

## **Research Report 4**

# **Improving the Representativeness of Councillors**

**Learning From Five High Performing  
Local Authorities in England**

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# Improving the Representativeness of Councillors: Learning From Five High Performing Local Authorities in England

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This research was conducted to inform the deliberations of the Councillors Commission but does not necessarily reflect the commissioners' views or final recommendations.

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

- Women, minority ethnic groups, young people, and people in paid employment are under-represented in local government. The aim of this report is to explain why some local councils are more representative of their local populations than others, with a particular focus placed upon these under-represented groups. This study was commissioned to inform the deliberations of the Councillors Commission, which is looking at the role of local councillors, and the incentives and barriers to serving on councils.
- The study adopted a case study methodology, focusing on five local authority areas characterised by a higher than average level of descriptive representativeness.<sup>1</sup> These cases are confined neither to any particular region nor party political orientation but are generally mixed in terms of their socio-economic, demographic and political characteristics.
- By focusing on some of the ‘top-performing’ councils, emphasis is placed upon learning from these areas and identifying transferable lessons that may be applied to areas that are less representative.
- Although the general focus is upon understanding why these five case study areas have achieved good levels of representation, the report also examines the barriers and incentives faced by under-represented groups.
- By exploring the constraints and facilitators that have influenced traditionally under-represented groups on their pathway toward political participation, the aim is to achieve a stronger understanding of why these authorities have become more representative than others.

## Motivations and perceptions

- Participants in each of the five case studies emphasised the importance of local context and historical circumstances when explaining high levels of representativeness. Local political cultures were seen as either promoting or supporting a strong sense of civic volunteerism. Local political and historical circumstances were seen as engendering involvement from under-represented groups, for example, a history of a hung council.
- The political parties have very different approaches to under-representation. Some felt uncomfortable with methods that suggested forms of positive discrimination. In one party there was an explicit view that they did not have a diversity strategy, but

<sup>1</sup> Here, descriptive representation is said to have occurred when a council roughly reflects the socio-demographic composition of the community it represents – most significantly in this study in relation age, gender, ethnicity and employment status.

instead offered the same to support all. Others, however, used affirmative action as a party policy, or used an informal targeted approach.

- Not all parties liked discussing, or were very engaged in a discussion about diversity, equality, or under-represented groups, even where they were doing positive and proactive work on this topic. They were active, but did not necessarily identify their work in this way.
- Council officers expressed the strong view that the role of the local authority was potentially minimal in influencing the diversity of councillors, and was overshadowed by the influence of historical circumstance, local context, and the primary role of the political parties.
- The factors motivating traditionally under-represented councillors were relatively mixed in the five areas. For some, a single issue propelled them toward political activity; for others a desire to promote party ideals was paramount. Yet most interviewees were driven by a strong sense of civic duty and a desire to serve the local community.
- Though individual motivations are unquestionably important, of equal importance (if not more so) is the role of local political parties or social networks in ‘pushing and pulling’ citizens toward active involvement. In some areas, a local political culture that emphasised civic volunteerism provided an important foundation; in others, close-knit families and social networks made it easier for parties to recruit from traditionally under-represented groups.
- The vast majority of councillors perceive the role of local councillor in the context of civic duty. In this respect, most expressed disapproval or exasperation with the way in which local politics is portrayed in mainstream society.
- The majority felt that involvement with the council ‘can make a real difference to the community’. The experience of helping local residents was important for most, with casework associated with feelings of pride and satisfaction. However, at the same time most interviewees explained how they would like to see this part of their role expanded.

## Barriers

- Some specific barriers were identified that affected under-represented groups, such as a lack of backing from employers for council duties for those in work. Other barriers to involvement were generally applicable to all groups, for example negative perceptions of local democracy. However, people in the case study areas felt that these general barriers affected under-represented groups to the greatest extent. The barriers to entry faced by all were seen as having a differential impact on under-represented groups currently outside mainstream political and party activity, who lack traditions of such activity.
- Most suggested that underlying barriers to increased involvement from under-represented groups were: general cynicism towards politics and local democracy; the lack of awareness amongst the public of the work of local councillors and local councils; a lack of connection and perceived distance between citizens and local

politicians and democratic systems, for example the high level of formality of council procedures. These views are backed up by evidence nationally.

- A noticeable barrier for some local activists was the perceived need to enter local politics via the ‘party route’. Some within each case study commented negatively on partisan politics, and saw the domination of the system by parties as a barrier.
- Overall, personnel from all five local authorities expressed the view that they felt unable make a major or significant contribution to the recruitment of new and under-represented councillors. Reasons for this lack of agency included: a belief that it was inappropriate for the authority to intervene; suggestions that councillor composition was partly dictated by historical accident and circumstance; and feelings there were few potentially effective interventions. This was despite a high level of supportive activity in reality.
- Employers who are unsupportive of the role of local councillor represent a major barrier to the entry and ongoing participation of people in employment. Interviewees frequently stressed the negative impact of an unsympathetic employer upon people’s capacity to undertake the role. Based on the accounts of councillors, employers do not appear to link the role of councillor with corporate social responsibility. A lack of demonstrable support for civic duty by employers exerted a negative impact upon both the willingness of citizens to come forward and to remain active in local political life.
- The time commitment required for the role of local councillor was cited as a barrier by the vast majority of existing councillors. Specifically, what emerged most clearly was a perception that councillors are required to devote an excessive amount of time to the council chamber at the expense of undertaking ward duties. Given the strong sense that the general public and potential councillors did not know what was involved in being a councillor, it is doubtful that the time commitment acts as a primary barrier for those not already in the system.
- Similarly, low levels of allowances offered to local councillors as financial compensation for the role were also cited by many existing councillors as a barrier for under-represented groups. Again, it is not clear to what extent the public take this into account when considering involvement. Moreover, the majority of the councillors participating in this study said that their primary motivation was a desire to make a difference and serve their community rather than financial gain. However, negative public perceptions of the personal financial benefit that local elected members derive from their role are barriers to encouraging engagement.
- Good levels of representativeness for one ethnic minority group may conceal a lack of representation for another. In several cases, where one minority ethnic group acquired significant levels of representation in council structures, other less-established, smaller or more scattered ethnic groups found themselves ‘left behind’.
- Though this study uncovered evidence that women from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities are willing to engage with the political process, the findings

also suggest that cultural factors act as a significant barrier to participation for some groups of BME women.

## Facilitators in the recruitment and retention of councillors

### Background factors and supportive contexts

- Some of the participating authorities were not aware that their councils were unusually representative of their local communities. This is partly attributable to the fact that information on council representativeness is not routinely collected and disseminated amongst authorities. As a consequence, the five participating authorities had not previously reflected on the possible factors contributing to their success in this area. Moreover, there was a lack of impact assessment of diversity-related work, making it hard for them to attribute this success to any particular intervention.
- Some specific facilitators were identified that involved targeted equalities and diversity work in relation to under-represented groups. Other more general facilitators were felt to have been disproportionately successful with under-represented groups by the people in the case studies, for example using social networks. However, these activities and approaches could also be applied more generally.
- Strong social networks which support political activity at local level not only encourage under-represented groups to seek representation but also provide 'fertile soil' from which local parties can recruit candidates. These social networks included community and voluntary organisations, but also covered circles of acquaintance and informal communities of interest. Many councillors' political interest had evolved out of their community and other civic work, for example voluntary work with local churches.

### Political parties

- Local political parties are the principal recruiter of traditionally under-represented groups. 'Active' parties can play a crucial role in reaching out to such groups, whether in the form of targeting candidates, publicising council opportunities, or developing organisations and mechanisms that seek to recruit under-represented groups into the political process, for example youth organisations and use of social networking websites. Some parties had opened up recruitment to the extent of advertising for possible candidates with sympathetic views even if they were not already party members. Some had 'fast-track' selection procedures for under-represented groups. Others emphasised the 'talent scout' and hand-holding role of the group leaders. The parties played a key role in developing people's political careers, and facilitating political career progression.
- The parties had very different approaches to improving diversity levels, ranging from affirmative action and quotas for women candidates to more informal approaches that didn't explicitly target under-represented groups but nevertheless had this effect.

- Political parties selecting councillors from traditionally under-represented groups for high-profile ‘ambassadorial’ roles is seen by many as sending a positive message to those communities. For example, in several areas, BME Mayors and Deputy Mayors were associated with raising levels of aspiration within minority communities and an increase in confidence more generally in local political structures (though the Mayors were non-elected).
- In general, parties appear strong in respect to the initial recruitment of councillors but less so in terms of providing ongoing support following elections. However, councillors did refer positively to mentoring schemes developed by the parties and other support targeted at newly elected councillors, including training and conferences.

### Local councils

- Despite an expressed pessimistic view about the local authority contribution to recruitment, there was a great deal of supportive activity by councils that was seen as playing a part in delivering the high levels of diversity observed amongst councillors in the case study authorities.
- Local councils were creating and promoting a supportive local political environment in a range of ways: awareness raising of political processes, councillors’ roles and work; encouraging civic engagement in different forms including work targeted at under-represented groups; offering a responsive, open and welcoming service; good communication channels and feedback loops with citizens; and outreach work with specific under-represented groups.
- Some of the case study authorities were working with local political parties to develop more imaginative ways of achieving diversity. This included subtle ‘back of house’ negotiations with political parties on increasing diversity levels.
- Local authorities were also making a contribution towards retention of under-represented councillors, most notably and successfully through member development and support. Good practice in this area was to offer flexible, individually tailored packages that accommodated the needs of under-represented groups, e.g. distance learning for those in work. Member development, in the form of exit interviews with outgoing members, was also used to better understand local politicians’ experiences in office in order to adapt where necessary.
- Other approaches by local councils that helped both recruitment and retention were focused on the promotion of civicness more broadly. This ranged from small practical measures to close perceived gaps between citizens and local government, to more strategic changes aimed at increasing the responsiveness of local authorities. Practical measures included holding meetings in community venues, and altering the timing of meetings. Strategic measures included making local government more responsive to local needs, including devolved decision making led by councillors at ward or neighbourhood level through area boards. In general, participants reported that people were more likely to get involved if local authority structures allowed politicians and local people to genuinely influence local decisions, and to be seen to do so.

- The timing of committee and general meetings can make it easier for some employed councillors and those with caring duties to undertake their role: whilst an evening meeting (i.e. 7pm onwards) facilitates involvement, a daytime or early evening meeting (i.e. 5.30pm) is seen by many as a barrier. Yet there is also a need for more research in this area as some councillors find evening meetings generally difficult to attend.
- Transmitting council news and information to minority communities is considered crucial by council leaders and officers for publicising the council and its role. For instance, this can be achieved either by communicating local political affairs via minority ethnic media outlets (newspapers, satellite television channels, etc.), or by translating relevant information.
- Relationships between councils and their local media played a part in promoting the role of younger councillors, minority councillors, and women councillors.
- In each area awareness-raising initiatives were presented as an important facilitator for the establishment of strong links between council and community. Promoting local democracy and improving citizens' understanding of the local council and its key functions is seen as beneficial for representation levels more generally. However, for most there remains significant scope in which to further develop such activity, for example through working with the community and voluntary sector.

### Employers

- The views of employers toward their employees' political activity is crucial and holds the potential to significantly influence the experience of public office. What emerges clearly from the fieldwork is the significant potential of employers to either facilitate or constrain involvement in local politics. This was mostly related to practical issues – particularly time off work, or flexible working hours.
- Public sector employers were cited as particularly supportive of their employees' involvement in politics.

### Impact

- A focus upon five 'top-performing' authorities enabled an examination of what impact higher levels of representativeness had upon a range of areas, such as community cohesion and service delivery.
- The perceived impact of representativeness was two-fold: (1) more effective political debate leading to improved decision-making, and therefore service delivery; and (2) a positive impact upon local community cohesion.
- There is a small amount of interview evidence that suggests that councillor diversity changes service delivery and decision-making to include a wider range of views, and therefore makes councils more responsive. Having a more representative council was seen to have a positive impact on decision-making and scrutiny because the local community is better represented and a variety of viewpoints and perspectives is likely to be taken into consideration.
- It has also been suggested that greater diversity amongst councillors means that it is more likely that those making decisions have more direct experience and understanding of the issues as they affect residents, and are therefore more likely to

make decisions that reflect or respond to residents' needs. For example, the presence of younger councillors in one case study area altered the nature of debates about late-night licensing.

- Another positive impact described by participants in this study was that good levels of representation for traditionally under-represented groups can exert a positive impact upon community cohesion. In some areas, BME councillors working alongside senior council officers were seen to have played an indispensable role in diffusing community tension.
- However, it is also crucial that representatives from minority communities are seen by local residents as actually being representative. For example, in one area community 'elders' were seen by younger BME councillors as 'out of touch' with the current generation.
- Moreover, it is very important to note that the causal link between levels of representativeness and community relations is difficult to evaluate and the evidence from the case studies is inconclusive.

## Recommendations & policy implications

Based upon fieldwork in the five case study areas, the following recommendations and policy implications are put forward for consideration by the Councillors Commission.

### Central government and national bodies

**R1.** We recommend that central government and national local government improvement bodies provide ways for local councils to assess their performance on their levels of elected member diversity. Allowing councils to benchmark themselves against others councils, or against guideline standards, would enable them to identify a need for action. It would also facilitate the sharing of good practice from local authorities that have good levels of diversity.

**R2.** Central government and national local government improvement bodies could reinforce messages to local authorities that they do and can play an important role in improving the diversity of local councillors, alongside political parties. Where these combined efforts have produced positive results, there should be clear ways to recognise, publicise and celebrate success.

**R3.** Central bodies should collect evidence of good diversity-related practice amongst the political parties and reflect this in guidance material. Guidance should take account of the fact that some parties are wary of the idea of positive discrimination, and do not articulate their work with under-represented groups as a diversity strategy.

### Political parties

**R1.** Routes into local political life included people who had started with a single local issue, and those already engaged in a civic activity such as a local community-based organisation. Parties could widen the pool of potential candidates by offering opportunities for citizens to become politically involved through these routes. This includes linking to local community and voluntary groups.

**R2.** For local political parties to field candidates from under-represented groups may require targeted recruitment and flexible selection procedures. Parties can use a variety of methods, including: targeting candidates; advertising vacancies; developing youth organisations; better use of information technology, e.g. social networking websites; outreach work with under-represented groups; ‘fast-tracking’ selection procedures; ‘talent scouting’; and mentoring people as their political careers progress.

**R3.** Outreach work particularly with minority ethnic communities is potentially very effective, including surgeries for identified communities and face-to-face meetings in venues where communities of interest gather.

**R4.** Parties can help under-represented groups get involved by reviewing and adapting the way they operate internally. For example, minimising the number of party and group meetings in order allow people to continue to play active roles in their communities, and making party and group meetings attractive, exciting and welcoming to newcomers.

**R5.** Political parties should build on their existing work by providing ongoing support following elections, e.g. mentoring schemes and ‘apprenticeships’ to higher positions particularly for younger councillors.

### Local councils

**R1.** We recommend that local authorities build accurate profiles of local demographics, and monitor their own performance on the extent to which councillors statistically reflect under-represented groups in the local population. Where councils have achieved high levels of descriptive representativeness, they should identify good practice. Evaluation of the impact of specific diversity initiatives and other research could add to this body of knowledge.

**R2.** Local authorities should acknowledge the positive roles they can and do play in improving representativeness, alongside political parties. Councils’ input should be seen to start before election, not solely as member development post-election.

**R3.** Local authorities can provide a supportive local political environment to bring forward under-represented groups into politics. The relevance of high levels of cynicism surrounding ‘politics’ generally should not be under-estimated by councils when developing a policy or strategy in this field. Each authority would want to develop their own approach suitable to local circumstances around three core areas: promoting ‘civicness’; being a responsive and open council; pro-active work on political diversity.

**R4.** Awareness-raising activity, particularly in local schools, is designed to create a long-term interest in political activity, through initiatives such as Local Democracy Week, Youth Parliaments and Youth Mayoral elections. These initiatives and other awareness raising activities are tools through which the council can promote civicness, encourage a local political culture of civic engagement, raise local awareness about its key role and also counter negative perceptions of council life.

**R5.** The evidence is that councillors are motivated by making a difference locally, and that citizens are put off local politics by formal procedures and bureaucracy. Based on this, awareness-raising exercises that focus on what councils do and what impact they can make for local people, could be beneficial. Showing how councillors can invest their time for the benefit of their communities and that it is time well spent may also help overcome the perception that the time commitment required is a barrier.

**R6.** To promote civicness we recommend that councils examine how local democracy and, specifically, the position and role of local councillors can be publicised in the local media. Negative portrayals of local politics and representatives not only exerts a detrimental impact upon overall perceptions of political activity but also the willingness of potential councillors to undertake the role.

**R7.** Specific opportunities to get involved in local politics may need to be offered to help people make take the step from being involved in the local community to being involved in politics, for example providing induction material on being a local councillor to potential and prospective candidates already involved in local community organisations, local meetings and campaigns. Local authorities could publicise the routes to become a councillor, including non-party political routes for people who might consider standing as an independent.

**R8.** Local authorities need to ensure they are responsive and open in their work, and try to close the perceived gaps between citizens, local democratic systems, and local public services. This could involve small practical measures such as altering timings of meetings to better suit councillors, and using community venues – taking the council out to the people. It also covers broader strategic work, for example strengthening devolved decision making structures led by local members.

**R9.** Local authorities should undertake proactive work with under-represented groups in order to increase diversity. This could include promoting the relevance of local councils to younger people and targeting women. Proactive work can include both formal initiatives, and informal outreach to under-represented groups via social networks and community organisations.

**R10.** Councils can improve relations with minority ethnic groups and encourage their participation in political structures by ensuring that general council news and information is communicated via channels most likely to reach minority populations, e.g. minority ethnic newspapers, minority ethnic television channels, etc.

**R11.** There is a need to explore ways in which women from BME communities can be more fully integrated into local political structures. Council initiatives should not just target local women generally but ought to specifically focus upon ways in which BME women can become engaged with the political process.

**R12.** There is a lack of understanding amongst council officers as to why traditionally under-represented councillors leave the role. It is recommended that exit interviews should be used to facilitate a firmer grasp as to why under-represented groups stand down as councillors and how they may be retained.

**R13.** Councils should seek to improve member support through training needs analysis and provision of tailored support packages, especially for new councillors, in order to ensure that the needs of under-represented groups in local communities are catered for in full. Better use of I.T. by local councils can add to councillors' ability to work efficiently, and therefore spend more time on ward duties. In addition, cross-party member development work could strengthen member support, and also help to promote cross-party working and a less adversarial atmosphere which respondents felt was attractive to under-represented groups.

### Public, private and voluntary sector employers

**R1.** Local councils and other public sector bodies are often one of the largest single employers of local residents in an area. Public sector bodies should act as exemplars to other organisations in their treatment of employees who are councillors. Action by local councils to improve representativeness should begin within the organisation. Parallel moves to improve the profile of senior council officers from under-represented groups could also be of value.

**R2.** The benefits of employing a councillor should be better communicated to employers. For instance, senior officers could conduct meetings with key employers in the locality to promote a more sympathetic approach to employees performing civic duties.

**R3.** National initiatives that promote corporate social responsibility should treat being a councillor in the same way as general volunteering and other forms of civic engagement as part of businesses' role in the community.

# 1 Introduction

The independent Councillors Commission was initiated to consider the role of local councillors, and the incentives and barriers to serving on councils. This research was commissioned by Communities and Local Government to inform the deliberations of the Commission.

Women, minority ethnic groups, young people, and people in paid employment are under-represented in local government. If descriptive representation is the desired outcome, exploring ways to encourage under-represented groups into local government appears a necessary step in improving current levels of representativeness (ODPM, 2003). Implicit in this suggestion is the notion that when traditionally marginalised groups are under-represented in political institutions, members of those groups – their interests, wants, and needs – are not fully represented. Equally, it is possible that barriers operate to exclude specific sections of society from participating in public life.

Two groups in society – women and ethnic minorities – have historically lacked significant representation in national and local government. According to the 2006 Census of Local Authority Councillors, 69.3% of councillors are Male (compared to 48.0% of the adult population) and 95.9% are white (compared to 90.5% of the population).<sup>2</sup>

Numerous studies have made the case for equal participation of women in the democratic process (e.g. Hernes, 1987), with recent years witnessing a gradual increase in levels of female representation (Rallings & Thrasher, 2000; Young & Rao, 1994). Yet though women are more noticeable in national and local government than in previous years, studies continue to highlight the difficulties experienced by women along the pathway toward political participation (ODPM, 2003; Rao, 2005; Yule, 2000).<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the under-representation of minority ethnic groups in political structures in not just Britain but more generally has been well-documented (e.g. Bäck & Soininen 1998). The 2006 Census of Local Authority Councillors revealed that just 4.1% of all local councillors in England belong to an ethnic minority. This compares with the overall adult population in which 9.5 per cent are from black and ethnic minority (BME) background (IDeA/LGA/LGAR, 2007). The political mobilisation of minority ethnic communities has only occurred recently, leaving important questions about forms of mobilisation within these communities unanswered (Shukra et al., 2004: 47). What factors facilitate the political involvement of minority groups at local level? Or, conversely, what

2 The 2006 National Census of Local Authority Councillors in England was sponsored by the Improvement and Development Agency and can be accessed via the following link: <http://www.lgar.local.gov.uk/lgv/core/page.do?pageId=23372>

3 For earlier studies on the under-representativeness of women in local government see for example Bristow (1980) and Hills (1983).

constrains their participation? And to what extent can we learn from those cases where minority ethnic groups have achieved comparatively good levels of representation?

The under-representation of women and minority ethnic groups is reflective of a broader ‘democratic deficit’ in local government that also affects young people and individuals who are employed (amongst others). Councillors have an older age profile than the general population, with the average age approximately 58 (IDeA/LGA/LGAR, 2007). Rather than recruit councillors from across the social spectrum, at present local councillors are instead disproportionately representative of certain groups within society.

## Key research questions

Studies have examined the issue of minority group representation in political institutions in a number of western democracies (e.g. Williams, 1998). Yet in Britain few studies have examined in-depth why some areas have better representation levels than others. As a result, several important questions warrant further examination, not least:

- Why are some local authority councils particularly representative of their local populations?
- What factors or conditions have facilitated this outcome?
- What efforts have been made to increase representation and by whom?
- What worked, what didn’t and why?
- What role was played by political parties, the council, and the community and voluntary sector?
- Finally, what has been the impact of more representative councillors on issues such as service delivery and community cohesion?

The purpose of this research is to acquire a deeper understanding of why some local councils are more representative of their populations than others, with particular emphasis placed upon the issue of traditionally under-represented groups. The primary focus of the study is upon councils that are characterised by high levels of traditionally and nationally under-represented groups (women, ethnic minorities, young people, and people in employment) rather than those councils that are representative by default (i.e. are representative because of the uniform nature of the local population). Within this framework, a particular emphasis is placed upon the need to learn from these areas and to identify transferable lessons.

The report draws upon fieldwork that was undertaken in five case study areas located throughout England.

# 2

## Case study selection

This report's findings emerged from fieldwork undertaken in five case study areas that were selected according to their level of representativeness. The aim was to produce a relatively mixed group of cases in terms of the under-represented groups they include. Efforts were also made to take account of their geographical distribution.

The research team utilised a number of sources when selecting the case studies. Initially data derived from the 2006 Census of Local Authority Councillors (IDeA/LGA/LGAR, 2007) was used to rank the number of women, minority ethnic, young, and employed councillors compared to information for the local population as a whole. After taking into consideration the response rates to the census, those councils which had comparatively high levels were identified by the Advisory Group for this research project. After further documentary and web-based exploration of this group of 'top-performing' councils, taking advice from experts in the field, and taking into account the importance of seeking the experience of councils outside London, five high-performing councils were identified and approached to assist in the research. We are very grateful for this help and the time taken by members and officers and others in the locality to share their experiences with us.

The five councils selected were comparatively more representative than others. The case studies, in varying combinations, incorporate significant numbers of women, young councillors, employed and BME councillors. However, a point worth noting was that some of the case studies expressed surprise to have been selected and were not aware that their levels of diversity were above average. One consequence of this for the research was that those authorities had not had the opportunity or spur to reflect thoroughly on the factors for their success. As can be seen throughout the report, there was a lack of impact assessment of diversity-related work, making it is hard for the case study authorities in many cases to attribute causal factors for success to specific initiatives.

The case studies included:

- A metropolitan council in the north west;
- A metropolitan council in Yorkshire;
- An outer-London borough;
- A coastal authority in the south east; and
- An inner-London borough.

The profiles and key characteristics of each case study are as follows:

## A metropolitan council in the north west

The council has a population of approximately 180,000. In terms of its ethnic mix, although the borough is over 93% white, it also has a significant Pakistani community (3%) and a well-established Jewish community. Though historically political control has been held by the Labour Party, recent years have seen a shift in support toward the Conservatives. The metropolitan council has 51 councillors, 15 of which are women. There are also several Jewish councillors and one high-profile BME councillor. In addition, there are a significant number of young councillors (around a fifth), and employed councillors (just under three quarters).

## A metropolitan council in Yorkshire

The council has a population of approximately 190,000. The 2001 Census revealed that over 90% of the population described itself as white whilst an Asian/Asian British community constitutes over 5% of the total population. The largest minority ethnic group is Pakistani. At present, no party has overall political control of the council. The council is made-up of 51 local councillors. Of these, a significant number are employed and minority ethnic councillors.

## An outer-London borough

The borough has a population of over 300,000. In terms of ethnicity, the borough is almost 60% white and has a large Asian/Asian British population (almost 25%). The ethnic mix of the borough is reflected in the number of traditionally under-represented groups in the council. There are over 20 minority ethnic councillors, including members from Asian, Polish and Lebanese backgrounds. In addition, there are over 20 women councillors of a total of 69 councillors. The Conservatives currently have political control following the 2006 local elections.

## A coastal authority in the south east

The coastal authority serves a population of slightly over 90,000, with the population having a slight bias toward women. In terms of its ethnic mix, over 95% of the population are white and over 90% of all residents were born in the UK (only 3.4% of the population are from minority ethnic backgrounds). Political control of the council is currently held by the Liberal Democrats. There are a total of 27 councillors, of which a significant number are women. In addition, there are two openly gay councillors, and one disabled member.

## An inner-London borough

The inner-London borough has a population of over 190,000 and one of the highest population densities in London. Minority ethnic groups comprise over 50% of the population, with a Bangladeshi community representing over one third of the total population. In addition, there is a significant Afro-Caribbean community as well as Chinese, Vietnamese, Somali and East European groups. Political control of the council is held by Labour (although in recent years there has been growing support for non-mainstream parties). The total number of councillors is 51. In terms of the council's representativeness, there are a large number of councillors from the BME community. Nearly 50% are under 40 years old, and around 50% are employed.

Interviews were undertaken in each case study between late May and the end of June 2007. In all cases, attempts were made to interview the Chief Executive, monitoring officers and other senior council officers such as representatives from democratic services and member support, party leaders and whips, councillors from under-represented groups and community representatives. This constituted around 10–15 interviews in each case study.

# 3 Motivations

In Britain, as in many advanced industrial democracies, rates of party membership and activism have been in steady decline in recent decades (Mair & Van Biezen, 2001: 6; Webb et al., 2002; Seyd & Whiteley, 2004). Addressing the question of what motivates local politicians can also teach us about the state of local democracy more generally. Are individuals motivated by a desire to serve their local community or their own interests? To what extent are they supported by local voluntary organisations, political parties and the local council through the process of becoming politically active?

Numerous studies have examined what drives the political activist; whilst some earlier studies stressed a desire for power and personal self-interest (Schlesinger, 1966; Lasswell, 1948), others argued that citizens pursue multiple goals through local political structures (e.g. Kirkpatrick & Miller, 1976). More recent work suggests that politicians often are not motivated by a specific ambition but instead become involved in a more gradual drift toward political life (Barron et al., 1989), with citizens often not considering political activity until being asked to do so (Rao, 1994).

What became initially apparent from the case studies was the importance of local contextual factors in the accounts of councillors. Often, active involvement was traced not to a specific 'motive' but rather local political cultures which were seen as either promoting or supporting a strong sense of civic volunteerism. For example, in the inner-London borough interviewees spoke of the rich history of vibrant political campaigning in the area and the presence of 'non-mainstream' political groups. Similarly, in the metropolitan council in Yorkshire participants emphasised a unique local culture of 'openness' and volunteerism. Crucially, this cultural dynamic was actively encouraged and supported by senior council officers and local employers. Officers also described how the absence of any one dominant party, and the consequent tradition of a hung council, has facilitated the turnover of councillors. In the metropolitan council in the north west, the area's small size was seen as a crucial facilitator in that it enabled a more personal relationship between the council and citizens.

These local contextual factors aside, in each case study interviewees stressed similar motives. Councillors were motivated by one (or a combination) of five motives: a sense of civic duty, economic self-interest, single-issues, political protest, or to represent and advance party principles.

The most prominent motive was a sense of **civic duty** and a desire to improve the local community. 'Serving the community' has also been shown to be an important motive for local councillors in general (IDeA, 2007). For instance, in the outer-London authority councillors stressed the importance of 'having a positive impact on the local

environment', and feeling 'like you're doing the best job for your community'. Others similarly talked of having a sense of civic pride and interpreted their role as contributing to a rich local tradition of volunteerism. A commitment to local civic life is also reflected in the way in which several councillors in the coastal authority had previously been heavily involved with local churches prior to political activity. This sense of civic duty was not confined to one group, but is evident in the accounts of all traditionally under-represented groups, such as BME councillors:

"I have spent my time in England doing community and translation work, I'm interested in developing communities. My intentions are always to be proactive and being a councillor seemed like a professional way to carry on with my community work" (local councillor).

For others, **self-interest** is more important. Some (typically younger) councillors saw local politics as a natural 'stepping-stone' into Westminster. This was not just a way of helping others, but also as part of their own political career progression. For others, the role of local councillor was linked to improving career prospects and enhancing the CV. In explaining political participation generally, self-interest has been shown to be an important motive (e.g. Riker & Oldershock, 1968; Uhlaner, 1989).<sup>4</sup> However, few councillors saw their own involvement as being driven by economic self-interest. Instead, several interviewees suggested that other economically inactive residents had been encouraged to become involved in local politics by the incentive of financial gain.

Specific **single-issues** can play an important role in driving local residents to become politically active: for one participant, becoming a councillor was seen as an opportunity to ensure that facilities were made available for young people; for another, the issue of street-lighting motivated initial involvement. A commitment to youth engagement was also cited, as was a desire to protest against the closure of a local hospital in the town. Only a few interviewees discussed the role of **ideological belief** or a desire to advance party ideals. One councillor in a London authority explained his aim to secure as many votes for his party as possible so that Liberal Democrat ideas could be promoted at local level. Similarly:

"I joined when I was 13. I wanted to work for the party's best interest. I'm a councillor to serve the party. I'm proud to represent the community but I'm here to promote party goals" (young councillor).

<sup>4</sup> For a good discussion of the role of economic self-interest in political participation see, for example, Whiteley (1995).

# 4 Perceptions of the role

Though experience of public office was relatively mixed in each council, all interviewees perceived there to be similar positive and negative aspects associated with the role of local councillor.

In terms of positive aspects, the majority felt that involvement with the council ‘can make a real difference to the community’. The experience of helping local residents was important for most, with casework associated with feelings of pride and satisfaction. For instance, one councillor spoke of a successful attempt to improve street lighting as a particular ‘high’ moment. For others, the role is linked more closely to rising levels of confidence, with one interviewee describing how delivering a good speech in the council chamber had been a particularly uplifting experience.

Interviewees also raised several negative aspects. Most important was the issue of time commitment which is typically presented as a major constraint upon their capacity to effectively fulfil the role. Time commitment is the most significant barrier not just for under-represented groups but for councillors more generally and is discussed in greater depth below. Participants also emphasised what they perceived to be a general lack of public understanding about local councillors and what the role involves. Councillors frequently raised their concern about the image of local councillors and local government more generally. These negative portrayals of council life can be reinforced by a hostile local press.

# 5 Facilitators

Based on the fieldwork, it became clear that a number of factors have facilitated the improved levels of representativeness in these five areas. However, what also became clear was that several are more prominent than others.

## Background factors and supportive contexts

Strong social networks and a vibrant well-connected civil society encourage involvement in the political arena (Putnam, 1995; Teixeira, 1992). For instance, early studies of citizens aspiring to enter public office have found that they tend to be individuals who are closely tied to the local community (Schwartz, 1969). Strong social networks which support political activity at the local level hold the potential to not only encourage under-represented groups to seek representation but also provide ‘fertile soil’ from which local parties can recruit candidates.

In the case studies, what emerged most clearly was the crucial role played by social networks within BME communities. One councillor commented:

“If you have a network it’s easier. You can get to people through those networks. I have those networks in my ward” (BME councillor).

Generally, minority ethnic groups are significantly under-represented in local government (see Table 1). For example, in 2001 2.7% of councillors were from a minority ethnic background, compared to 7.9% of the total population. By 2006, the figure had risen to 4.6% of councillors, but still didn’t compare favourably to the proportion of BME people in the population (9.5%) (IDeA, 2007). However, findings suggest that where social networks within these communities are strong, participation in the political arena is more likely. For example, social networks within the Bengali community in one London borough are central to understanding the mobilisation of this specific community. Consistent with studies that have highlighted the strong social and family networks within the South Asian population (Ballard, 1994; Lewis, 1994a, 1994b; Modood et al., 1997; Peach, 2006; Shaw, 1988, 2000, 2001), both councillors and party representatives stressed the importance of such networks to understanding the increased levels of representativeness.

<b>Table 1: Ethnicity of Councillors, 1997 to 2006</b>				
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2006</b>
% White	96.8	97.3	96.5	95.9
% Other ethnic background	3.2	2.7	3.5	4.1

Source: 2006 National Census of Local Authority Councillors in England (IDeA/LGA/LGAR, 2007)

Political parties frequently target such networks when recruiting candidates. For instance, in the inner-London borough in the early 1990s the Labour Party had actively attempted to recruit Bengali men who had been heavily active in voluntary and community organisations. The Labour Party recruited from this community via organisations such as a local trade’s council and Bengali movements. More recently, political movements such as the Respect Party have similarly sought to mobilise support by appealing to local mosques (there are over 40 in the outer-London authority) as well as Bengali media outlets (there are 2 television channels and 7 newspapers).

As discussed in a later section of this report, evidence from the case studies suggests that the mobilisation of one minority group does not necessarily mean that all minority ethnic groups have achieved adequate levels of representation. We discuss this later in this report.

## Political parties

Political parties can assume a central role in the mobilisation and retention of under-represented groups in local politics. Alignment to a political party more generally has been shown to increase opportunities to enter and advance in local politics. For instance, much early work in political science demonstrated that individuals who are contacted and ‘nurtured’ by political parties are both more likely to vote and also to become active participants in political affairs (Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960; Wolfinger, 1963). At the same time, a lack of contact between political parties and local residents appears to fuel disillusionment and protest activity. For example, voters rejecting mainstream parties in favour of extremist groups such as the British National Party (BNP) trace their support for the latter to the BNP’s use of intensive canvassing coupled with the perceived absence of mainstream parties at grassroots level.<sup>5</sup> Even where parties are active, the way they operate can help or hinder political involvement. For example, parties can exert a detrimental impact upon local democracy by operating as ‘closed networks’ and excluding ‘outsider’ groups (Hall et al., 2001).

5 See Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (2004) *539 Voters’ Views: A Voting Behaviour Study in Three Northern Towns*. Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

In the five case studies, local parties have been instrumental in recruiting under-represented groups and, consequently, improving levels of representativeness. At times, local parties play an active role in the targeting and recruitment of minority groups. For example, in the outer-London authority local Conservatives advertised for candidates in a local newspaper with the aim of attracting Conservative-minded people who may not have previously thought about political involvement. Response rates for this initiative were seen as good, with interested residents subsequently being invited to a follow-up evening discussion. The attendees were not party members at the time but party supporters. Following that evening, it was planned that those who were still interested in becoming councillors were going to be interviewed in order to establish that they definitely wanted to stand as Conservative candidates. Upon selection they would then need to join the party to demonstrate commitment. At the time of writing it was not yet clear whether these efforts were likely to result in additional (and more representative) people standing for election or being elected.

The Conservative Party's selection methods were also pitched at encouraging a diverse range of candidates. One factor was their adaptation of the usual process of approval and selection for Conservative candidates to allow particular wards to conduct a quick pre-selection interview in order to get candidates from under-represented groups onto the approved list more rapidly than would normally be the case. The Party was also careful to ensure that candidates from the under-represented groups were given a fair chance by being allocated to 'winnable' seats. This has all had a significant impact, with the local branch selecting candidates with Polish and Irish backgrounds for winnable seats.

Though Labour is often interpreted as a more naturally diverse party, a clear message from Party head office has highlighted how local councils and parties must make a concerted attempt to improve levels of diversity at local level. In the outer-London case study, the local Labour Party used affirmative action plans to ensure that at least one third of multi-member wards were fought by a woman (at the next election this will be changed to ensure that 50% of winnable seats are fought by women). Additionally, senior Labour councillors in the outer-London borough have always tried to keep an eye out for young talent to try and ensure that councillors are as diverse as possible.

Other examples of proactive recruitment practices were evident in the coastal case study where local Liberal Democrats made a conscious effort at the last election to recruit local people who were not stereotypical 'political animals'. One of these residents was a member of the local Bangladeshi community. Importantly, the Liberal Democrats have also played an active role in promoting the inclusion of younger councillors. In one case a Liberal Democrat councillor had established an Internet-based social network on the 'Facebook' website in an attempt to keep in touch with party supporters and prospective local candidates. Another Liberal Democrat councillor had used the Internet site 'Epals' to collect e-mail addresses from local residents and subsequently keep them informed of political affairs in their local neighbourhood. Whilst it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of such initiatives, anecdotal evidence from

“We’ve always been keen on reflecting the local community. But I would be lying to you if I said it was just good-spirited. It’s also about votes” (Party member).

In the outer-London borough, Conservative councillors held surgeries specifically designed for the Polish community in an attempt to promote engagement (there is also a less formal surgery for the Chinese community). For party members, such initiatives are seen as crucial to engaging communities who might otherwise be prevented from participating in politics due to language barriers. In this specific case, the council leader has also become heavily involved with the local voluntary and community sector, devoting considerable effort to attending meetings with the Afro-Caribbean community, with the aim of engaging this community. These efforts by the Party were often reflected in the accounts of local councillors, such as this Mayor from a local BME community:

“I settled ... in 1992. I had time for local politics. The Labour Mayoress invited me to meetings. Then I began to work for the Party. They invited me to stand in a local by-election in the mid-1990s” (Mayor).

Only in a minority of cases did party representatives place party ideals above the need to ensure that they fully represented the local community. For instance, one local party organiser explained: “I would rather have a good Liberal Democrat man than an illiberal female councillor. Loyalty to the Party is important”.

Local parties can also play an important role by providing **ongoing support** for councillors. For example, councillors in the outer-London borough referred positively to the local Labour Party’s mentoring scheme which is made available both to new councillors and to new shadow cabinet members. Similarly, in the same council, Conservatives attempt to retain their councillors by using deputy portfolio positions that are designed to enable members to learn about specific issues. Councillors fill these positions for a period of two years and by participating in this ‘apprenticeship’ they become eligible for promotion should a vacancy arise. In the north west metropolitan council, when it seemed likely that the Conservatives would take control, local councillors were provided with a mentor from a neighbouring borough. One local councillor said: “We formed a shadow cabinet and trained for this leadership role which was great”. Anecdotal evidence from the people we spoke to suggests that such initiatives play an important part in keeping younger members engaged and interested in council structures and work.

Further good practice was uncovered in the coastal authority where the Liberal Democrats are particularly supportive of newly-elected councillors. In particular, newly elected councillors spoke very highly of a scheme that enabled them to select a mentor from within the group. Upon joining the party, members also have the opportunity to attend national party conferences for training and other regional training events. Additional support mechanisms made available by the national party, such as the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, are also viewed by local organisers as an important source for guidance.

councillors suggests that such attempts at innovative practice contribute positively to recruitment and retention.

Similarly, a local Labour Party branch in another area has recently sought to revive a 'Young Socialist' movement with the specific aim of 'avoiding becoming a party of older people'. For the local organiser, such efforts are required if the Party is to engage fully with today's young people: "My fight was against Thatcherism but they don't know anything about Thatcher. It's our job to engage with them". Prospective young candidates "need to be kept away from committees and away from old men talking about the miners' strike". Again, though it is difficult to examine the effectiveness of such organisations, anecdotal evidence suggests their positive contribution to party campaigning and recruitment. As one female councillor explained:

"... there was a bit of a drive to get female councillors ... If I hadn't been pushed I wouldn't have done it. The Party and its local councillors pushed me" (woman councillor).

In the north west metropolitan council, the Labour Party had long standing links with the local South Asian population and representatives from this community for over 20 years. The local party were seeking ways of encouraging women members of the BME community to become involved starting with a drive to recruit more BME women as party members. These efforts were ongoing at the time we visited, and the results are not yet evident. Some longer established politicians in this area described their work supporting younger party members as their political career progressed, and pointed to the election of new young members as evidence of success.

In the inner-London authority, the local Labour Party deliberately sought to mobilise traditionally under-represented groups such as individuals from the Bengali community and local women. In the same area, Bengali councillors placed heavy emphasis upon engagement with local parties. For example, one interviewee explained the importance of a personal visit from a Labour Party member as a key factor in persuading him to stand as a councillor: "... he made the effort to come and see me". This councillor described "feeling that I was important enough to come and see me. He found the time and the effort".

From the party's perspective, there are clearly pragmatic reasons for such targeting activity. In one area, a long-term councillor recalls being approached by Labour to stand, recalling what the Party told him at the time: "I could win the by-election because I was from the Bengali community". The councillor had previously been a youth worker, had established a football team and was highly respected in the local community. For Labour, he was seen as a high-profile representative of the local Bengali community. This dimension was also expressed by local party organisers, such as this Labour Party organiser:

## The Council

Much like political parties, local councils can assume an active role in promoting representativeness. Whilst in each of the case study areas considered it is the parties that have been central to the recruitment of traditionally under-represented groups, the local authorities themselves also played an important supporting role.

Levels of representativeness in several areas were facilitated by the presence of an ‘active council’ that launched initiatives designed to encourage a good cross-section of the local population to come forward for selection and election. For instance, in the south east coastal area Democratic Services spoke with local political parties, encouraging them to be more imaginative when recruiting candidates. This council’s local paper ran a profile on the two youngest councillors which was viewed as a great tool for disseminating the idea that young people are engaged and can make a positive contribution to their community. In the inner-London borough, the council similarly plays an active role in disseminating information to local minority ethnic groups. Council-related information is made available in different languages through press briefings targeted toward local minority ethnic media outlets (television channels, newspapers, etc.), making it easier for these communities to receive news about local decision-making. Though it is difficult to assess the precise impact of such measures, both senior officers and BME councillors saw such attempts as critical to the engagement of BME groups. This authority has also actively sought to recruit more local women into public life. For example, one high-profile initiative aims to ‘encourage more women in the community to influence decision-making in the borough and to increase the number of women involved in public life roles’.

It is clearly difficult to assess the impact of individual initiatives. It is, however, arguable that these initiatives as a group reflect a general desire to promote diversity on the part of the authority that filters its way into public consciousness, and adds to the general supportive environment offered by local government for under-represented groups such as women.

Following election, councils appeared to overtake the political parties as the most prominent source of support for councillors. In particular, member support is an area where the role of the local authority becomes most apparent. Specifically, this dynamic can be seen in two areas: (1) the development of a comprehensive, innovative and flexible member support programme; and (2) altering council structures to facilitate the role of councillor.

In terms of the first, both the **quality and extent of member support** holds the potential to exert a significant impact upon the experience of public office. In some areas, member support was playing a crucial role in equipping councillors with the required skills and confidence; in others it was felt that this support mechanism could

be greatly improved. In terms of a positive example, support offered to members in one of the case study areas was comprehensive and innovative (as reflected in the fact that the Council was a finalist in the 2006 MJ Member Development Achievement Award). In this authority, member support services played an active role during the initial induction phase and beyond. In particular, member support staff offered tailored development opportunities to each council member. Crucially, member support officers in this authority developed a flexible approach orientated around councillors' busy lives and utilising one-to-one discussions to identify individual needs and areas of interest. This kind of support was seen to assist in building on the motivation for standing for election and to overcome some of the barriers which otherwise act to disincentivise councillors and sometimes lead to them standing down. For example, one such initiative provided learning materials in audio CD format so that councillors could undergo training when at home or driving. One CD focuses on 'radio skills', providing information and directions to councillors on the topic of handling media relations. Importantly, the decision to design and produce innovative material following one-to-one appraisals received strong support from senior management. Additional and innovative support mechanisms are currently being developed. For instance, member support is currently developing an Internet site that is designed to enable all councillors to share knowledge and experiences with one another.

Much of this work has been the result of an emphasis upon "training-needs-led support" through which member development takes place on a one-to-one basis and is supported by an informal mentoring 'buddying' scheme. In this way support is adaptive and fixed upon individual needs rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. For example, recently several councillors had raised their concern about delivering spontaneous speeches within the council chamber. As a result, member support developed a programme focused specifically upon this need. Such examples are part of a broader attempt to give councillors a sense of "ownership" over their own professional development which is seen as a positive way to sustain involvement. Rather than have things "done to them", effort is instead directed toward incorporating members as fully as possible in the design and implementation of support programmes.

It should also be noted how member support in this specific case has been proactive in terms of learning from other authorities. Officers have sought to integrate the experiences of neighbouring authorities into their own programmes. Likewise, in the metropolitan council in the north west, officers expressed their willingness to use existing frameworks, such as the North West Employers Organisation's Member Development Charter, an accreditation framework for council-led member development and support.<sup>6</sup> The same authority has a cross-party elected member development working group that meets monthly to develop member development, including recruitment. Similarly, the inner-London council had learnt of the practice of

6 See <http://www.nweo.org.uk/> for more details about the Member Development Gateway and Charters.

exit interviews carried out in a neighbouring authority and member development staff are now considering how to replicate the practice in their own authority.

Adaptive council structures are also an important facilitator, especially flexibility with regards to planning council meetings. Four out of the five case study areas hold evening meetings which are seen as positive by councillors. A starting time of 7pm is seen as beneficial to those with caring duties, whilst in one case study area the time of 5.30pm was seen as problematic for those councillors having to pick up children from school or leaving full-time work. Some councillors advocated expanding further upon flexible meetings, including for example meetings on a Saturday morning and generally encouraging the council to ‘think outside of the box’ in an age of increasing web-based communication (though the suggestion of weekend meetings did not receive widespread support). In some cases, the council provided a meal before meetings and has sought to accommodate councillors during religious festivals such as Ramadan.

In the inner-London authority both the council and political parties have tried to ensure that most meetings commence at 7pm and are kept as brief as possible. The council also avoids holding meetings in August or during school holidays. From the perspective of officers, this strategic approach to the scheduling of meetings is seen as crucial in retaining those who might have resigned due to the intense time commitment. Moving meeting times to a later slot is also seen by some as opening up the process to the public who, it is argued, are more likely to attend early evening meetings.

## Employers as facilitators

The view of employers toward their employees’ political activity is crucial and holds the potential to significantly influence the experience of public office. What emerges clearly from the fieldwork is the significant potential of employers to either facilitate or constrain involvement in local politics.

In terms of the role of employers, the five case studies were relatively mixed: whilst in some cases employers actively supported their employees’ political role, in others employers were seen as a significant constraint upon councillors. For example, in the north west metropolitan council, it was argued that the significant number of micro companies employing just one or two employees meant that local firms were less able to offer employees time off and other support for their civic duties. This was in contrast to the situation in the Yorkshire metropolitan area where there were several large employers in a better position to offer support to employees who were councillors. This was said to be coupled with a rich local tradition of civicness and volunteerism that added to local employers’ commitment to offering flexible hours etc. This strong sense of civic duty at neighbourhood level was seen as being supported by two large local employers in the area who were active in the financial sector. The important role of corporate social responsibility was viewed both by councillors and officers alike

as an important factor facilitating the council to achieve higher than average levels of representativeness. Likewise, in a different authority interviewees spoke of how their employment in the public sector enabled them to undertake their council role. Councillors explained how much of their confidence and skills had been acquired when working on public sector unions or committee structures. Employers such as local secondary schools and the National Health Service encouraged and supported the decision to contest local elections which, in turn, seemed to increase the confidence of participants. Self-employed councillors and postgraduate students also saw in their professional arrangements a greater level of flexibility and autonomy that enabled active commitment to local councils.

## High-profile roles and role models

In several of the case studies interviewees stressed the importance of having individuals from under-represented groups in high-profile ‘ambassadorial’ roles. For instance, in the inner-London authority the last four Mayors have come from the local Bengali community. Such appointments are seen by interviewees as sending a positive message to often marginalised communities and promoting further engagement. High-profile appointments are promoted not only through civic events, but also via the council weekly newspaper. Similarly, in the outer-London authority it was suggested that if residents were able to see individuals from their own community appointed to senior or highly visible roles then a positive message is communicated which directly counters the ‘people like me aren’t councillors’ argument. As explained by one Somali community leader:

“It’s about having a role model. It’s a prestigious position within the community and you need good role models. If you see someone from the same background or area then it can drive an individual to be a bit more aspirational than they would otherwise have been” (community leader).

Political parties can play an active role in this process: in one authority the local Conservatives appointed a young member of the BME community to the role of Deputy Mayor. For the party, the initiative was viewed as an assertive attempt to engage young people in politics through an ambassadorial role. Anecdotal evidence from the party indicates that this strategy has worked. Although it is not clear how this process happens, it is felt that people see themselves reflected and are more likely to become engaged. The party felt strongly that this has also kept the young councillor engaged and interested in the political process, without the pressure to train up to be Mayor. In another case, a BME councillor was appointed to the same position despite holding little experience of public office. The intention was to keep this councillor engaged over the long-term and to foster strong links with local communities. However, it is crucial that the right type of community representative is selected. For example, reflecting upon his experience in a neighbouring authority, one Chief Executive explained how unrepresentative community ‘elders’ perpetuated feelings of alienation and

marginalisation amongst some minority groups, a suggestion also supported by reports undertaken following the 2001 disturbances (Cantle, 2001).

## Awareness-raising activity

Each of the five case studies underlined the positive aspects that are associated with awareness-raising activity. Initiatives designed to raise awareness of the Council, its function, and the role of local councillors are often viewed as beneficial to local democracy. Local schools appear the most obvious forum for such activity. The Yorkshire case study council had undertaken two focus groups with local secondary school students, for instance asking students how they perceive local politics. In response to this exercise, member support is designing a DVD to use in local schools with feedback from students used to develop such resources. In another authority, Democratic Services ran similar events, for instance a junior Mayoral multi-media competition aimed at primary school children. The winner of the competition spends a day as Junior Mayor and accompanies the Mayor to various functions. At the same time, throughout the year an outreach programme sends officers and councillors into local schools and colleges to explain the democratic process, how it works, and to raise awareness of the importance of voting. Electoral registration forms are also distributed and help and advice is given to the young people in filling them out. The effect of this work on youth electoral turnouts may not emerge for several years when school pupils eventually become eligible to vote, and the impact of this particular work would be difficult to disentangle. Despite this, in all five areas, awareness raising and youth education about politics and the political process was felt to be crucial.

Nor is such activity confined to children: there are also plans to initiate events for adults during a Local Democracy Week. It has been noticed that typically such events are aimed at young people at the expense of adults. One of these events will target approximately 150 local people, including school governors and prominent members in local communities. Council officers and current councillors will deliver talks and be available to answer questions from delegates on the role of the council and councillors. On the same day that this reception is held, a debate will take place between young people and older members to encourage young people to consider local politics.

However, from the perspective of local parties there emerged a general belief that awareness-raising, particularly targeted toward youth groups, could go much further. The disengagement of young people was identified by most local organisers as a major problem in terms of improving levels of representativeness further. One women councillor remarked: "... they need to teach politics in school. They don't teach the right history. If I was an American I would know everything – we need to push that ... getting kids interested in the constitution. It's the educational thing".

# 6

## Barriers & constraints

Whilst the five case studies were specifically chosen because they were more representative than most councils, the accounts of interviewees also highlighted significant barriers that were either constraining or preventing further representation. Whilst some barriers are more general, influencing councillors as a whole (i.e. time commitment, perception of the role), others are linked to specific groups (i.e. cultural factors).

### Perception of the role

A lack of information about local councillors – what the role entails and what residents can expect – is a significant barrier to improving current levels of representativeness in the five areas. As one Chief Executive put it in the interviews: “We need to demystify what public institutions are”.

Perceptions of a lack of connection between citizens and local democracy were symbolised by descriptions from the case studies of the “pomp and circumstance” and “austere” surroundings of the Town Hall that put people off.

More generally there is a lack of awareness over what the role entails, with those citizens possessing some knowledge associating being a local councillor with negative features such as hard work with little reward (Granville and Laird, 1999; Hall et al., 2001). Evidence from public-orientated focus groups in Scotland underlined how there is “a distinct lack of knowledge and awareness of what councillors do”. Few participants were aware of the sort of contact councillors have with constituents or the nature of problems which local representatives must deal with (Granville and Laird, 1999: 2). This finding is corroborated by studies undertaken in England, where few of the respondents had more than a rough idea of what councillors do (Taylor and Williams, 2006; White et al., 2006).

Importantly, negative perceptions of local democracy can be further fuelled by local media. One local Labour Party organiser pointed out that: “the councillors on television are always bent”. For example, in the north west case study the local media in previous years was seen as adopting a particularly hostile position toward the actions of local councillors. In contrast, the arrival of a more sympathetic editor is seen as playing a positive role and strengthening council-media relations. Some councillors suggested that negative perceptions could be tackled by exploring ways for them to spend more time on ward duties and less time away from the electorate in committee meetings. Expanding the ward aspect of the councillors’ role, it was suggested, would directly counter negative portrayals of politically active citizens. For instance, one BME councillor explained how councillors: “have too many meetings” and that “our job should be to connect with the local people”.

In some areas local party organisers were actively seeking to expand upon the ward aspect of the role. For example, in one borough the local Labour Party encouraged

members to focus on their ward duties and engage with local residents. The number of group meetings was halved, with a party representative explaining how “people sat in the council town hall is not what the public want ... The first role is representing the community: wards must come first”. Others urged local councils to think outside of the box when managing councillors time: “Why do we have to come into the town hall when we’ve got the technology that we’ve got?”.

## Time commitment

The amount of time needed to perform the role of local councillor is consistently cited as a major barrier to becoming and remaining active in local politics (Courtney et al., 1998; Hall et al., 2001). Table 2 shows the average number of hours spent by councillors on council duties. Whilst these figures have to be interpreted with some caution (they are sourced from various surveys that have utilised different methods and definitions) they are indicative of a general upward trend.

Whether attending council meetings, dealing with constituents’ enquiries or attending community councils and school boards, councillors contribute a large amount of time to their duties which inevitably in turn impacts upon employment and family life. Women in particular have found council duties a constraint upon obligations to their family (e.g. Wilson et al. 1993, p.346).

Findings from the five case studies show that the vast majority of interviewees cite time commitment as a significant constraint. One councillor commented:

“I wouldn’t go on holiday because I had so much work when I got back. I was the chairman of social services committee and I had my post couriered out to me on holiday so that at least I could sort out the rubbish, deal with anything that was really urgent and leave the rest of the letters until I came back but I wouldn’t go away otherwise and I think it’s a lot worse now” (councillor).

Some councillors described how being a councillor restricted time spent with family and friends. This was discussed particularly in relation to women, who continue to be most likely to have primary caring responsibilities in the home, and employed councillors.

**Table 2:** Average Number of Hours Spent on Council Duties, 1964–2006

Year	Average Number of Hours Spent on Council Duties per Month	Source
1964	52	Maud (1967) cited in Widdicombe (1986)
1976	79	Robinson (1977) cited in Widdicombe (1986)
1985	74	Widdicombe (1986)
1993	74	Young and Rao (1994)
2003	82.66	Rao (2005)
2004	93.2*	IDeALGA/LGAR (2007)
2006	94.9*	IDeALGA/LGAR (2007)

\* Based on weekly data and re-aggregated to provide an estimate on a Calendar month basis.

One councillor explained how the role affects every aspect of his daily life: “People want a quiet life but when your details are everywhere ... there is a general absence of privacy”. Similarly, another councillor said:

“My husband said, ‘when is your surgery?’ I said, ‘why?’ He said, ‘so I can make an appointment to see you’” (councillor).

## Remuneration

According to the 2006 Survey of Members’ Allowances, councillors in England receive an average of £5,648 in basic allowances per annum (LGAR, 2007). There appears to be a general consensus that, compared with the vital work they undertake, councillors are poorly rewarded (Lyons Inquiry into Local Government, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2005b: 27). The argument is that the decision to become and remain an active councillor is met with inadequate financial rewards (Rao, 1994; Scottish Executive, 2005).

However, based on the interview data, few councillors were motivated by economic self-interest. Although it was suggested in one London authority that some economically-inactive residents saw in local politics an opportunity to receive a regular income, a significant number were opposed to the idea of increasing members’ allowances. As argued by one councillor “I’ve always discouraged increasing remuneration because it would attract the wrong type of people. Would they have the same passion?”.

Yet several interviewees did suggest the need for an increase in members’ allowances. One local councillor said: “Seven and a half grand isn’t enough money for people who are reducing their working hours”. Participants also highlighted a problem with retaining councillors who receive means-tested benefits, as they actually become worse off financially by becoming a councillor. There have been some problems with the Department for Work and Pension in resolving this matter and it has subsequently resulted in a couple of councillors standing down. Such findings corroborate other studies that have similarly shown how receiving a councillor’s allowance can exert a negative impact upon an individual’s benefit entitlement (Canavon & Smith, 2001).

## The ‘party route’

A noticeable barrier for some local activists was the perceived need to enter local politics via the ‘party route’. Some studies have emphasised the challenges facing those citizens seeking to enter local politics outside of the party apparatus. The absence of party support can impose both practical and financial restrictions on the capacity of residents to contest elections (Scottish Executive, 2005). This finding is supported by the fieldwork. For example, in the coastal authority councillors expressed a desire to see less of a party-political focus and more of an emphasis upon local issues. Some councillors

resented the way in which local residents are forced to go through a party and explained how standing as an independent would be “virtually impossible”. Also, it was suggested in one case study area that although there are a notable number of highly-active local community activists, these individuals remain reluctant to become involved through formal decision-making channels. Party leaders described formal party meetings as “boring” and as “failing to move with the times”.

## Council and party support

Though support mechanisms were generally good in each of the five case studies, there were several examples of where this could be improved. In some areas, whilst a comprehensive induction programme was provided, IT facilities were not operational and assurances that councillors would be given laptops and be able to communicate via e-mail at home were not met. More importantly, in several cases interviewees expressed the view that whilst councillors were representative, policy officers in contrast remained disproportionately white older males. In one London borough several interviewees explained that whilst there was a good level of representation from BME groups, there were not enough representatives in the ‘white-dominated’ senior council tier. Others were more critical of the “pomp and circumstance” associated with the town hall. This was seen as “putting people off” and as contributing to an inaccurate portrayal of what local councillors are about.

There were also examples of weak party support. Most often, councillors explained that whilst they received good levels of support during the election campaign this soon evaporated following their entrance into public office. In this respect there is a need for continual ongoing party support. As one councillor explained: “I felt supported in becoming a local councillor, not being a councillor. There’s more that can be done”.

## Employers as a barrier

Although, as discussed above, employers can act as a force for good, supporting and even encouraging involvement in local civic affairs, such examples are a rarity. More often employers act as a constraint upon the capacity of councillors to undertake their political role. Difficulties experienced when attempting to obtain time off work have been shown to be an important factor (Courtney et al., 1998). The same study revealed that over 60% of employed councillors use holiday allocation so that they are able to fulfil their council duties. One councillor told us:

“I had a high-pressured job with deadlines and I took holiday time to attend council meetings” (councillor).

Some councillors explained how taking time off to attend council duties may jeopardise promotion opportunities at work. One senior officer said "... two new Conservative councillors had serious difficulties with their employers to the extent of not being able to take portfolio positions".

This issue was reflected in the accounts of interviewees. For example, one councillor who also worked part-time as a teacher in a local school explained how although her employer was *initially* supportive and enthusiastic about her decision to stand they became less so when she was actually elected into public office. Another councillor explained how it took two weeks to get compliance to work for the council: "They don't understand it, they see it as another income and think it's another job". Similarly:

"If more people are going to be encouraged to become councillors, workplace flexibility is really important. I was told I get 10 days a year for council work but they've not lived up to that ... employers need to understand. They were encouraging *until* I got elected!" (councillor).

For most, council duties are seen as exerting a negative impact upon their working life. Some explained how by taking time off to attend a committee meetings they felt that they were jeopardising promotion opportunities at work; others alleged that their employer had attempted to make them redundant following the election victory and a request to change working hours. The general consensus, with only a few notable exceptions, is that employers are perceived as viewing council work as 'just another job' and as providing a second income as opposed to representing a contribution to civic life.

This particular aspect is reflected in attempts to promote corporate social responsibility. For instance, whilst organisations such as Business in the Community encourage companies to donate a percentage of their profits to charitable causes and to protect their employees' commitment to volunteering activity, currently they do not advocate time spent on council duty as an equal measure.<sup>7</sup>

## Representation for one but not for all?

Within minority communities, academics have observed the evolution of new patterns of ethnic, religious and identity-based political mobilisation. New opportunities and the establishment of relatively new arenas for political discussion and campaigning around issues of racial equality, racism and minority representation have emerged in recent years (Shukra et al., 2004: 32; Back et al., 2002; Schuster & Solomos, 2004). The 'ethnic vote' has become a significant political force in contemporary British politics (Anwar, 1998; Saggat, 1998, 2000). Often, minority ethnic groups focus their political involvement upon local government, with ethnic-orientated organisations remaining a highly-localised affair (Ball & Solomos, 1990; Ben-Tovim et al., 1986; Shukra et al., 2004: 34). For example, in the inner-London case study the local Bangladeshi

<sup>7</sup> See Business in the Community (BIC), available online: [http://www.bitc.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/index.html](http://www.bitc.org.uk/what_we_do/index.html)

community had become politically mobilised and, in doing so, had gained access to local decision-making channels and resources.

However, based upon fieldwork in the five case study areas what also becomes apparent is that whilst councils may have become particularly representative of specific ethnic groups, other groups have not advanced as far in representation channels. For instance, whilst the mobilisation of the local Bengali community in one area was interpreted unanimously in positive terms, at the same time it was acknowledged that there is a near-complete absence of a number of other ethnic groups who also have a significant presence in the locality. In this case the local Somali, Chinese, Vietnamese, Afro-Caribbean and, increasingly, the East European communities did not have representatives in the council chamber. Despite one ethnic group successfully mobilising, other ethnic groups were described by some officers as effectively remaining 'hidden' within the local community. Although local political parties are currently attempting to engage with such groups, for example targeting East European residents via Catholic Churches, these groups remain on the margins of political representation. Studies elsewhere have similarly noted that whilst, longer-term, minority ethnic groups acquire representation in political assemblies, more recently arrived groups are often left with minimal or no representation (Bäck & Soininen, 1996 and 1998: 43).

Nor was this finding confined to a single case. In the outer-London authority community representatives spoke of the difficulties associated with mobilising the local Somali community who remained disengaged from the political process. This suggests a wider problem linked to the representativeness of councils: whilst some minority groups achieve good levels of representation, others have seemingly been left behind. The implication being that each minority group should be targeted on an individual basis.

A related, but different issue was raised by one representative from an Afro-Caribbean community who explained his perception that it was virtually impossible to get a community member elected because that specific group is spread thinly throughout the authority and generally does not engage itself in local politics to the same extent as other ethnic groups.

## Cultural factors

Some barriers identified are unique to specific groups and focus more upon cultural dimensions. The most notable finding emerging from the case study work in this respect was the issue of representation levels for BME women. Table 3 shows ethnicity of councillors by gender and demonstrates that BME women are under-represented in comparison to their male equivalents. In two of our case studies where representation from the BME community was strong, local councillors also commented that there was no female representation from these communities and that this was an issue the local party was seeking to address.

Ethnic Origin	Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%
White	12,379	95.5	5,321	96.9
Asian	438	3.4	75	1.4

Source: 2006 National Census of Local Authority Councillors in England (IDeA/LGA/LGAR, 2007)

This was explored in the inner-London borough in respect of the Bengali community. Bengali and non-Bengali interviewees explained how this disparity in representation levels within the community can be traced to a culture in which women are discouraged from becoming politically active. One interviewee described there being 'sexism' within the community, also alleging that Bengali male councillors had 'actively resisted' equalities training. Others highlighted how although there had been four Mayors from the Bangladeshi community, none had formally appointed a Consort. One Bengali councillor acknowledged the need to encourage more women from his community into public life. Likewise, in the northern borough BME women from communities which originally came from Pakistan and Kashmir were similarly less involved in civic life. That said, there are signs that this dynamic may well be generational. For instance, younger Asian activists stressed their willingness and attempts to recruit Asian women.

# 7

## Impact

Each of the five case studies exhibited good levels of representation of traditionally under-represented groups. Fieldwork enabled the research team to probe the perceived impact of good representation levels upon the respective local community. The perceived impact was two-fold: (1) more effective political debate leading to improved decision-making, and therefore service delivery; and (2) a positive impact upon local community cohesion.

### Effective political debate

Broadly having a more representative council was associated with improved democratic outcomes, i.e. the inclusion of under-represented groups is linked to more effective political debate and the strengthening of intra-community relations. This builds upon the suggestion that the best political decisions for society are those that are based upon the experience of a range of different social groups (Hernes, 1987, cited in Bäck & Soininen, 1998: 30). As a Chief Executive in one London borough explained: “It’s important that when you hold up a mirror to a council chamber it reflects back to you the local community”. In the outer-London council, having a more representative council was perceived to have had a positive impact on decision-making and scrutiny because many parts of the community are represented so many viewpoints are taken into consideration. This is especially important when residents question decisions taken by the council who can then be confident in defending decisions because a variety of points of view would have been considered during debates. The increase in diversity has also helped in terms of fostering cross-party working as members form bonds based on age, ethnicity, shared acquaintances and background that cut across party lines, and this results in more conducive debates.

The inclusion of under-represented groups is also thought by politicians and officers to make a contribution to improving **service delivery**. It has been suggested that greater descriptive representativeness implies that services are more able to respond to the needs of the most disadvantaged (ODPM, 2003). This worked by having people involved in decision-making who had more direct experience and understanding of the issues as they affected residents, and were therefore more likely to make decisions that reflected or responded to residents’ needs. For example, the participation of young councillors was viewed as an invaluable input into debates on licensing regulations in the north west authority. Younger councillors were seen to bring a more liberal outlook and to recognise the benefits associated with late-night licenses, a contribution that was seen as vital if the council was to ensure that it is not just “people over 60 who were taking all of the decisions”. Similarly, in the coastal authority, getting a broad range of ages is seen as crucial and has had a significant impact on the way in which decisions are taken, for example more emphasis has been placed recently on projects such as skateboarding parks and festivals in order to reach out to the younger people in the community.

## Community cohesion

Whilst in some areas inter-community tension was not an issue, in others proximity to authorities that have experienced urban unrest placed cohesion-related issues high on the agenda. In one case study area where cohesion is a matter of concern, a higher level of representativeness is seen to be associated with a positive impact upon community cohesion. Senior officers drew a strong link between the composition of the council chamber and the absence of any significant disturbances. This council shares many features with near-by areas that have recently experienced inter-community tension. When the possibility of tension has emerged, local police and council officers have worked with ward councillors from BME groups to engage intensively with local communities. Such findings reflect those presented in the Cattle Report which stressed the need for local authorities to involve all of the community in the decision-making process so that ‘communities felt valued and had a stake in their future’ (Cattle, 2001).

Likewise, in another authority interviewees associated the council’s make-up with the fact that the area has not experienced, like neighbouring authorities, the election of far-right councillors. In this case, cross-community cohesion events were viewed as crucial in bringing people together (although evidence for the effectiveness of this approach is not clear). Meanwhile, in the north west case study, Jewish councillors were seen as an important medium through which the council could develop relations with a strong local Jewish community. During Passover the council increased police patrols as the period often witnesses a rise in burglaries (council meetings are also adjourned). However, it is difficult to specify the precise link between the composition of local councils and levels of community cohesion. For example, in one case senior officers attributed seemingly healthy community relations to a general level of affluence in the local borough.

It is also important to note that several interviewees opposed the notion of drawing a strong link between a council’s representativeness and community relations. Some argued that too much emphasis is placed upon diversity-related statistics which often downplay the question of whether or not individuals are in fact representative of their communities. As stated by one young councillor:

“Too often statistics are linked to the outcomes. Do I represent the young people in this borough? Does the Muslim Mayor represent the local Muslim community?”  
(young councillor).

Overall, the messages from the case studies on cohesion were that council composition has contributed to community cohesion. However, council composition needs to be seen alongside other cohesion work, such as outreach, and secondly that descriptive representation does not guarantee thoroughgoing community links between community ‘leaders’ and the ethnic groups they come from.

## 8

## Recommendations & policy implications

Based upon fieldwork in the five case study areas, the following recommendations and policy implications are put forward for consideration by the Councillors Commission.

### Central government and national bodies

**R1.** We recommend that central government and national local government improvement bodies provide ways for local councils to assess their performance on their levels of elected member diversity. Allowing councils to benchmark themselves against others councils, or against guideline standards, would enable them to identify a need for action. It would also facilitate the sharing of good practice from local authorities that have good levels of diversity.

**R2.** Central government and national local government improvement bodies could reinforce messages to local authorities that they do and can play an important role in improving the diversity of local councillors, alongside political parties. Where these combined efforts have produced positive results, there should be clear ways to recognise, publicise and celebrate success.

**R3.** Central bodies should collect evidence of good diversity-related practice amongst the political parties and reflect this in guidance material. Guidance should take account of the fact that some parties are wary of the idea of positive discrimination, and do not articulate their work with under-represented groups as a diversity strategy.

### Political parties

**R1.** Routes into local political life included people who had started with a single local issue, and those already engaged in a civic activity such as a local community-based organisation. Parties could widen the pool of potential candidates by offering opportunities for citizens to become politically involved through these routes. This includes linking to local community and voluntary groups.

**R2.** For local political parties to field candidates from under-represented groups may require targeted recruitment and flexible selection procedures. Parties can use a variety of methods, including: targeting candidates; advertising vacancies; developing youth organisations; better use of information technology, e.g. social networking websites; outreach work with under-represented groups; ‘fast-tracking’ selection procedures; ‘talent scouting’; and mentoring people as their political careers progress.

**R3.** Outreach work particularly with minority ethnic communities is potentially very effective, including surgeries for identified communities and face-to-face meetings in venues where communities of interest gather.

**R4.** Parties can help under-represented groups get involved by reviewing and adapting the way they operate internally. For example, minimising the number of party and group meetings in order allow people to continue to play active roles in their communities, and making party and group meetings attractive, exciting and welcoming to newcomers.

**R5.** Political parties should build on their existing work by providing ongoing support following elections, e.g. mentoring schemes and ‘apprenticeships’ to higher positions particularly for younger councillors.

## Local councils

**R1.** We recommend that local authorities build accurate profiles of local demographics, and monitor their own performance on the extent to which councillors statistically reflect under-represented groups in the local population. Where councils have achieved high levels of descriptive representativeness, they should identify good practice. Evaluation of the impact of specific diversity initiatives and other research could add to this body of knowledge.

**R2.** Local authorities should acknowledge the positive roles they can and do play in improving representativeness, alongside political parties. Councils’ input should be seen to start before election, not solely as member development post-election.

**R3.** Local authorities can provide a supportive local political environment to bring forward under-represented groups into politics. The relevance of high levels of cynicism surrounding ‘politics’ generally should not be under-estimated by councils when developing a policy or strategy in this field. Each authority would want to develop their own approach suitable to local circumstances around three core areas: promoting ‘civicness’; being a responsive and open council; pro-active work on political diversity.

**R4.** Awareness-raising activity, particularly in local schools, is designed to create a long-term interest in political activity, through initiatives such as Local Democracy Week, Youth Parliaments and Youth Mayoral elections. These initiatives and other awareness raising activities are tools through which the council can promote civicness, encourage a local political culture of civic engagement, raise local awareness about its key role and also counter negative perceptions of council life.

**R5.** The evidence is that councillors are motivated by making a difference locally, and that citizens are put off local politics by formal procedures and bureaucracy. Based on this, awareness-raising exercises that focus on what councils do and what impact they can make for local people, could be beneficial. Showing how councillors can invest their

time for the benefit of their communities and that it is time well spent may also help overcome the perception that the time commitment required is a barrier.

**R6.** To promote civicism we recommend that councils examine how local democracy and, specifically, the position and role of local councillors can be publicised in the local media. Negative portrayals of local politics and representatives not only exerts a detrimental impact upon overall perceptions of political activity but also the willingness of potential councillors to undertake the role.

**R7.** Specific opportunities to get involved in local politics may need to be offered to help people make take the step from being involved in the local community to being involved in politics, for example providing induction material on being a local councillor to potential and prospective candidates already involved in local community organisations, local meetings and campaigns. Local authorities could publicise the routes to become a councillor, including non-party political routes for people who might consider standing as an independent.

**R8.** Local authorities need to ensure they are responsive and open in their work, and try to close the perceived gaps between citizens, local democratic systems, and local public services. This could involve small practical measures such as altering timings of meetings to better suit councillors, and using community venues – taking the council out to the people. It also covers broader strategic work, for example strengthening devolved decision making structures led by local members.

**R9.** Local authorities should undertake proactive work with under-represented groups in order to increase diversity. This could include promoting the relevance of local councils to younger people and targeting women. Proactive work can include both formal initiatives, and informal outreach to under-represented groups via social networks and community organisations.

**R10.** Councils can improve relations with minority ethnic groups and encourage their participation in political structures by ensuring that general council news and information is communicated via channels most likely to reach minority populations, e.g. minority ethnic newspapers, minority ethnic television channels, etc.

**R11.** There is a need to explore ways in which women from BME communities can be more fully integrated into local political structures. Council initiatives should not just target local women generally but ought to specifically focus upon ways in which BME women can become engaged with the political process.

**R12.** There is a lack of understanding amongst council officers as to why traditionally under-represented councillors leave the role. It is recommended that exit interviews should be used to facilitate a firmer grasp as to why under-represented groups stand down as councillors and how they may be retained.

**R13.** Councils should seek to improve member support through training needs analysis and provision of tailored support packages, especially for new councillors, in order to ensure that the needs of under-represented groups in local communities are catered for in full. Better use of I.T. by local councils can add to councillors' ability to work efficiently, and therefore spend more time on ward duties. In addition, cross-party member development work could strengthen member support, and also help to promote cross-party working and a less adversarial atmosphere which respondents felt was attractive to under-represented groups.

## Public, private and voluntary sector employers

**R1.** Local councils and other public sector bodies are often one of the largest single employers of local residents in an area. Public sector bodies should act as exemplars to other organisations in their treatment of employees who are councillors. Action by local councils to improve representativeness should begin within the organisation. Parallel moves to improve the profile of senior council officers from under-represented groups could also be of value.

**R2.** The benefits of employing a councillor should be better communicated to employers. For instance, senior officers could conduct meetings with key employers in the locality to promote a more sympathetic approach to employees performing civic duties.

**R3.** National initiatives that promote corporate social responsibility should treat being a councillor in the same way as general volunteering and other forms of civic engagement as part of businesses' role in the community.

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