibDem Leader of the Opposition chairs the Overview and Scrutiny Commission. The Council drew up a Community Consultation Strategy at the heart of which were eight Community Forums whose task included encouraging greater participation of community groups in neighbourhood planning.

The Council is managed by a Corporate Management Team (CMT) of eight directors led by a Chief Executive who has held the post for 12 years. When she was appointed she was the only senior woman manager. However, she maintains that she did not set out to appoint women around her. Her emphasis was on transparent and professional recruitment practices and a lot of money was spent on training people to promote this. Such practice helped women get appointed.

Overview of gender policy and practices

In pursuing the equalities agenda, top management feels the Council is working against the culture of the local community, particularly that of the business community which is “way behind” the public sector in terms of appointing women. The gender equal climate within the local authority therefore was not regarded as necessarily reflecting the wider community. For example, there could be strong gender-biased attitudes expressed within schools, and St

Helens experienced higher than average levels of domestic violence. However many community organisations and partner agencies, including the Chamber of Commerce, are led by women. Paradoxically one woman senior manager felt that the Council's effectiveness in performance and equalities terms was somewhat reflective of the social history of the local community -

"There is however a long history in the town of women working, and there is a sense of it being a matriarchal society - strong women in a close-knit family, strongly Christian and stable. So women role models are not unusual - strong women leading within stable multi-generational families."

In the total workforce, 75 per cent of employees are women. A high percentage of senior positions across all services (45 per cent) are held by women, placing St. Helens within the top quartile for comparator local authorities. The Council has a comprehensive Corporate Equality Plan which sets out equality policy statements for age, disability, sexuality, race, faith and belief, as well as gender. In April 2004, the Council was nominated for inclusion in the inaugural edition of *Top Women in Business and Government* that resulted from a survey of 10,000 organisations in the UK. Elected members are regarded as having been very supportive of the equalities agenda, and they link this with the desire to be a "quality authority" based on the appointment of good people.

St. Helens has developed a range of flexible working practices, e.g. job share arrangements, and again elected members are supportive and don't see such practices as antithetical to service quality. The view is held that an organisation can perform well and be a fair employer. The Council achieved 'excellent' status in the CPA preceding our study, the first local authority in Merseyside to do so.

The Chief Executive has set out actively to establish a culture of equality. She acts somewhat as a role model by having a career and a family (she was pregnant and had a young child when she was appointed). She encourages people to go home to their family and challenges people *"who think that they have to spend 13 hours a day behind a desk."*

St. Helens invests considerably in staff development, including the sponsorship of several women to take degree courses. The thinking is that education helps to build women's confidence and that attention needs to be given to succession planning. We found that there was a consensus among many to whom we spoke that confidence levels of younger women in the organisation is increasing perceptibly and there is now a supply of women to take advantage of management opportunities. Senior management feels that the Council was advancing on two fronts - raising awareness within the organisation of equality issues and challenging unhelpful attitudes and tackling disadvantage. The Chief Executive thought that there was a need for *"consistently seeking to win hearts and minds."*

The Council has also invested heavily in equalities training. All senior managers have diversity training as part of their development. Elected members have

training as well as officers. Diversity is seen as an integral part of other training courses, and it is not seen among staff as being pursued in an aggressive way but in more of a “drip-drip” way. On many occasions, participants (elected members, managers and staff) told us that equalities issues come as “*second nature to people*” in the authority – “*Gender doesn't really cross our minds, you just get on with the job*” as one (male) front-line member of staff put it. Gender issues are dealt with alongside other equalities issues rather than in isolation. The overall emphasis is on valuing people through a diversity approach. For example, at the time of our visit (May 2004) the Council was giving a special emphasis to disability issues.

What does it feel like to work for the Council?

All the focus groups we held at St. Helens were, generally, very positive about gender equality. Most colleagues spoke highly about the organisational culture, about what they experienced as effective leadership from both the CMT and elected members, and about how the authority gave emphasis to staff (and member) development. We were on the lookout for any tendency towards hyperbole that can occur in these situations. We checked our data several times, and found that all the groups and individuals we talked with shared with us a consistent picture of an employment experience which is gender equitable and empathetic to staff needs. Nowhere is perfect, and there were suggestions about needs for further development (see below). The openness with which any critical comments were offered made the overall perception of pride in St. Helens Council seem highly authentic. These thoughts are captured through the following representative quotes from across the authority -

“I've worked here for 20 years and noticed significant changes in that time - the way the Council plans ..., appraisal, links with training plans, encouragement to move on and up, encouragement of staff development. I'm proud to work here. We're not dictated to, we get clear guidance, and we feel we all contribute. The development of middle and senior management networks has been important, there's good relationship building and friendships, and we feel we've contributed to this.” (Woman middle manager)

“In Social Services there's a higher proportion of women anyway, and I'm used to being managed by a woman. There's no difference. It's a nice culture with a general feeling that people prosper here (and unlike other places, it's not [a question of] the organisation prospering, and staff not).” (Male middle manager)

“There are many more women than anywhere else I've worked – the Chairs are all women. I've never worked in such a place.” (Woman CMT member).

What is your experience of the ways in which gender equality is promoted?

There were five factors which were most often mentioned by respondents as contributing to gender equality in St. Helens. These factors overlap and together appear to contribute cumulatively to a positive gender and diversity culture – leadership, emphasis on member and staff development, flexible working practices, a positive diversity culture and an emphasis on community-orientated performance. The consensus between the hierarchical levels of the organisation, from front-line staff to senior managers and elected members, is noticeable.

- The importance of leadership was mentioned time and again.

“Leaders - the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council - provide strong models. They call people by their first names.”
(Woman middle manager).

“The Leader, Chief Executive and members - they do speak to you; relationships are fine and friendly.” (Male front-line staff).

“There is lots of communication in the authority including from the Leader and the Chief Executive who get themselves around the place including talking to front-line staff.” (Male senior manager).

“... there's a good officer/member relationship here - we need each other do our jobs. The member training includes equalities. There are some from the 'old school', but you can be challenging of them. Members recognise people, on the whole they're extremely supportive and appreciate staff. The woman Leader is very approachable, and praises the team.” (Woman middle manager)

“Having a woman chief executive who is very good demonstrates the potential of women. She is very approachable and this sets the tone for the culture of the authority.” (Trade union official)

- We were told that the budget for staff and member training had doubled in the past two years. Some of these resources have been allocated to the development of horizontal (“cross-cutting”) relations in the authority, for example through the middle management network. There is a perception that a training and development investment impacts beneficially on the organisation’s pursuit of equality -

“We have invested heavily in developing a middle management network, to grow our own people, encouraging people to speak out so that they grow in confidence. We try to be developmental.”
(Woman member of CMT)

“A lot of attention has been given to people development as well as training - looking at individual development needs, which ensures

that people get what they need to progress. This has helped women.” (Woman senior manager)

“There is a lot of emphasis on developing women and valuing women.” (Male senior manager)

- The authority had worked hard to modernise its employment practices, such as job-share and part-time working. This has evidently been coupled with increasing the discretion of managers in making sensible flexible arrangements when necessary -

“We’re trying to introduce more flexible working practice to respond to these demands, for example a four day week for someone who we could have lost (and I didn’t want to lose) because of family demands. And another who is also on a four day week because of a dependent parent – we were desperate not to lose her. The extra day off work made the whole difference in these cases.” (Woman member of CMT).

“There’s more flexibility now - women can work part-time, job share - really good.” (Woman front-line staff)

- The organisation has a “feel” of a positive diversity culture and being supportive and empathetic to staff at all levels -

“But I have never felt patronised or looked down on since I came here.” (Woman member of CMT).

“You have to see the other person’s point of view, don’t you. It’s good to get around a table and talk it through. Training comes to the fore: it’s still a learning curve for all of us ... I don’t think “them and us.” I go and visit the [named] Unit and I speak to the staff and the clients, and sometimes I take up things for them. That’s what we’re here for, and it’s nice that they feel comfortable in approaching me.” (Male elected member).

“Having more women around impacts on the culture of an organisation – a more open atmosphere where issues can be raised and discussed.” (Woman senior manager).

“St Helens is an authority that likes to get things done and as a result there are lots of opportunities to get involved and to contribute and for the contribution to be valued. This works well for women. People like working for St Helens. There is no stifling bureaucracy or elitism. It is very informal and casual and creativity is encouraged. It is a very womanly environment.” (Male senior manager).

- The authority is able to demonstrate its emphasis on community-orientated performance, making clear links between its diversity culture and “hard-

nosed” performance. It seems to have achieved a balance between being a place which is sensitive to staff needs, but also a one where a commitment to performance effectiveness and being outward looking is regarded as essential. St. Helens therefore is not a place where you can “float”, and this is true both of the emphasis that must be given to serving the community well and to the elimination of discriminatory practice.

“This town is successful, and that’s what we’re after regardless of party – every member is working for the constituency. ... It’s important we say that to officers. Good performance is noticed from the outside.” (Woman elected member).

“People are very proud to work for St Helens. Many people have been here for a very long time because they like being here. They like it because although they are expected to work hard, they are given recognition for what they achieve and because poor performance is not accepted. If you don’t perform it gets dealt with.” (Woman senior manager).

“Achievement-orientated. They want St Helens to be really really good. I’ve never felt any gender issues from members here, they’re just interested in whether you can do the job.” (Woman CMT member).

“It’s gone from a local authority that ‘floated along’ to one which is performance-led - there’s an emphasis on targets which are strategically led. People are helpful and respond to blockages.” (Male middle manager).

“I’ve seen quite a change over time. There’s been an investment in the town itself - people can see what’s on offer, and it’s an attractive package.” (Male front-line staff).

What works and why?

One of the consistent messages from this case was the statement that *“gender isn’t an issue here”*, mentioned by many respondents. In other circumstances such a statement could be taken as a form of denial or avoidance about gender issues, a politically correct stance which masks a reality which is more discriminatory. However, in this authority, it was clear that such a statement indicated that the experience of working was one where gender equality was taken for granted – as second nature. For example, it was emphasised to us on numerous occasions – by elected members, members of the CMT, managers and front-line staff - that what was important was recruiting the best qualified and suitable person for the job, irrespective of gender –

“Gender doesn’t really cross our minds; you just get on with the job.” (Male front-line staff).

“Both the Leader and the Chief Exec. are women – it’s whoever’s best for the job that matters.” (Woman front-line staff).

“We’re not politically correct: we don’t positively discriminate. When we recruited the Director of Education, we didn’t positively discriminate” (Woman elected member)

“... It’s if they have the qualification, and communications again. It doesn’t matter if you’re a man or a woman so long as you can do the job.” (Male elected member)

What else could be done?

While the vast majority of the data indicates exemplary practice, respondents admitted that St. Helens Council was not perfect, and there remained challenges and difficulties. However, as mentioned earlier, we were struck by the willingness of participants to be open about difficulties and needs for development or improvement. Such frankness itself suggests both the authenticity of the overwhelmingly positive data, and confirmation about a non-punitive organisational culture.

- **Persistence of some “traditionally male roles.”** Participants occasionally pointed to the existence of pockets of employment that were still male preserves. In part this was attributed to the Council’s struggle to promote gender equality in the context of a community in which conservative and sexist attitudes towards gender remained -

“However, although the authority has been very successful in getting women into senior management posts, the authority has been less successful in getting women into traditional male roles which may be due to the strong white, male working class nature of the town.” (Male senior manager).

“Diversity is not a natural feature of the local community so we actively have to work on equality to achieve progress. It is quite difficult to be yourself if you do not conform to traditional stereotypes so there is real job to be done to make everybody feel valued.” (Leader of the Council).

- **Remaining inconsistencies in implementing good equality practice.** The few (but not insignificant) mentions of this issue suggest that exemplary practice can be fragile inconsistencies in some parts of the organisation, requiring constant monitoring.

“The Council has developed family friendly policies but these are inconsistently applied - in [certain areas] some managers are not open to new ways of working.” (Trades union official).

“Well ... simply saying that staff should work in an empowered way in all parts needs constant work. ... There’s some of the old boy network, men who have been in position for many years, and there’s a lack of awareness among them about the effects of their behaviour - they can be exclusive. There’s a need for conscious working on this.” (CMT member).

- **Remaining need to encourage junior women.** It was felt by some colleagues that the authority needed to remain alert to the need to “plug away” at encouraging women in more junior hierarchical positions to develop self-confidence, to seek promotion, and to be less dependent on a benign senior management to speak for them. This points to an interesting possible paradox in organisations where there is exemplary gender equality practice promoted by an enlightened organisational leadership, the risk of creating a form of dependency, an expectation that senior management will ensure that disadvantaged groups will succeed -

“However, more attention needs to be given to bringing less senior women on who are not taking up opportunities and using their full potential.” (Male senior manager).

“More needs to be done to educate people to fight for themselves rather than the emphasis being on managers raising awareness of equality issues.” (Trade union official).

“My team is 85 per cent women, but women are only 50 per cent of managers. There are less women applicants for managerial posts.” (Male middle manager).

- **Need to guard against complacency.** Even in the context of demonstrable exemplary gender equality practice, a local authority is required to remain alert to its precariousness in some areas -

“The Council isn’t yet perfect. There are still complaints of discrimination.” (Trade union official).

“It still happens that one department doesn’t talk to another one, and you find yourself sometimes being the member in the middle” (Male elected member).

Main learning points about good practice in gender equality in St. Helens MBC

- 1) Investment in training of officers and members in effective selection processes coupled with equalities training has meant that sound, professionally conducted processes result in diversity, and women (and other traditionally disadvantaged groups) will get appointed, simply because they are the best for the particular job at hand.

- 2) Staff and member development contribute to gender equality. The authority has well-respected equality and diversity awareness training, and equalities issues are regarded as a legitimate part of the curriculum for all training programmes. Secondly, training and educational opportunities are seen as ways of redressing targeted disadvantage, e.g. the support of women to pursue higher education. Finally, staff and member development are seen as important contributors to culture change.
- 3) St. Helens' emphasis on the development of the community and town is seen as linked inextricably with the promotion of internal and external diversity. Participants in the study were able frequently to describe the connections between service effectiveness for the community and gender equality. Further, an empathetic style of management could be consistent with a demanding performance and achievement culture.
- 4) This case demonstrates the pivotal importance to gender equality of the *fact* and the *symbol* of having gender diversity at the top of the organisation. The capacity for leaders (at whatever hierarchical level) to enact espoused values consistently communicates both a model and set of expectations.
- 5) St. Helens shows how it may be possible, with considerable effort and investment, to achieve a systemic mentality of gender *not* being an issue – where the appointment of women to significant leadership and professional positions is not remarked upon; where flexible working arrangements and an emphasis on work/life balance are the norm rather than the exception; and where any isolated incidents of discrimination are dealt with promptly.
- 6) Managers and leaders were able to demonstrate a capacity to notice the potential fragility of gender equality and to recognise the dangers of complacency. In the final analysis, a feature of exemplary practice appears to be a form of authentic modesty that the organisation, despite its immense achievements, cannot ever be perfect.

Case Study Four: The London Borough of Brent

About the London Borough of Brent

Brent is an outer London Borough, but it displays many of the characteristics of inner London. It has a population of 263,000 people which is the second most ethnically diverse in the country. 60 per cent of the population are from black or ethnic minority communities (including the Irish community). Unemployment stands at 13 per cent above the London average and there are significant levels of deprivation. It is the 13th most deprived London Borough and five of its wards fall within the 10 per cent of the most deprived in Britain. These wards experience an unemployment rate of nearly double that for the Borough as a whole.

After many years of political instability, the Council has for several years had a Labour administration with a clear majority which has been providing both political continuity and pragmatic leadership.

Since 1998 the Council has enjoyed a period of organisational stability. Prior to this, in the early 1990s, it embarked upon a radical programme of outsourcing, asset-disposal and year-on-year cuts in Council tax. Significant responsibility was devolved to over 100 business units which weakened the corporate centre and led to a fragmentation of corporate standards in key areas such as human resource management, financial accountability and performance management, but produced benefits in respect of innovation and customer care. The Council has been redressing some of the issues stemming from this period, placing an emphasis on reinvesting in front-line services, rebuilding the corporate core of the authority and developing sound financial management to make best use of its scarce assets.

The Council was a pro-active player in one of only two sub-regional community cohesion pathfinders, the West London Alliance. As a member of this partnership the Council has demonstrated clear leadership on equalities issues.

Overview of gender policy and practices

During the 1980s the authority gained a national reputation for its radical pursuit of equal opportunities, particularly race equality. Under the Conservative administration of the early to mid 1990s, equalities issues were not prioritised to the same extent, but came to the forefront again when a Labour administration was formed in 1998. However, the approach that has been adopted since that time has been less aggressive than previously and attention given to a range of equalities issues rather than race being seen as the most important issue to be tackled.

“Race was the Council’s number one priority for such a long time and women’s issues were virtually invisible.” (Woman middle manager)

“Concerted action in terms of gender equality is quite a new thing for the Council – only over the last three years or so has it been tackled in a systematic way. We started from a very low base. Basic infrastructure such as monitoring of recruitment and selection, workforce profiling, childcare support for low paid women, were not in place.” (Woman middle manager)

Both leading members and senior managers are fully committed to this approach and are very visible in demonstrating their commitment. The woman Council Leader (one of only two in London) and the male Chief Executive are both seen as being strong and vocal in their commitment -

“Our Leader is very committed to diversity. She is very articulate and approachable. People feel good about having her around. She and the Chief Executive are seen as a double act and seamless in their speech and actions - they both attend meetings of the Corporate Equalities Group. It’s crucial that both they both sign up to achieving diversity.” (Woman middle manager)

Commitment at the top of the organisation is not confined to the Leader and Chief Executive, but shared amongst other leading members and all members of the Corporate Management Team.

“There is a very strong corporate commitment to diversity and this is percolating down the authority as being a priority.” (Woman middle manager)

One of the Corporate Directors has a lead responsibility for equalities and diversity issues, which involves chairing a high level forum (called the Leadership Group, made up of the Leader, lead member for Equalities, the Chief Executive plus members of the Corporate Management Team) and a Diversity Reference Group which made up of representatives from all departments. The Diversity Reference Group contributes to the development of policies and practice relating to diversity and scrutinises what is being achieved, whilst the Leadership Group, sets the strategic direction for the council’s equalities agenda. Both groups are assisted by the council’s Head of Diversity and Corporate Diversity Team.

The second key feature of the Council’s approach to gender equality is the explicit link that is being made between diversity, including gender equality, and organisational improvement and service performance, i.e. a “business case” approach. Diversity and equalities issues lie at the heart of the Council’s corporate strategy, its improvement plan and other key Council plans and strategies -

“The Council is seeing a causal relationship between diversity and service improvement. This is demonstrated by the fact that a member has a portfolio for diversity and service improvement. The two are linked in peoples’ minds.” (Woman senior manager)

“Diversity is now much more of a mainstream issue and not just about a few hardy champions flying the flag.” (Male senior manager)

“Equalities issues, including gender equality, are a core value of the authority hence the strapline ‘Brent – proud of our diversity’.” (Woman senior manager)

To date, the Council has been placing an emphasis on recruiting women to senior management positions and has made rapid progress in doing so. 48 per cent of senior management posts in the authority are now occupied by women (earning £48k plus). One of the main ways in which the Council has been seeking to achieve this has been by giving attention to creating an environment in which women will feel comfortable. In particular, it has been seeking to promote a work/life balance amongst staff so that they are able to get the most out of their working life and contribute to their full potential.

The Council’s approach to work/life balance, for which it has received a great deal of national recognition, was piloted in Social Services but has now been rolled out across the Council. Brent was presented with a special commendation in December 2004 at the Annual Working Families Awards for its work-life balance project. It was short-listed for an Opportunity Now award earlier in 2004 for the same work and will hear the results of its being short-listed again in April 2005 for an Employee Benefits award. The project has helped to bring about a decrease in sickness absence, an increase in the proportion of women in senior management (from 30 per cent in 2001 to 48 per cent in 2004), and a decrease in staff turnover. There has been a lot of support for the initiative -

One of the main thrusts of the Council’s approach to gender equality has been achieving work/life balance. The Council is keen not to make women a problem and is seeing the initiative as one that benefits men as well as women. This has been key to selling the programme. We didn’t want women to be seen as being needy.” (Woman middle manager)

“There was sound backing for the work/life balance piloted in Social Services. It was launched in a positive atmosphere rather than having to work for it. The Council thinks that as a community leader it should be seen to be a good employer and an employer of choice.” (Woman senior manager)

The approach being taken to equalities and diversity issues is a very outward looking one -

“It’s not just about employment issues, but also about what is happening in the local community and about influencing the work of other agencies.” (Leading member)

In seeking to achieve a work/life balance Brent distinguishes its approach from traditional “family friendly” initiatives, which it believes have achieved limited

success because they have not been supported by men and women who did not have children.

“The disadvantage of traditional work/life balance schemes is that they can be divisive if they only apply to only one group.” (Woman senior manager)

Brent is keen to identify the working patterns that will suit its employees and to respond to their individual needs. A number of our research participants commented that because the authority serves a very ethnically diverse population, it has a lot of experience of and is culturally attuned to working with different and wide ranging needs. Its approach to gender equality is seen as building on its approach to ethnic diversity.

“The Council works on the basis of what is important to people and their individual needs rather than a pre-set programme of initiatives. It is more of a cultural than a technical approach.” (Woman senior manager)

Our participants were at pains to emphasise that, while Brent was very sensitive and committed to being as flexible as possible in accommodating different needs, service delivery imperatives took priority. However, by encouraging staff to work flexible hours, the authority has, in a number of instances, been able to improve services, e.g. extending opening hours in many of its offices, including the Council’s One Stop Shops and the Registrar’s Service (which now opens 7 days a week).

The final strand to the Council’s current approach to gender equality is that of equipping women to take best advantage of opportunities for promotion and career advancement -

“A lot of attention is also being given to recruitment and selection procedures to make them more relevant to women, e.g. how they gain their experience.” (Woman senior manager)

What does it feel like to work for the Council?

The consensus amongst those interviewed was that Brent Council is a very “positive” place to work. People enjoy the diversity of its workforce and the vibrancy that it brings to the authority and the relaxed atmosphere.

“This is a diverse area in terms of both the community and the Council. It’s interesting.” (Woman manager)

It’s a “buzzy” place to work – fast-paced and vibrant.” (Male manager)

Because a great deal of attention is given to individual needs, it is widely felt that Brent offers a “comfortable” work environment -

“A lot of attention has been given to changing the culture of the authority to make it empathetic to women and their aspirations.”
(Woman senior manager)

“It’s increasingly comfortable here for women. Women are getting a lot more attention. There are lots of initiatives to help them feel at ease. The Council is trying to be very accommodating” (Woman senior manager)

People also value what is seen as being a stable political administration which has made its commitments and priorities explicit -

“The administration is clear on what it wants to achieve. There are clear strategies which are being implemented. Staff therefore feel secure and know what is happening. This helps people relax.” (Male senior manager)

However, the environment is not equally comfortable for all staff. A number of interviewees stressed that the authority places high demands on its senior managers -

“It feels different in different parts of the organisation. As a senior manager you are much more under pressure than as a less senior manager.” (Woman senior manager)

“People are given the space to achieve but there are very high expectations of them.” (Woman middle manager)

What is your personal experience of the ways in which gender equality is promoted?

In commenting on their personal experience of the Brent’s approach to gender equality, participants frequently referred to the positive impact of the Council’s commitment to promoting flexible working -

“I’m a mother with two children and I’m also a manager. There’s a psychological contract: whatever it takes, I’ll do it [complete a task], but if I need to get to the school to pick up my kids, I don’t need to fill in lots of forms to get permission. It works really well. There’s flexible working which takes into account the needs of staff. It’s quite supportive.” (Woman middle manager)

While most participants were positive about the impact that the Council’s approach is having, some concerns were expressed about the decreasing number of women at the most senior levels in the authority -

“There are only two women on the nine-person Corporate Management Team. There used to be more and the dynamic is now

a bit different. There are a lot of women at assistant director level so women are well represented at senior management meetings, but it doesn't give a very good message that there are so few women right at the top of the organisation.” (Woman senior manager)

What works and why?

Research participants stressed that the Council has made rapid progress in a short space of time. This progress was attributed to -

- The clear commitment and role modelling provided by leading members and senior officers -

“I observed the Leader leave a very high level meeting at 5.30 p.m. saying that she was leaving to collect her grandson from school. This sends very powerful messages into the organisation.” (Woman senior manager)

“The Leader is very hands on and senior managers are also very visible and accessible. People feel encouraged by this.” (Male senior manager)

“There are now women in positions in places in the organisation where three years ago no one would have anticipated that this would have been possible. A lot of this is down to leadership. They [the Leader and the Chief Executive] are very committed to ensuring that women are supported and mentored.” (Woman senior manager)

“Members are very supportive and very visible in their support. Because of this support, it's like swimming with the tide rather than against it.” (Woman middle manager)

- Having women in key positions who act as role models and who are very supportive of other women coming up through the ranks -

“They talk openly about how they balance their lives and how they work flexibly.” (Woman middle manager)

- The attention that has been given to communication – communication of what it is that the Council wants to achieve, what is happening and celebrating successes. Messages are constantly “drip fed” through the authority -

“Pats on the back like the Opportunity Now award have helped to keep up momentum. They help keep it fresh in the minds of senior managers that diversity is good for business.” (Woman middle manager)

- The Council carries out a lot of benchmarking and invites other authorities in to discuss what is being done. This helps maintain momentum.
- The buy-in from senior and powerful men is also seen as having been very helpful.

What else could be done?

- ***The need to be more systematic in its approach to gender equality.*** Although it is widely recognised that there has been rapid progress on gender equality in the last few years, there is a great deal of commitment to maintaining this progress and a high awareness of how Brent can continue to improve its approach. In particular, interviewees stressed the need for the Council to become more systematic in focusing its attention on less senior women to increase their confidence levels -

“The authority has no real plan in terms of gender equality. It has been more organic. We have been pursuing things that have worked well and dropping others that have worked less well. We now need to adopt a more systematic approach.” (Woman middle manager)

“There are a lot of younger women with children at less senior levels who have got stuck. They have stayed in posts for some time because of their childcare commitments and have gradually lost the confidence to move on. These women have been a bit neglected by the Council because a lot of attention has been focused on getting women into senior positions.” (Male senior manager)

“The Council has got to give much more attention to less senior people and preparing them for future promotion. They need to be nurtured and supported.” (Woman middle manager)

“There have also been some successful training initiatives designed to help women to move up the ladder. But there needs to be an even bigger push here to help women to break out of traditional roles. I would like to see more secondments, mentoring, etc. to broaden women’s horizons and stop them stagnating.” (Male senior manager)

- ***The Council still has work to do in sensitising everybody to gender issues.*** While there is a great deal of support for gender equality across the Council, it is recognised that continuous work needs to be done to address the perceived patchiness in attitudes and in implementing equality policies -

“There are still some attitudinal problems around the place about part time working – those working part time are seen as not being so committed or as serious about their jobs and they therefore get

left out of the loop in terms of development, briefings, etc.” (Woman senior manager)

“A question is how flexible the Council is to different forms of flexibility, for example to job share. In different parts of the Council people may be more familiar with flexibility policies than in others – I think there’s a need for a bit more imagination in some parts of the Council.” (Woman senior manager)

“There are still some people in the organisation who are struggling to come to terms with increased flexibility, especially in traditionally male dominated areas of the Council.” (Woman middle manager)

- **No black managers in the authority.** At the time of our study the authority was acutely aware that there were no black senior managers in post -

“Not enough recognition is yet being given to women and race – the different needs of women from different ethnic backgrounds. It is possible that black women are staying in less senior positions in the authority because it is more comfortable for them to be there. We know that black women are generally more ambitious than white women, but they don’t apply for jobs. The Council needs to have better understanding of this and to provide different types of support.” (Woman middle manager)

- **Need to spend more time assessing the impact of its activities and celebrating successes.** As some participants commented -

“We need to know more about the impact of initiatives. We are getting better but we are not there yet. For example we do not know whether people are staying around because of more flexible working.” (Woman senior manager)

“The Council needs to celebrate women’s successes because women are not as good as men are in putting themselves forward.” (Woman middle manager)

- **Need for more work on staff development.** Finally, a number of interviewees said that Brent still had work to do on staff development -

“There is a lot of wasted talent and the Council doesn’t do enough around career planning and staff development to unleash it.” (Male senior manager)

Main learning points about good practice in gender equality in the London Borough of Brent

- 1) There is a high level of commitment to promoting diversity at the top of the organisation. The Leader and the Chief Executive are particularly

assertive and consistent in their messages, but their commitment is shared widely amongst other leading members and senior officers - commitment to gender equality and to diversity is broad as well as deep.

- 2) The widely shared commitment is made very visible and constantly reinforced. The political and managerial leadership of the Council spend a lot of time visiting various parts of the authority to make their commitment known.
- 3) Diversity issues, including gender equality is not an “add-on” but is a mainstream issue. It is an integral part of all of Brent’s strategies and plans.
- 4) The Council is keen to move on from what it recognises as being an incremental approach and to be more systematic in the way in which it goes about promoting gender equality.
- 5) Gender equality is viewed not in isolation but as part of a much broader approach to diversity.
- 6) The approach being taken by the authority is people-orientated. A lot of attention is given to making women feel comfortable by catering for their individual needs, making them feel confident in their abilities and to changing attitudes rather than placing an emphasis on changing systems and processes.

Case Study Five: Bristol City Council

About Bristol City Council

Bristol has a population of just under 500,000. It is a cosmopolitan and multi-cultural city, at the centre of which are the historic docks, increasingly a focus of imaginative developments in tourism, the arts, leisure and expensive housing. Bristol has been designated a European Centre of Culture. There are two universities in the city and well-developed further education institutions. Car ownership is among the highest in the UK, and this testifies to both the relative wealth of its citizens as well as to the reasons for the city's traffic congestion. It is generally an affluent regional leisure and commercial centre.

However, the city contains some areas of deprivation and low quality of life, with above average levels of unemployment. These areas tend to be racially diverse neighbourhoods where there are high levels of crime, drug use and the highest number of children on the 'at risk' register. Deprivation indices indicate that Bristol has a number of wards within the worst 10 per cent nationally for both income and employment deprivation. Similarly there are parts of some wards which are among the worst 100 nationally for crime, and for education skills and training deprivation. Bristol may therefore be seen as a city of contrasts.

The Council is well aware of the social and economic challenges facing it, and these are reflected in its Corporate Plan. On the positive side, Bristol is on an upward curve in terms of performance assessment. In 2002, the Council was judged as "weak", but last year its CPA improved to the "fair" category, and the Council claims it is "the second most improved Council in England."

Labour had led the Council for many years. However, recently, the Council has been "hung", and after much political conflict and debate, it was led by a fragile "rainbow" coalition between the three major parties, all of which were represented in the Cabinet. This state of affairs, and the means by which it came about, have been characterised by a difficult process of political transition which did not always endear itself to citizens.

Since the case study was conducted, the Council has won a Beacon Award for Promoting Race Equality.

Overview of gender policy and practices

The challenge of tackling inequality features in the authority's *Corporate Plan for 2004-7*. One of the four parts to the Vision for Bristol is "a diverse and accessible city that values all its people and communities", and "equalities and social inclusion" is one of three underlying principles for the Community Strategy. The Corporate Plan includes among its priorities "improving the representativeness and diversity of the workforce, including those employed in management positions."

In support of these aims, the Council has set up a series of forums covering disability, lesbian/gay/bisexual, race, older people, young people and women. These forums advise the Council. They invite members of the public and community bodies to participate. Thus the Women's Forum is "made up of women from all walks of life, cultures, and age ranges to be as representative as possible."

The authority has included the following action point in its Culture and Values Action Plan -

"Change the staff profile in senior management to increase numbers and seniority of women and black employees."

It has set up Self Organised Groups (SOGs) which mirror the forums. The Women's Issues Network (WIN) is a Council-wide women employees' SOG which recently focused on anti-bullying policies, career development and women's health. It has encouraged a range of initiatives to support the development of women staff, and helped co-organise the International Women's Day event in Bristol. The network has played a role in developing and implementing the Council's Work-Life Balance Policy.

Compared with the other case studies in this inquiry, and despite the promulgation of a range of policies and initiatives outlined briefly above, Bristol has some way to go in terms of gender equality in employment. By the open admission of managers and staff who participated in our study, this large organisation still suffers from what many described as a "macho culture."

While the women in management statistics are good (41 per cent, the third best performing Council among eight comparator authorities) and women are getting appointed up to third tier positions (29 per cent), it is only very recently that a woman director has been appointed to the all-male Management Team. This is the first such appointment since the departures four years ago of a former woman director and of the previous (woman) chief executive. This latter event has been controversial. It was raised on several occasions during our research. It has become an important organisational legend, the properties of which depend on who tells the story. Part of the legend is the view that the former Chief Executive had to be "*as strong as a man.*" Her departure created for some a symbol of difficult officer-member relations that allegedly set back progress towards gender equality at that time. For others the facts of the case are presented more neutrally. However we were told that the event paralysed progress on gender equality for some time, and it is only now that it is moving on once more.

It has to be said that the data in this case study communicates that the authority has a lot of work to do. Given this it may be asked why Bristol has been included in this study of exemplary practice. We found that there was a sense among those we spoke to that matters concerning women's equalities were on the move -

- Attention to gender equality has been given added impetus by the recent appointment of a chief executive and his, and the former and current (woman) Leaders', stated determination to ensure that there are more women in senior management positions.
- The 'Women in the Council' initiative recently has meant that the challenges and issues faced by women employees have been well-researched internally through a series of focus groups for women and men -

"We've now got a forward-looking working policy, and people were enthusiastic: there was a strong message about women coping well, being enthusiastic and committed to their work, and talking quite passionately about these things. ... Our flexible working policy is well-regarded and people value it" (Head of Scrutiny and Equalities)

- There has been a renewed emphasis on management and leadership development within the authority through the introduction of 'The Bristol Manager' programme.
- There is a sense that gender and other equality issues are being debated vigorously at many levels of the authority. This debate reflects the fact that staff think there remain big needs for improvement, but this is taking place within the context of a strong avowal of gender equality by key senior managers and elected members.

What does it feel like to work for the Council?

The internal research carried out within the 'Women in the Council' initiative indicated that many women staff and managers were experiencing a number of positive developments in gender equality, but also some problems. Just as Bristol may be seen as a place of contrasts as a city, so the theme of contrast is marbled through the data that follows. A feeling of transition and some optimism with regard to equalities is palpable, and it is this transition that makes this case interesting in the search for good practice. People told us about the former Leader being *"upfront about women's issues."* Similarly, *"within weeks of coming into the post"* the new Chief Executive said that he wanted to tackle the under-representation of women at senior levels of the organisation. The current Leader supports this. People have taken heart from these developments: *"gender's on the agenda."* There's some appreciation that the organisation is in transition, supported by the Chief Executive and the members.

However, a range of outstanding problems were mentioned by a number of participants. The norm is still to be male at a senior level. The 'macho culture' persists to some degree among both officers and elected members, and there is a realisation that the achievement of a culture change to shift this long-standing feature of the authority will take some doing. The authority, like others in this study, is struggling with a 'long hours culture', and the internal research

(which took place before this study, but confirmed by our data) indicated that some women middle managers were reluctant to apply for promotion because of the probable 'personal costs' that might be involved.

These contrasting points of view, captured within a transitional period, are reflected in the data. As a first example, here is part of a conversation that took place among women middle managers in our research. It concerns work/life balance -

"I made a conscious decision to join Bristol because of its child care policies, and a feeling that I wouldn't be sacked if I took time off for child care. There's a kind of mental security about this sort of thing here."

"But there's no workplace nursery – the organisation needs to develop one."

"And it doesn't support under-fours nursery provision."

"Long hours is part of the culture here."

"That's a problem for part-time staff who have child care issues, and tight deadlines."

"I've had a positive experience of Bristol. Before I had a stressful experience in London where I had to work for 12 hours sometimes. Managers here monitor this sort of thing and are supportive."

Another example of contrasting data about the experience of women middle (3rd tier) managers in the Bristol City Council included the following passage of conversation in which we may detect exemplary practice, e.g. being able to work flexibly without fear of criticism, sitting alongside problematic aspects -

"I feel I have a fair amount of autonomy, for example I can take an afternoon off if I need to look after the children in the school holidays. I feel I can say no to my managers and not be thought of badly. I've never felt that I haven't been giving my all. I treat my staff in the same way, whether they're male or female."

"It's OK if you have the confidence, me saying no, I can't do it at a drop of a hat, and there's a better acceptance of this now."

"You'd have to give up a lot to be a 1st or 2nd tier officer - difficult if you have children."

"It's not about hours or working arrangements, it's about politics. Not wanting to move on in Bristol? It's the political environment. In the past three years there's been major shenanigans in Bristol, and I don't like it. I am a good manager, but I don't like what I see."

Members expect you to be there and you can't say no. There's a macho culture of white middle class managers."

Some respondents were able to compare the cultures of different departments across the authority. Some were described as being more "laddish" than others. Similarly, the experiences of working part-time varied between directorates -

"For part-timers there's a monumental glass ceiling. You get the strong impression that if you want to get beyond 4th tier, forget it if you're working part-time. Because if you're 3rd tier it means working 45 hours."

"There is a long hours culture but [disagreeing with previous participant] as a part-time person, I'm much more comfortable here than with my previous employer."

Our study is suggesting that some of the main sources of an oppressive ("macho") culture in the Council are attributed to the behaviour and attitudes of some elected members, and these passages of discussion in our focus group with women managers could lead to real anger and frustration -

"It's quite an oppressive culture. Members can make you feel an inferior person, they can be heavy. The way that power is assumed by members is about keeping people in their place."

"I've always been concerned about Bristol's macho culture, although I'm lucky having a woman 2nd tier officer, but I notice how she struggles. Much of the macho culture comes from members."

"It's their [members'] needs to micro-manage, sending e-mails, interfering and dabbling that create a disproportionate workload and impact on women. Sometimes you have to stay for a ridiculous time to answer their ... questions. Members should set policy, and get their fingers out."

The "inappropriate" behaviour of some elected members was also noticed by chief officers. One attributed part of the problem to the perception that some members were not clear about their roles in the new governance system -

"We've got more women members proportionately. But members lack confidence about what their roles should be: they're not seeing it in action like they used to in the past with the committee system. We have difficult challenges: I have a 4th tier woman manager leaving because of the inappropriate behaviour of men and women members – male colleagues see this as well. Members aren't clear about what 'appropriate political leadership' means: part of inappropriate behaviour is not engaging in discussion. They revert to command and control." (Male director)

The effects of some members' behaviour was also noted by one woman Councillor we spoke to -

"There is an issue around the role of members, some of whom are openly aggressive towards officers." (Woman elected member)

It should be pointed out that the stories people told concerned some members, and not all. However this data points to a climate of anxiety about officer/member relations that, we were told, affect male as well as women colleagues.

What is your experience of the ways in which gender equality is promoted?

In general, participants were able to appreciate that gender (and other equalities) were being discussed more now than hitherto, and there was a sense that change – and the opportunity to challenge the *status quo* - was in the air -

"It's patchy: there's some way to go." (Woman middle manager).

"We're increasing our experience and expressing ourselves more. I find myself challenging discrimination and unfairness a lot more." (Woman member of staff).

"This is the future – here's the hope for culture change." (Woman middle manager).

"The good news is that there are many part-time jobs, and people still continue with their careers. It's becoming more possible. We have the possibility of challenging more of what's going on. It's slow, but it's coming." (Woman middle manager).

More optimistic participants felt that Bristol could be on the edge of considerable improvement, and colleagues could cite examples of good practice. The Work-Life Balance Policy was universally welcomed, though this enthusiasm was tempered to some extent by the noticeable patchiness in implementation. In addition, some appointments of women to senior positions were happening, and one chief officer echoed the views of some middle managers that the importance of this should not be underestimated -

"The symbolism of having a new woman chief officer will be important – it will show that there's no glass ceiling." (Male director).

Participants were also able to recall a range of examples of what would be thought of as good personal leadership practice and modelling by more senior managers –

“Our divisional director walks the corridors at 6.30 in the evening and chucks people out to go home.” (Woman middle manager)

“I have a male chief officer and he’s a good role model about taking half-term off for his family.” (Woman middle manager)

What works and why?

A range of policies and practices which have the potential to shape Bristol’s “macho culture” for the better are suggested by our data -

- This case exemplifies the contribution that the values of organisational leadership can play in promoting more gender equitable cultures. Participants mentioned the arrival of the new Chief Executive as itself holding a symbolic significance for the Council, and enabling it to exorcise the pain that was caused by the departure of the former chief executive. One of the new Chief Executive’s early acts had been “simply” to ask HR staff to have a look at the person specifications for senior posts to see if they might be discriminating against women. Another was to state that he was *“keen to do something about the under-representation of women at senior levels.”* Such early acts, apparently minor in themselves, have had the effect of *“loosening up”* the organisation, enabling the passion and controversy about gender issues to be untied -

“The new Chief Executive is obviously wanting to do something about the lack of women in senior positions.” (Woman elected member).

- Bristol has made several attempts over the past few years to develop managers and organisational leaders. New connections are being made between these processes and gender equality. The criticism of past initiatives was that programmes concentrated too much on performance, and less on values (see quote below). However ‘The Bristol Manager’ proposal is seen as having potential to contribute to culture change, as does the Performance Management Development Scheme (PMDS) -

“The ‘Managing Into Leadership’ development programme workshops have been good, although they’re largely focused on management and performance, and we have to focus more on things like trust, openness – the key Bristol City Council values.” (Woman middle manager).

“There’s still some [bullying and command/control assumptions], but far fewer than there used to be. I get a sense that it still isn’t right but I think that PMDS has been beneficial in that people can have different sorts of conversations. Also leadership development might contribute to redefining the terms of change between managers and staff.” (Male chief officer).

- The Work/Life Balance Policy has been welcomed (even though, as some have pointed out, its implementation has been patchy so far). The Head of Scrutiny and Equalities maintained that this initiative has had a significant impact on the organisation, many women were making use of it, and this was indeed corroborated by many of the women managers we talked to -

“Also the work/life balance policy, a lot of job sharing compared with two years ago ... none of these policies by themselves will change things, but taken together they’re starting to shift things.” (Male chief officer).

“I’m one of three women managers – there’s a lot of women, and things are radically better than they used to be. The previous director got rid of a ridiculously long hour’s culture.” (Woman middle manager)

- The introduction and support of arenas of dialogue concerning equality have been welcomed. Self Organised Groups (including the Women's Issues Network) seemed to participants to represent at least a potential contributor to good practice. The support of particular SOGs by senior management is seen as dissimilar. One member of staff thought that the SOG concerned with lesbian, gay and bisexual issues was not as well regarded by organisational leadership as WIN. However, in combination with other developments and initiatives we refer to here, SOGs appear to be contributing to a shifting culture in which dialogue and debate are more welcome than used to be the case -

“Yes, you can put perspectives through to the Equalities Unit.” (Woman member of staff)

What else could be done?

- ***Reducing the gap between espousal and enactment of gender equality.*** On the whole, staff thought that the espousal of gender equality made by senior management and the Council leadership, taken with senior managers acting in their day-to-day behaviours in ways that were consistent with these values, held much potential to change a traditionally male culture. The main message is that the gap between avowal of gender equality values at the top of the organisation and enactment on the ground needs to be narrowed in Bristol -

“There is some commitment from above, but they need to mean what they say.” (Woman member of staff).

“There are some excellent policies, but practices are not good ... [for example] there is quite a bit of hostility towards people that have to work round childcare responsibilities. Comments are made such as “nice of you to pop in” and you are seen as being “a pain

in the neck” if you have to leave early. Work-life balance arrangements are seen as skiving.” (Trade union official).

“Sometimes it feels like tokenism – you get lots of papers, but it doesn’t go anywhere.” (Woman member of staff)

“The work/life balance policies are not being evenly implemented - some managers are more signed up to them than others.” (Woman senior manager).

“The style of the Chief Officer Management Team is not overtly aggressive but it does work in a male kind of way which is not conducive to women attending meetings, for example they can be very task-orientated” (Woman senior manager).

- **Positive action in terms of women’s development and perceptual change.** We noted a desire held by different sections of the organisation for actions that support women’s advancement in the organisation. It seems that the authority could do more to shift the perceptions of women (and the reality) of (a) the long hours worked by senior managers, and (b) the inevitably messy and difficult working with demanding elected members. There are one or two problematic aspects to this. Men too can be put off by political “shenanigans” and the long hours demanded in senior management positions, and therefore action which concentrates only on the women’s needs may themselves be discriminatory. Nevertheless, there is clearly a need to encourage women to apply for more senior posts. As one woman elected member said -

“Work/life balance policies are working for women, but more could be done to develop women for taking on more senior roles, especially giving them experience of more senior positions (‘sitting next to Nellie’) which would help to break down the negative perceptions they hold of life at the top.”

She continued -

“Changing attitudes needs to be led from the top of the organisation, but it’s not just about challenging overtly discriminatory behaviour. We must also challenge deeply held, but less obvious traditional views about the role of women and give strong messages about the value placed on women’s contribution.”

A woman senior manager added -

“There are a number of factors that are stopping women from making it to senior positions such as the long hour’s culture ... but also because of women’s perceptions of what it’s like at the top. The reality of senior posts needs demystifying but the lack of women role models does not help this.”

- **Strengthening of SOGs.** As has been mentioned, culture change requires different conversations to be held, in different ways. Dialogue and challenge of the *status quo* require nurturing, and the introduction of SOGs appears to have been a contributor to good practice in the authority. However, again, the issue of patchiness and inconsistency was raised -

“Budgets are not fairly distributed between SOGs. Some groups get more than others.”

“We can give support to people who are isolated, we can get training going, but sometimes barriers are put in the way – you have to justify how the money will be spent before getting it.”

“SOGs need more work.”

“Emphasis needs to be placed on changing the male dominated culture. There needs to be more dialogue with women so things can improve.” (Trade union official).

Main learning points about good practice in gender equality in Bristol City Council

This case study contrasts with others included in our research by virtue of the fact that there remain many unresolved and problematic issues with regard to gender equality. Yet Bristol can demonstrate to other authorities and organisations two things: (a) that trying to change an historic deeply ingrained culture is not for the faint-hearted; and (b) there is hope.

- 1) The case demonstrates well the struggle that is involved in turning a so-called “macho culture” around. By stimulating internal inquiry, dialogue, debate and argument, movement – patchy, but discernible – is possible. This struggle is taking place in a context characterised by two features: (a) the achievement of a better than average representation of women in middle management, and (b) a challenging and turbulent political and organisational system where the tradition of open access of members to officers has been valued.
- 2) The data has communicated the pivotal importance of the espoused values of senior management and of Council leadership, and of the cumulative symbolic impact that can come from a range of statements and decisions at the top of the organisation. In a situation in which leadership capacity in the Council has been seen to be in need of development, e.g. through the earlier CPA process, the significance of the behaviour and attitudes of senior managers and elected members cannot be under-estimated.
- 3) *“Gender’s on the agenda.”* An “unlocking” seems to have happened as a result of a range of factors – statements from the Chief Executive and Council leadership, the ‘Women in the Council’ initiative, giving SOGs access to senior management, the Work/Life Policy. The fact that “gender’s on the agenda” won’t be welcome to everyone. But the effect has been to

catalyse a renaissance of a concern with gender that has been suppressed or had been dormant until recently. This gives hope and challenge in equal measure to many in the organisation.

The Keys to Gender Equality and Diversity

In this section we bring together an analysis of the key lessons emerging from the five case studies. Our learning has led us to conclude that there are six critical factors that seem to contribute to good or exemplary practice with regard to gender equality and diversity. While there is some difference of emphasis when one local authority is compared with another, these factors are present to varying extents in each of the case studies –

- 1) The pivotal importance of organisational and political leadership
- 2) Gender equality and diversity as embedded social and cultural constructs – “Gender isn’t an issue”
- 3) The legitimisation and encouragement of dialogue about problematic issues in gender equality and diversity
- 4) A strategic concern with establishing and sustaining momentum with gender equality progress
- 5) An association made between gender equality and seeing the authority as a community-oriented “open system”
- 6) Strong connections between gender exemplary practice and effective performance and change management

The pivotal importance of organisational and political leadership

This was the strongest message that emerged from our research. Time and again, leadership was cited as being pivotal to good practice in gender equality. In each case, there is a complex mix of factors relating to leadership which can be operating. There were four senses in which leadership was regarded as pivotal to an effective gender diverse culture -

- a) ***The symbolic importance of the sex of the organisation’s leaders*** – the leader of the council, the chief executive, the gender mix in the Cabinet/Executive, in the top management team and among senior managers, e.g. heads of service. The fact that there is a woman leader and/or chief executive, for example, holds high significance for the organisation as a whole, and indeed the community. Women managers and front-line staff take heart from seeing women succeed, and as more women are represented in leadership positions throughout the organisation the momentum for change builds up – what was referred to as the “success breeds success” factor. We are not concluding that there have to be women in these positions for there to be exemplary practice, but for some of our inquiry sites their appointment did send messages.
- b) ***Good gender relations are reinforced by the modelling behaviour of managerial and political leaders***, both men and women. Good practice is correlated strongly with the capacity of leaders to “walk the talk”, to be visible, to behave, consciously or unconsciously, consistently with openly espoused values of equality. These leadership behaviours seemed to be central to attitudinal and cultural change – to win “hearts and minds.” The consistency with which the group of organisational leaders – the chief

executive, the leader of the council, CMT members (men and women) and elected members - espouse and enact values supporting equality and performance sends powerful explicit and subliminal messages through the organisation and in its dealings with groups and organisations in the community. Women managers and other staff can notice appreciatively how a male chief executive or director can reinforce equality messages in his day-to-day communication and behaviour, sometimes in quite personal ways, e.g. the chief executive who makes a point of going home because he has child care responsibilities, the male director who take time off at half term, and so on.

Similarly the behaviour of women organisational and political leaders provides an important model that communicates expectations of staff. Where this has been achieved, the approachability, informality, openness and honesty in the relations between senior managers, elected members, and staff appear to have suffused the cultures of some of the organisations, and is clearly an aspect of the working experience which is appreciated by staff.

- c) ***A clear consensus between senior managers and powerful elected members*** about the importance that is attached to gender diversity and equality provides to the organisation both symbolic and enacted significance for good practice. Indeed, the study data suggests that chief executives, acting with a cohesive management team, cannot achieve the necessary culture change on their own, even though their transformational leadership capacities are a central feature of successful and lasting change. The case studies suggest that real change requires visible, personal and active commitment from the political leaders of the council working *in tandem* with managers.
- d) ***A leadership view that aggressive promulgation of gender equality will be counter-productive.*** The leadership styles of organisational and political leaders in these authorities were characterised by the holding of a view that progress on gender and diversity was not best served by aggressive or confrontational approaches and tactics. Rather their emphasis was on “people-orientation”, “emotional intelligence”, and development and training. This did not mean an unassertive style. On the contrary, the determination to develop more gender equal organisations was expressed confidently and clearly, but this was underpinned by emphases given to developing relations between people, giving them space, supporting people who do things differently, staff and member development and personal contact. Leadership on gender issues was subtle but consistent.

The cultural and social embedding of gender equality and diversity - “Gender isn’t an issue”

The assertion that “Gender isn’t an issue” is double-edged. In some organisations where this is argued by key power players, this can indicate a

discourse which centres on a denial or avoidance of discussing gender inequality: gender becomes less and less discussable the more it is asserted by key organisational actors that it is not an issue. It might be remembered that in *Room At The Top?* we found instances where it was believed that gender was no longer an issue because women's issues had been dealt with. However, we have found that in sites of exemplary practice, this assertion seems to represent an authentic belief, borne out by good practice, that gender equality is taken for granted, is culturally and socially embedded, and informs in a naturalistic way HR and management policies and action. There remains, in these authorities, alertness to equality issues, but our methodology (that entailed checking out assumptions and observing languages used across different organisational groupings, vertically and horizontally) confirms a systemically held and practised attitude of good gender relations. The principal feature of this engagement with culture change has been, and continues to be, addressing the potential gap between avowal of gender equality and actual practice deep within the offices and corridors of the local authority.

The legitimation and encouragement of dialogue about problematic issues in gender equality and diversity

The existence of exemplary practice does not imply perfection. None of the authorities that took part in this research would in any way claim that they had completed all that they had wanted to achieve. On their own admission, different local authorities are at different stages of development in terms of gender equality, depending on their recent histories. Different stories are told by people in different sections of the organisation. Nonetheless, a clear concern to promote good gender practice can be genuinely present in situations where the authority is at what organisational members might feel is the beginning of a journey towards gender equality. So the good practice, in these authorities, manifests itself as a determined policy and concern to address inequality and discrimination, coupled with the legitimation of different kinds of conversations and dialogue about equality through the organisation in which critical thinking is encouraged¹². Our inquiry is suggesting that, in these cases, the leadership of the organisation, the behaviour and personal commitment of key actors, especially leading members, are critical to ensuring that the journey is begun and sustained.

The case studies suggest that sustained effort on equality and diversity is closely associated with an absence of a 'blame culture'. A 'blame culture' characterises organisations "where change is either feared or discouraged". In such organisations "there is little tolerance of error, and therefore incentives to risk are reduced"; blaming is the opposite of learning – a defence against learning, and the effect of a 'blame culture' can be to inhibit communication

¹² Dialogue: "A sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions and certainties that compose everyday experiences" (Isaacs, W., 1993, 'Taking flight: Dialogue, Collective Thinking, and Organisational Learning', *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol.22, No.2, pp 24-39)

between different parts of the organisation¹³. In contrast the assumption in the leadership of the case study authorities was that people need to be treated empathetically and with respect, to be consulted and to be involved in conversations that could take place without a blame culture. Difficulties were often opened up rather than ignored.

A strategic concern with sustaining momentum with gender equality progress

In all our authorities (regardless of their stage of development) a sustained commitment and alertness to gender issues lie at the heart of continued good practice. Even where “gender isn’t an issue” (in the positive sense discussed above), senior managers and elected members take on the responsibility to ensure that the organisation does not lapse into complacency. These officers and members saw a gender equal culture having both robust and fragile aspects. Robustness involves a concern to ensure that such a culture is embedded as the norm. A fragility that was noted many times was the persistence of the “long hours culture”, and an acceptance that this impacts differentially on men and women.

Another vulnerability was the potential for political turbulence and/or a change in political leadership. Yet a further risk was that managers and staff could name parts of the organisation where there remained pockets of inequality and inflexibility or delays in extending flexible working arrangements. It was thought that there was something to be done to redress a “hidden inequality” in pay. A number of people commented on the need to have gender-balanced staff groups – having an all-woman team could detract from effectiveness in the same way as all male teams do. More could be done to promote family-friendly policies among senior managers, and a few admitted that their own long hours working did not always set a good example.

So, there was a sense in which key players in these authorities saw their concern with sustaining gender equality and diversity progress as a long-term one, to develop policies, cultures and practices which, as far as possible, were resilient and impervious to the exigencies of political and financial turbulence. A clear characteristic in all five cases was a belief that the mere establishment of policies that encouraged diversity was not enough in itself. Given that the authorities saw a concern with gender equality to be closely associated with organisational culture change there was no sense in which these officers and members regarded the issue as a quick fix. It seemed to us that taking the sample of cases as a whole those authorities that were furthest ahead in terms of gender equality had been in the long haul the longest.

¹³ Vince, R., Broussine, M., 2000, ‘Rethinking Organisational Learning in Local Government’, *Local Government Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Spring, pp. 15-30

An association made between gender equality and seeing the authority as a community-oriented “open system”

Exemplary practice in gender relations appears to be closely associated with an outward-looking and community-focused mentality held at political, managerial and operational levels. In part this is due to a concern for understanding the local labour market, and seeking to overcome societal gender inequities. For instance an open acknowledgement of labour market barriers to women’s employment could be addressed directly by instituting work/life balance employment policies such as an encouragement of part-time working, a flexible hours policy and job sharing, and, in some cases, making interventions in the labour market to build women’s confidence in the community to apply for jobs in the first place. But we have also been struck by the connection between good gender relations and good community development. A healthy organisation is associated with a healthy community, with a desire at all levels of the hierarchy to serve that community effectively, and to be effective.

Strong connections between gender exemplary practice and effective performance and change management

Many of our research participants took for granted the need to be judged as effective by external standards such as BVPI and CPA. However, “good performance management” did not mean an obsession with performance measurement. It meant rather the presence – alongside a collective determination for organisational effectiveness in terms of service delivery – of an attitude of good management being closely associated with the good and empathetic treatment of staff. There was a clear emphasis on achievement of targets, but this was coupled with an equally clear “people-centredness” that was emphasised by organisational leaders in their various ways. They stressed the importance of understanding the needs of the individual and to tailor support and working arrangements to respond to those individuals rather than developing undifferentiated programmes of action.

Case study authorities emphasised the need to see equality issues as integral to wider change strategies, e.g. as part of a drive to increase customer focus; similarly the promotion of gender equality was seen to take place within a context of a wider approach to promoting diversity, e.g. to be seen alongside their work on racial equality or disability issues, rather than as stand alone policies.

The continuous struggle for gender equality

Although each of the authorities that we worked with had much good practice to celebrate, all were at pains to point out that the pursuit of gender equality was a process of continuous improvement and that many issues remained to be addressed. There appeared to be some commonality in the sorts of issues that they saw in need of further attention, namely -

- Addressing inequalities in pay and conditions between men and women
- Tackling pockets of resistance (usually in areas that were seen as being “traditionally male”)
- Boosting the confidence and skills of less senior women to equip them to apply for more senior jobs and ones in non-traditional areas.

In *Room at the Top?* we suggested that if local government is serious about working towards gender equality and diversity, it needs to go beyond the orthodox concerns with which we have become familiar in the past decade or more. These traditional concerns can be described as¹⁴ –

- *Equip the Woman* – women have to be socialised into the world of management and work, so that they can learn the rules of the game. The underlying assumption of this approach is that women are in some way deficient in their capacity to be effective in organisations that have historically been dominated by masculine organising discourses.
- *Create Equal Opportunity* – the equity problem is rooted in the structures of organisations which create uneven playing fields between men and women, e.g. gender segregation of occupations and bias in employment policies and practices. The underlying assumption here is that structural and procedural barriers need to be removed in order that gender equality can progress.
- *Value Difference* – acknowledges that there are feminine and masculine “ways of being” and identities which are formed by our different patterns of socialisation. Strategies based in this concern acknowledge gender as one of many differences that exist between people in organisations. Intervention strategies include consciousness-raising and diversity training to promote tolerance.

There is no question that initiatives within these three frames of concern have contributed to improving women’s opportunities and hold potential value in helping to make organisations more tolerant places. However, what the five local authorities that participated in this study show is that there is a need to move beyond these concerns. Of and by themselves, the three types of initiative have proved insufficient in achieving lasting gains because they have had little effect on the informal rules, practices and norms that govern organisational life. They also side-step the fundamental problem of the power of the masculine image that underlies most generally accepted models of leadership or management¹⁵. What is exemplary about these authorities is that they have engaged in a long-term struggle to address underlying factors through attempts *to re-vision organisational culture*. Some of them are further ahead than others, but what unites them is a conscious attempt to address

¹⁴ See Center for Gender in Organizations, 1998, ‘Making Change: A Framework for Promoting Gender Equity in Organizations’, *CGO Insights*, Briefing Note Number 1, Simmons Graduate School of Management, Boston MA

¹⁵ Broussine, M., Fox, P., 2002, ‘Rethinking Leadership in Local Government - the place of ‘feminine’ styles in the Modernised Council’, *Local Government Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 91-106

deep-seated assumptions and practices that historically have been antithetical to diversity and gender equality.

The front-line staff, middle and senior managers, and elected members and leaders, with whom we talked recognised modestly that they had, to greater or lesser degrees, some way to go in achieving gender equality but neither, justifiably, did they overlook the considerable progress that they had made together. Achieving a state in which “gender isn’t an issue” in the positive sense has been achieved, to the extent it has, not by formulaic quick-fixes, but rather by committing to a long-term process of change and learning. This process has been underpinned by empathetic and overt leadership approaches that have managed to link in accessible and understandable ways gender equality and diversity with organisational effectiveness – customer focus, performance and an outward-looking face. There is much to be learned from the stories about how they are doing this.

Implications: How to make progress on gender equality

What do these case studies say about how we might make further progress in the journey towards gender equality?

- 1) **Recognise the crucial role of effective leadership in culture change.**
The local authorities in this study show us just how pivotal are managerial and political leadership are in the journey towards exemplary gender equality. We have noted the four senses in which leadership (not just at the top) contributes to the necessary culture change. This challenges local authorities – officers and members – to reflect critically on their leadership assumptions and styles. It is difficult to distil this complex area into a list of simplistic action points. However these authorities are saying this – that leaders need to behave and model the values they espouse (including those concerning equality), and in doing so encourage leaders, managers and staff throughout the organisation to do the same.
- 2) **Recognise that there isn't a ready-made "tool-kit".** Exemplary practice in gender equality seems to be underpinned by a "way of being" rather than a mechanistic application of managerial techniques. What is apparent, in different and similar ways across the five cases, is that progress towards gender equality is characterised by some form of "gelling agent". This represents a cohering around a set of values that unconsciously lead to a set of contributory behaviours and practices that cumulatively promote empathetic and tolerant relations between people throughout the organisation, and a lack of a 'blame culture'. This may feel like a frustratingly vague and intangible notion, but a review of the cases shows that this values-led "gelling" can be real and practical enough to staff, managers and elected members.
- 3) **Have a clear route map or game plan.** Although there is no ready-made tool kit for achieving gender equality, our research does suggest that there is a process that those authorities and leaders who are intent on addressing inequalities seek to follow. This process, what we might refer to as the "equalities journey", is not exactly the same between authorities but some common elements are nevertheless evident to varying extents. During the early stages of this journey organisational leaders seek to -
 - Develop a consensus on the importance on gender equality (and other aspects of diversity) amongst senior managers and leading members and build active partnership working on equality issues.
 - Carry out practical activities that signal the importance of gender equality and demonstrate the seriousness of the intention to address equalities issues. This either takes the form of exploiting a window of opportunity (e.g. using a major organisational restructuring or an organisational crisis such as an adverse inspection report) or focus in on a particular initiative (e.g. a major training programme, good recruitment and selection practices, etc.).

- Focus on bringing about changes at the top of the authority to both signal change and to provide new role models

The next stage of the journey may then involve -

- Broadening out consensus and commitment on the need for change through communication, consultation, debate and dialogue.
- Developing a more co-ordinated and strategic approach to gender equality and linking the pursuit of equality to wider organisational objectives.
- Focussing on achieving equality at less senior levels in the authority, particularly increasing the capacity and confidence of women managers to seek promotion.

In those authorities that have been on the equality journey for some time the main emphasis is on:

- Embedding change and ensuring that the authority does not slip into complacency
- Addressing pockets of resistance and outstanding equalities issues.

- 4) **Encourage critical review and dialogue.** In various ways, the five cases show that progress is made if an atmosphere of risk-free dialogue and reflection can be inculcated. This seems to be an important ingredient in culture change, one in which leaders and managers are tolerant of occasional disruption and challenge to dominant and historic views and practices – the existing order of things. Dialogue doesn't mean defensive debating where, as we put it in *Room at the Top?*, there is a competition about whose story holds more truth than the other. Rather it means finding or devising arenas in which there can be collective discussion and critical review of existing norms and practices, including constructive challenge to the organisation's leadership.
- 5) **Support staff, management and elected member development.** The emphasis placed on staff and member development is a notable characteristic of the experience of working in the five local authorities. Certainly such programmes contribute towards continuous improvement for effective performance. But training and development isn't just seen to be about the techno-managerial steps that need to be taken to improve performance. In these authorities they also provide the spaces in which there can be dialogue and critical thinking about the ways in which the authority is led and managed.
- 6) **Work on the remaining inequalities.** As we have seen the authorities in this study were not complacent. They recognised that they needed to work continuously on the inequalities that continued to exist in parts of the organisation. This meant that they needed to work on pay inequity and other unfair and discriminatory practices, to maintain effort in devising and improving flexible working and to challenge a long hours culture where this

exists. There is also a need to challenge inappropriate behaviours and practices that may exist in some pockets of the council.

- 7) **Have hope, keep faith.** It is a struggle and demands considerable emotional investment and long-term determination. The people who participated in this study have shown us how they are trying to do it. Certainly those that have been in the long haul the longest cast doubt on the notion that a true commitment to gender equality can be achieved through the use of aggressive approaches. Paradoxically these authorities are achieving something by not necessarily putting the spotlight on gender. They see gender equality as integral to good performance, providing a good service to the community, to good management including good training, development, employment and recruitment policies and practices. Movement towards gender equality is possible.

Conclusion

Unlike our previous research, *Room at the Top?*, this study was not intended or designed to produce a list of recommendations for various bodies. Its main purpose was to describe how some authorities had gone about making progress on achieving gender equality to stimulate discussion and action in those councils that were on their journey towards change on gender diversity and equality. However, the research delivered some unexpectedly powerful messages about the role and nature of leadership of local authorities which have implications not only for individual councils but also for those bodies seeking to build leadership capacity at a national level, particularly agencies such as the Leadership Development Commission for Local Government.

There now appears to be a general acceptance that local authorities no longer need charismatic and top down leaders and that 'heroic' leaders are not the ones most likely to achieve sustained service improvement. What is required is 'transformational' and 'situational' leadership. However, there remains a certain lack of clarity on what exactly transformational leadership involves. In particular, there is a tendency to seek a set of generic competencies for leaders in local government and to stress the technical aspects of leadership roles. This study has highlighted that those who are successful in achieving improvement, including on sensitive and complex issues such as gender equality, do not only have obvious well-honed leadership skills but are also very attuned to the environment in which they are operating. They are what might be termed good *situational leaders* who are seeking actively to drive improvement by connecting with their colleagues and the communities that they serve. This enables them to overcome cultures that have traditionally been averse to equalities agendas and to survive in politically turbulent environments.

The research has also shown that transformational leaders who see gender equality and diversity more generally as a vital component of improvement, place less emphasis on the technical aspects of performance management, such as state-of-the-art ICT systems, but adopt people-focused change strategies. However, this does not mean that they focus only on people; they also have a keen eye to performance and see themselves as having a key role in forging the link between well motivated and well supported staff to sound performance management systems. They also see it as an important part of their role to develop leadership capacity throughout the organisation, not just at the top.

We suggest finally that this study is particularly relevant to the work of agencies that have responsibility for developing leadership capacity in local government. These agencies are encouraged to continue the quest to research and develop our understanding of the importance and meaning of transformational and situational leadership in local government, and to emphasise the vital link between empathetic and equality-based leadership of people and performance.

About the authors

Pam Fox is both a Visiting Fellow at Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, and a Senior Associate of the School of Public Policy at INLOGOV. She has an in-depth understanding of change management and leadership. This has been gained partly from her practical experience of working at the highest levels in the voluntary sector, local government and recently in central government, but also from work that she has carried out as an independent adviser in the public sector. She has researched and written extensively on leadership issues and has also played a role in formulating the local government change agenda through her work with the IDeA as a member of the DTLR/ODPM Local Government Modernisation Team. Pam conducted the research into the experiences of women chief executives in local government with Mike Broussine that led to the *Room at the Top?* report in 2001.

Mike Broussine is Director of the Research Unit for Organisation Studies at Bristol Business School, University of the West of England. Main research interests include emotions in organisations, leadership, gender issues, organisational research methods and public services management. He is Joint Programme Director of UWE's M.Sc. Leadership and Organisation of Public Services (LOPS), a programme designed to promote learning across the public, private and voluntary sectors. He undertakes consultancy and action research for organisations, and his experience lies mostly in public services, especially UK local government. Mike has recently (2004) led a major review of multi-agency working in Bristol funded by the Bristol Children's Fund. He is a member of the ODPM Task Group on Bullying and Harassment in Local Government, a group that was set up in part response to Mike's earlier work (with Pam Fox) on the experiences of women chief executives in local government.

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