

Leadership & Gender in Local Government in England: Part Two

In 2007, the Centre for Women & Democracy produced a report entitled 'Leadership & Gender in Local Government in England'. This examined the incidence of women as Council Leaders and Chief Executives in English local authorities, and also looked at the position with elected mayors in those authorities.



This second report re-visits the issue of council leaders and elected mayors, and compares the situation in 2008/9 with that of 2006/7. It also looks at the gender of deputy leaders (where councils have them), and updates the 2006/7 figures for chief executives.

Executive Summary

30% of local councillors in England are women, but only 15.7% of local authority leaders are female and 20.1% of deputy leaders. Only one of the country's thirteen directly elected mayors is a woman, and only four deputy mayors. The entire political leadership of London (directly elected mayor and five deputies) is male.

Local authority leaders achieve office either because they lead the largest political group on the council, or as part of a negotiated agreement in a council with no overall control. The great majority have been elected as leader of their political group by fellow councillors – an electorate the size of which may be anything from five to fifty. Leaders of groups may become leaders of authorities as a result of changes of political control, or as a result of internal changes in their parties. Some hold office for considerable periods of time; others stand down, lose elections or are replaced very quickly.

Deputy Leaders may be either appointed by their leader (or mayor) or elected by their groups – in some cases both. Chief Executives are not elected, but they do form an essential part of any local authority's leadership team, and have therefore also been considered.

The following points highlight some of the key figures, which are expanded upon in the main report.

- ❖ Between 2006/7 and 2008/9 the council leader changed in 39.5% (148) of English local authorities. The result in terms of the representation of women was a net increase of only 9 female leaders.
- ❖ In 2006/7, CFWD found that 19% of Chief Executives were women; by 2008/9 this had risen to 20% - a net numerical increase of 6 women.
- ❖ Altogether there are 129 authorities (34%) in which either the leader or the chief executive is female (including 10 in which both posts are held by women); this leaves 248 authorities in which there are no women at all in either of the two key leadership positions.
- ❖ There is one authority – South Northamptonshire – in which the leader, deputy leader and chief executive are all women. There are 175 authorities in which all these posts are held by men.
- ❖ Of the 59 women leading English local authorities, 66% are Conservative, 15% Labour, 15% Liberal Democrat, and 3% Independent/Other. In 2006/7, these percentages were 48% Conservative, 16% Labour, 30% Liberal Democrat and 6% Independent/Other.
- ❖ 15.4% of Conservative leaders are women, 17.6% of Labour, and 15% of Liberal Democrat.
- ❖ In the vast majority of the 148 councils in which there was leadership change in the last three years, male leaders handed over to male successors (102). Only 6 women were succeeded by women. 24 men were replaced by women, and 15 women were replaced by men.
- ❖ Women are most likely to lead unitary authorities, where 21.4% of leaders are women, and least likely to lead London boroughs, where only 3.4% of leaders are women.

- ❖ Women are most likely to lead authorities in the East of England, where 24.5% of authorities have women leaders, and least likely to lead London Boroughs (3.4%). Outside London, the region where women are least likely to lead is Yorkshire & the Humber, where 9.5% of leaders are female.
- ❖ 20.1% of deputy leaders in English local authorities are women
- ❖ 18.3% of Conservative deputy leaders are women, 25% of Labour and 22% of Liberal Democrat.
- ❖ Women are most likely to be deputy leader of a metropolitan authority (36.1%) and least likely to be deputy leader of a shire district (15.2%).
- ❖ Women are most likely to be deputy leaders in the North West (36.7%) and least likely to hold this office in the East of England (13.7%).
- ❖ Women are least likely to lead large urban authorities in London, the midlands and the north, and most likely to lead the more varied shire districts and unitaries which are concentrated in the south east and south west.
- ❖ There are only 5 councils in which both the leader and the deputy leader are female; on the other hand, both leader and deputy are male in 224.
- ❖ As in 2006/7, only one out of thirteen directly elected mayors in 2008/9 is a woman.
- ❖ There are four women deputy mayors. In London, there are five deputies, not one of whom is a woman.
- ❖ In the four new unitary authorities of Cheshire East, Cheshire West & Chester, County Durham and Northumberland which will come into existence in 2009, but which elected their councillors and leaderships in 2008, all of the new leaders and their deputies are men. These 4 authorities will replace 19 districts and 3 shire counties, where 4 of the leaders are women. This will reduce the number of women leaders in 2009 to 55.

The lack of women in leadership roles in local government is clearly unrepresentative, not only of the electorate as a whole, but also of the councillors by whom they are chosen. Given that leaders are often the public face of their authorities, and, together with the chief executive provide the formal point of interface for government and other statutory bodies, the absence of women at this very senior level should be a cause for concern. It must inevitably have an effect on both the political culture and the culture of the authority, and create an imbalance of experience, interest and expertise at the point at which key decisions about local communities are made.

In addition, the lack of public visibility of women in leadership roles in politics generally and local government in particular means that there are very few role models for women either inside or outside the political structures or local government.

This report identifies where the women are as well as where they are not; future work will need to examine both male and female routes to political leadership more closely, and to identify effective ways of achieving change in this field.

For further information please contact:

Nan Sloane

Director

Centre for Women & Democracy

cfwd@cfwd.org.uk

0113 234 6500

www.cfwd.org.uk