

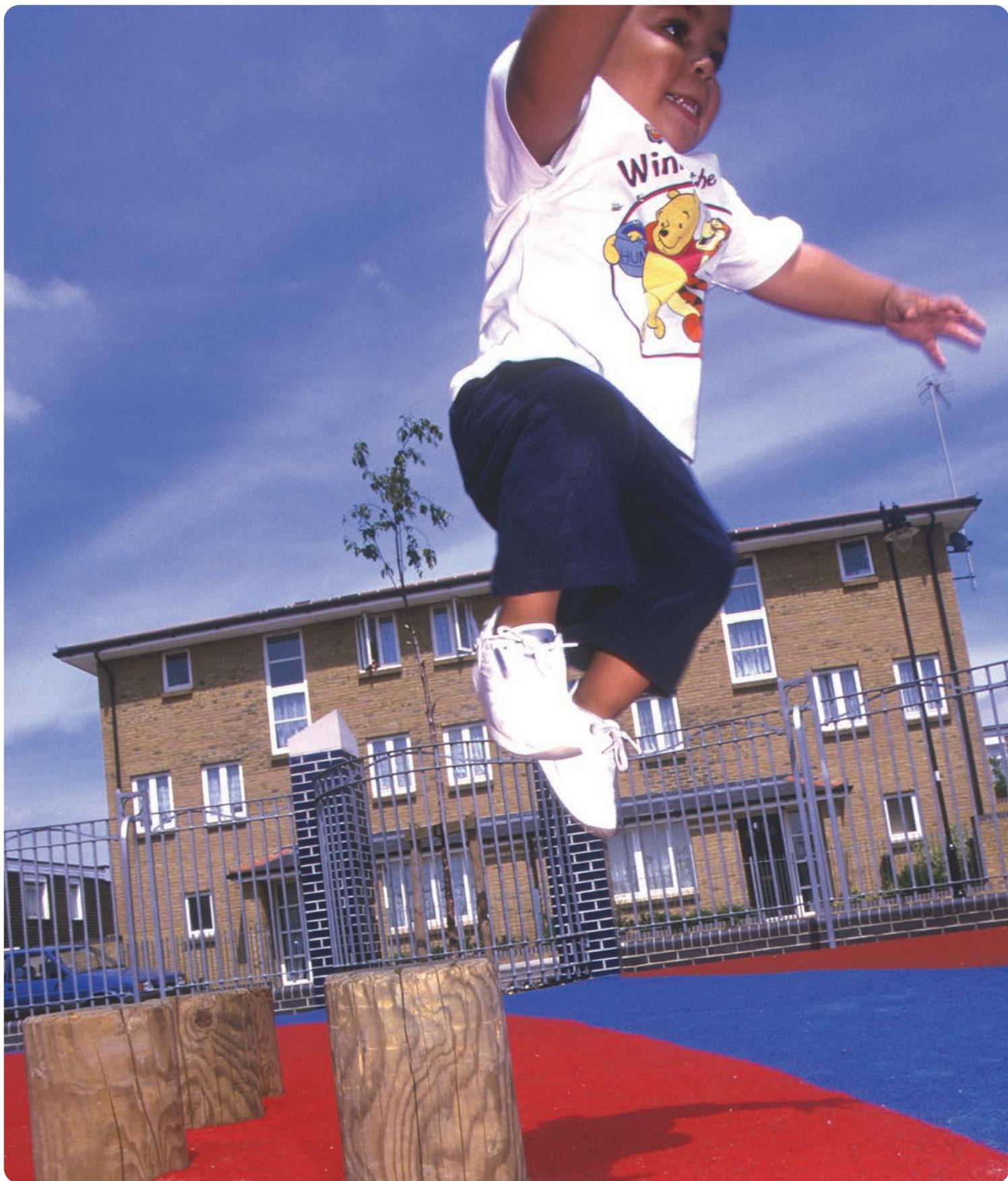
Attracting talented Londoners to become councillors

Pride of London



Contents

- | | | |
|---|---|----------------------|
| 1 Attracting talented Londoners to become councillors | 10 Incentives for being a councillor | 22 Appendix 1 |
| 3 The context | 11 To pay or not to pay | 23 Appendix 2 |
| 4 The perception of local government | 12 The skills for the job | |
| 5 The role of councillors | 14 The role of political parties | |
| 6 The role of the councillor in local governance | 16 What councillors say | |
| 7 The party political dilemma | 19 Solutions and suggestions | |
| 9 The role of political parties in promoting diversity | 20 Conclusion and next steps | |



Attracting talented Londoners to become councillors

London is the world's most culturally mixed city – over 300 languages are spoken by residents from as many cultures. With a third of Britain's black and ethnic population living there, the city has succeeded in making a virtue of its diversity – it is one of London's greatest strengths. The way London celebrates its many cultures and the relative harmony in which they co-exist was one of the reasons London won the 2012 Olympics.

Yet politically, London does not reflect the richness of its 7.4 million inhabitants. On the vast majority of councils in London, elected representatives are predominantly white, male and middle-aged. Admittedly, London's councils are more representative than those in the rest of the country: a fifth of its councillors are drawn from BME communities compared to just 3.5 per cent outside London and a third of councillors in London are women – but on the other hand, only one of the capital's 32 council leaders breaks the white male format.

There are some interesting paradoxes in London authorities – Tower Hamlets has the highest proportion of councillors from black and other minority communities, but it also has the lowest number of women councillors. Over half of Islington's councillors are female, but less than twenty per cent are from BME communities. Figures for the age of councillors in London are not available, but nationally 87 per cent of councillors are over 45. London's councillors are thought to be younger but still do not reflect the fact that London is the youngest place in Britain.

Does it matter? With an average voter turnout of less than 40 per cent at the most recent London local elections, it is clear that fewer and fewer people show much faith in their councils, and this is beginning to affect the democratic legitimacy of London's local authorities.

There is wide agreement that the decline in voting is due in part to people's lack of understanding of how local authorities are relevant to them and make a difference to their lives. This lack of understanding is not helped when they look at their representatives and do not see people like themselves – it makes them feel that democracy and government are done to them, rather than something they can be part of and influence.

So widening participation and encouraging a more diverse range of people to become councillors is something that needs to be done urgently. There is an opportunity now, in the period before the next London elections in 2010, put in motion a strategy to raise the profile of councillors and encourage more and different types of people to stand.

Diversity is an issue that political parties are beginning to consider seriously for parliamentary candidates – it is time that those concerned with London local government, from authorities themselves to bodies like the LGA and London Councils, set up a systematic way of encouraging a more representative selection of council candidates.

This discussion document aims to generate a debate about the role of councillors in London and identify what all of us concerned with the issue can do to make sure London local government benefits from the contribution that all its citizens can make.

The statistics

- 29 per cent of London's population is black ethnic minority, half the BME population of Britain
- 20 per cent of councillors elected in 2006 were of BME origin
- 33 per cent of London's councillors are women
- 31 out of 32 council leaders are white males
- London is the youngest city in Britain, with 20 per cent of its population under 18
- Forty five per cent of London's workforce is under 35, compared to 39 per cent nationally



The context

The 2006 local elections saw a significant change in the political map in London, with the Conservatives gaining control of seven councils, Labour losing control in eight boroughs and gaining in one, and the Lib Dems winning Richmond but losing Islington. Despite the fact that the Conservatives are traditionally the party with fewest women or BME councillors the overall numbers of both went up. Precise details of the breakdown of councillors by gender, race and party can be found in the appendix.

There has been a steady improvement in the numbers of young, female and BME councillors in London over the past decade but these groups are still under-represented in London politics. We wanted to know what those involved in local government, either as stakeholders or as councillors, thought were the issues that stopped people putting themselves forward, and what could be done to encourage them.

This report was compiled in the aftermath of the 2006 London local elections, by talking to two groups of people. The first group was a range of stakeholders in London, from business leaders and members of the voluntary sector to politicians and local government observers, all of whom have an interest and an influence in shaping London's economic, social and political landscape and in London's governance being dynamic, effective and sustainable.

Interviews were held with the Association of Chief Executives in Voluntary Organisations, political advisers at London Councils (formerly the Association of London Government), City Parochial, CLORE Leadership Programme, Common Purpose, officers and a member at the Greater London Authority, officers at the Local Government Association, London Chamber of Commerce, London Communications Agency, London First, Westminster City Council and the Lyons Inquiry team.

The second was a group of councillors who had stood down in 2006 after serving just one term. They had one other thing in common – they were all uncommon in local government: all were under 50, a third were under 35, half had children of school age, half were women, a third were from an ethnic minority, and all worked.

The aim of the discussions in both cases was to find out what the two groups felt were the main issues hindering the recruitment of talented people to the elected member role, and what actions could be taken to change to improve the perception and take-up of councillor candidacies.

A number of key themes emerged which essentially linked the councillor role to the role of local government and the role of the political parties to ensure better quality candidates are recruited and supported. Stakeholders also gave their views on how the capacity and calibre of councillors could be supported by external organisations and how the image and perception of councillors could be improved.

What the stakeholders say

In our discussions with the different stakeholders a range of common themes emerged concerning the profile of the councillor role. Broadly these divided into: problems with the perception of local government, a lack of understanding of what councillors do and the role of political parties in encouraging a more diverse range of people to step up for election.



The perception of local government

The key issue for most of the stakeholders is that the profile of councillors is connected to the poor image and reputation of local government. While public perception of local government is low, so will be the perception of councillors and the role they play. Recent LGA/Mori research showed that while the public likes local government services it has a low opinion and understanding of local government – only five per cent of people are well-informed about what their council does and only one per cent would talk highly of their councils unprompted. People's views of local authorities are formed by the type of experience they have with them; 'Some people see local authorities as irrelevant, some people see them as purely party politically driven and some people see them as powerless governing structures.'

There was a strong feeling among stakeholders that the public needs to have a more positive impression of local government, both through their own experience of their local council and through what they hear being said nationally. The LGA is leading the way by taking a much stronger line on many issues – LGA spokespeople (usually councillors) are being heard increasingly frequently commenting on relevant issues – and through its latest publication '*Closer to people and places*', which aims to reposition local government as a major influencer and improver of local lives, and promotes the message that councillors are 'elected by you to put local people first'.

However, the LGA is fighting a losing battle if there isn't greater respect for the role of councillors, particularly among national politicians: '*The attitude of national politicians toward local politicians is disgraceful,*' reflects Colin Stanbridge of the London Chamber of Commerce (LCC).

There is also a perception among stakeholders that local government has less power than it did 15 years ago. At the same time as devolving more powers to neighbourhoods with schemes such as the New Deal for Communities, the government has centralised many local authority powers, with more policy being set by central government and more inspections.

The view of Robert Gordon Clark of the London Communications Agency is that, '*The power of local authorities nationally has been being taken away for years, which may be a reason why good councillors leave.*'

It is particularly acute in London, he believes: '*Delegation needs to go back to London authorities; it is promoted in the other regions but not enough in London. Although the GLA has quite rightly increased its powers, for example in planning, local residents do not know how to challenge the GLA.*'



The role of councillors

Stakeholders believe that most people do not understand what councillors actually do. There's no such thing as a job description for the councillor role, and very little information on what a councillor's job actually entails – and this stops people getting involved. *'If people knew about it and felt it was important enough, if they knew how it affected their life, their friends, their neighbourhood, they would be more interested,'* says Colin Stanbridge.

Clear, concise information on councillors' duties and time commitments should be available to help potential candidates decide whether it is a vocation for them. As Irving Yass of London First put it: *'To get younger lawyers and accountants involved they will need a better understanding of the time commitment and a better understanding of how their contribution will have an impact.'*

A sustained campaign is needed to raise the profile of councillors and what they do, and to show how good local governance is vital for the delivery of effective public services – the public doesn't appear to understand the need for both political and managerial leadership, or the difference between officers and councillors. *'If you ask people have you contacted your councillor they say yes, but actually they mean they've contacted the council,'* says Robert Gordon Clark.

One suggestion was to use the existing Councillors' guide, published by the IDeA, to give the public a better idea of what councillors actually do with their time. The guide includes information on being a councillor, civic life and community leadership. By summarising the role and duties of councillors it could be a useful campaigning tool to get more people interested in becoming a councillor.

Some stakeholders felt that understanding the role of council and councillors was part of civic education and should start earlier at schools and youth clubs. There is some activity already happening: the LGA runs a number of campaigns to make councils more relevant to young people and to increase councillor involvement in citizenship teaching in schools, such as 'Local democracy week', 'Political speed dating' and 'I'm a councillor get me out of here'. It is hoped that greater understanding of the councillor role will enable younger people to get involved in the democratic process.

Common Purpose runs a programme inviting councillors to meet their young leaders and ask questions about the councillor role. This type of activity allows councillors to answer questions in a non-political environment.

¹ Further information on the campaigns can be found on:

http://campaigns.lga.gov.uk/localdemocracy/resources/activities/political_speed_dating_downloadable_pack/

http://campaigns.lga.gov.uk/localdemocracy/resources/activities/im_councillor_here_2006/

The role of the councillor in local governance

Stakeholders had many views about the part councillors play, or need to play, in the governance of their boroughs.

Some believed that the changes in council structure after the 2002 Local Government Act had eroded the role of the ward councillors. Irving Yass asked, *'Do backbench councillors have any power?'*

Almost all believed the councillor's role is to ensure good delivery of public services and strengthen the community – *as councils move away from direct service provision to a more strategic delivery role*, councillors must understand the needs of the local community as well as the wider place, relate to other leaders in the community and develop a shared vision with them. Stakeholders felt more needed to be done to support frontline councillors in this role and in their scrutiny function. Not all were convinced that this place shaper role would deliver better local governance.

Most stakeholders did feel the public was not aware of how the councillor's role had changed over the years, and that some of the big decisions are no longer in the hands of the local authority but with other strategic bodies such as the local strategic partnership, health authority or housing association. This makes the councillor role more difficult to explain, as the public does not understand what decisions are made by the councillor and the powers councillors have over other organisations delivering public services. There does not appear to be a consistent set of messages stating the role of councillors in relation to partnership bodies and how it applies to modern day local government.

The majority of stakeholders felt that councillors were committed, hard-working people who wanted to make a difference to their community but often got a raw deal.



The party political dilemma

Councillors have what are seen to be conflicting roles: are they there to represent the locality or to represent their party? If it is the former then most stakeholders felt community advocates could be good in the councillor role, as they would not necessarily be party affiliated. But if it is about party politics, there needs to be more clarity in how councillors role manage the relationship between the local interest and the party interest.

Some stakeholders did feel that part of the councillor role is to ensure the party interest is debated at the local level for gaining electoral support – if the public does not like what you are saying or doing, they can vote you out. This issue raised questions around the type of political governance that is appropriate at the local level and how, with declining party membership and distrust of political parties, people can be encouraged to stand.

There was a feeling that more could be done to work with local businesses, who are not being targeted as key stakeholders in the community, either as potential candidates or voters, even though they play an integral part in the economic development of the community. There was a perception that councils and businesses often had antagonistic relationships and little meaningful dialogue.

Some stakeholders thought the City of London model of governance, where aldermen are nominated by local businesses, could provide lessons for councils and councillors on how to work better with business.

Colin Stanbridge thinks that the City of London is good at branding and has glamour in the shape of the Lord Mayor, his sheriffs and aldermen. People think it is worthwhile and that needs to happen to all councillor posts.'





The role of political parties in promoting diversity

Many of the stakeholders believed that not enough was being done by political parties to get a wider group of people into local politics. Councillors who reflect their communities are an important asset and where this is the case, it is a vote winner. Almost all the stakeholders identified Lambeth's new intake as an example of good practice – running up to the 2006 elections there had been a conscientious effort by the Labour party group to get a more diverse councillor profile via the existing political structures, which paid dividends in electoral success for Labour. Similarly, both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have identified key target areas for getting better quality candidates from a wider group of people and communities.

Most still thought of London councillors as older retired men despite the fact that the proportion of BME and female councillors has increased and there was a younger cohort of councillors this time round. *'Who are these younger councillors and why isn't anyone promoting them?'* asks Robert Gordon Clark.

But they felt political parties need to do more to ensure councillors reflect the diversity of the local population: *'Increasing diversity and party politics cannot be divorced. Equalities in any organisation is a mark on its managerial health,'* comments Valerie Shawcross from the London Assembly.

And, as a Conservative adviser for London Councils and a Harrow councillor points out: *'Local parties have very few powers left – selecting candidates is one of the few they do have.'*

There was some concern that if the councillor role was professionalised too much it would exclude grassroots activists, particularly those from marginalised or hard-to-reach communities, and there needs to be a balance in the type of councillors coming forward to reflect London's diverse population. There was also concern that the top job – that of leader - is filled almost entirely by white men. Currently there is one female leader and no BME leader in London. Equally the image of London Assembly members (of 25 members nine are women, two are BME) was perceived as bad for London as a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic city.

The point was made that political parties pay much attention to the selection of MPs from wider communities but little to widening selection for councillors and that developing and supporting quality candidates at a local level would widen the pool of politicians at both local and national level.

Key issues

- Promote the 'difference' a councillor can make to his or her place
- Clearly define the councillor role – make it concise, visible and worthwhile
- Promote reputation and credibility of local government
- Set out objectives of councillors within partnership arrangements
- Develop strategy to increase the diversity of London councillors



Incentives for being a councillor



What the rewards should be for being a councillor is a subject endlessly debated in members' rooms, council chambers and improvement bodies up and down the country. Whether councillors should be paid or not and how much, should they be given time off work to do the role, would more flexibility make the job more attractive – these are all key areas which affect the types of people who apply to become councillors.

The majority of stakeholders in our survey were ambivalent about what the appropriate level of incentives should be for the job. They did agree that the biggest incentive for doing the job was the belief that by becoming a councillor individuals can make a difference, and this motivating factor should be harnessed.

There was a feeling that reducing the amount of government bureaucracy at local level would give councillors more freedom to exercise their local decision-making powers and would make the job more attractive. Some stakeholders felt that current arrangements such as the Standards Board, CPA and best value regimes strangled the councillor role and there needed to be 'a bigger and freer community remit'.



To pay or not to pay?

Stakeholders disagreed about whether councillors should be full-time salaried professionals. While some stakeholders recognised the need to attract a wider group of people into the role and to increase the professionalism of councillors, they did not necessarily believe the councillor role should become professionalised.

Irving Yass thinks: *'Paying them will encourage more full-time politicians, which usually puts the public off,'* while Robert Gordon Clark's view is that *'if you pay councillors, they will protect their jobs.'*

However, as pointed out by Bharat Mehta from City Parochial; there was also the belief that: *'Councillors need to be professionalised, to have better skills; if recompense or pay helps with the process then it can only be good for services.'*

The issue of remuneration is highly emotive and politicised and it is difficult to have a rational discussion about it inside individual councils as opposition parties often use the issue to score political points.

Stakeholders felt that it was good for most councillors to work as it helped them stay connected with the real world, but the role of leader and deputy leader probably needed full-time salaried people.

The role of employers in releasing people to become councillors was also discussed. Some felt that employers should be given incentives to let their staff take on the councillor role, which would release a wider range of skilled people to do the job. There were a number of suggestions as to how this could be done:

- If part of the business rate went directly to local authorities, business communities would be more engaged in local democracy and would have more of an incentive to ensure business leaders became councillors
- Councils could create task groups on various issues that are chaired by elected members but could bring in additional skills by co-opting people from organisations that have a vested interest in the community
- Employers could consider secondments/sabbaticals for staff to stand for election
- If local authority business and council meetings were conducted more efficiently, with better chairing of meetings, outcomes to be agreed early on and more use of IT, members would need to take less time out of work

The amount of time that should be devoted to being a councillor depended very much on the role being undertaken: *'Being an executive member is a full-time job for most people now; it needs flexible employers...it's almost impossible to have a full-time job and a cabinet post,'* says Stephen Knight, councillor and Liberal Democrat advisor at London Councils.

However it was generally considered unwise for backbenchers to devote too much of their time to the role. Says Valerie Shawcross: *'With only one leader post there is not enough of a career path for councillors. People in their 20s will lose out on their career development if they just focus on the councillor role. People should not lose their grip on the day job.'*

There was a general feeling that there needs to be greater flexibility on how much time councillors spend on the role. One idea was that councillors could opt for specific duties, with those with more time taking on more than those who work, which would allow a more diverse group of people to take up the councillor challenge. But the councillor role would have to be identified at the outset so the public and potential candidates were clear about which part of the role they were opting for.

Some of the stakeholders felt more practical issues could be addressed first, such as support for childcare and caring responsibilities - for example, how many local authorities actively promote childcare support or family friendly policy for councillors?

The current incentives are obviously not attracting a wide enough range of people. At the moment the role is considered the privilege of the few who have sympathetic employers and flexibility in their financial arrangements. However, equally true is that current benefits of the job are not well-publicised and not consistent across local authorities - some authorities offer childcare provisions, while others do not. It is difficult to understand why such variations exist across London councils.

Key issues

- Publicise the full benefits of becoming a councillor
- Scope research into "time" invested by councillors at various roles
- Develop a strategy that encourages employers to make a more direct contribution to the councillor role
- Local authorities to change way they conduct council business to be more user friendly
- Consider a more consistent system of remuneration and salary for London councillors

The skills for the job



There was a great deal of respect among stakeholders for the skills and capacity of many London councillors. The best were thought to be highly motivated with an exciting vision for their locality and strategic understanding of the authority and its objectives. They are good at forming partnerships and bringing people together, good at communicating and not afraid to make difficult decisions. They spend a great deal of their time on council business, are charismatic and visible in the community.



Even those who disagreed with his politics frequently cited Ken Livingstone as a good example of a local politician who set clear direction and takes risks: *'Ken Livingstone sets out his views and vision and doesn't sound too managerial and boring. People see him make things happen in the locality. He is not afraid to be controversial and people like that. The mindset and organisational culture of local authorities and political parties can stop that happening elsewhere,'* says Stephen Bubb, chief executive of the Association of Chief Executives in Voluntary Organisations.

Stakeholders believed councillors need more support in understanding their role, behaving appropriately and building an effective working relationship with council officers. There was a suggestion that councillors have some form of training accreditation that set a minimum standard. Modules could include leadership, communication and standards and others relevant to the individual council.

As to whether there should be a basic set of skills and qualifications for becoming a councillor, most stakeholders said no but felt frustrated by the lack of quality candidates. This statement captures the dilemma: *'If you want democracy no, but if you want competency yes.'*

The skills councillors will need in the future were seen to be mainly around place shaping – understanding pan-London issues and having a vision that strategically pulls together key providers in the local area or across boroughs. People's relationship to place has changed and the commitment to one place is diluted as their energies are not concentrated in one place, believes Colin Stanbridge.

Furthermore, *'Londoners are not confined to one area. They live in one area, work in another and play in another. Councillors don't see the big picture in terms of pan-London; councillors don't present the case on where they fit in.'*

Councillors need to understand how this affects people at the local level and how services can be better delivered to a more consumer-aware society. The proximity of London councils means that potentially a lot of services operate outside traditional silos and electoral boundaries, but this would require local councillors to have courage and take some high-level political risks.

There was also a strong view that councillors need to scrutinise council policies and programmes better to ensure a greater degree of accountability and transparency of decision-making; such scrutiny would help challenge the perception that councillors 'become part of the system' once elected rather than maintain their community champion role.

Key issues

The main skills needed for the role can be defined as:

- Community skills - commitment to and knowledge of community
- Political skills – scope the political environment and are prepared to take risks, show loyalty to party colleagues and understand traditions of other political parties
- Intellectual skills - ability to think strategically, set vision for community, effectively scrutinise policies and financial health of the council
- Interpersonal skills- charismatic, credible and approachable



The role of political parties



Political parties play an important role in identifying, recruiting and selecting candidates but they are also part of the problem, as the culture of political parties puts people off becoming a councillor.

Those interested in becoming a councillor usually take the party route (just three per cent of London councillors are independent) so they have to join the party and attend local meetings. There was criticism of how these meetings were conducted and whether ward level meetings were essential.



Some stakeholders had attended their local party meetings and felt that there was a hierarchy, with more established members of the party looking towards existing peers for advice. There was little attempt by parties to encourage newer members to take an active role as one female stakeholder explains: *'I was attending party meetings for a long time before someone asked me my view, and even then they dismissed it. Meetings were just a waste of time.'*

Party meetings were felt to be 'boring and time consuming'. For a wide range of people, being a party activist, developing a career and having a life are not considered compatible. Stakeholders felt the party system had not managed to reach out to a wider group because by and large it had not changed the way it conducted its business.

Parties should be more open in the way they recruit candidates and the criteria they set. Currently this information is not in the public domain but is available to party members who express an interest in becoming a prospective candidate. Even internally, members are not automatically sent the information on how to become a councillor. Stakeholders felt that work needed to be done with political parties and selection panels to ensure good quality candidates were successfully supported. As Bharat Mehta put it: *'There are lots of people interested in being councillors but they don't like the party system and don't want to play the game.'*

However, selection is not the only problem for political parties. London voters are more mobile and may or may not be registered in the area they currently reside, and are also more likely to change their voting habits. *'The London election results show a more cafeteria culture with a fair amount of mixed voting in wards. People don't want to buy wholesale into party politics,'* says one contributor to this report.

This creates a real challenge for political parties in London, as voters are more likely to split their votes towards individual candidates they find credible (whether its on a policy issue or personal reputation) rather than maintain allegiance towards one political party.

Most stakeholders felt it was important that councillors represent a ward and that mechanisms are available for councillors to be accountable to local people. Good councillors should be community advocates, but it was recognised there would sometimes be tensions between the party and the local community and to deal with this politicians need credibility and the support of their community as well as strong influencing and negotiation skills. The role of the political party is to nurture those

skills. There is also a need for political parties to effectively train people as whip and group leaders, as this is often the underlying cause for poor council meetings and inappropriate behaviour in the council chamber.

Some stakeholders were cynical about the party system – believing that local party politics was corrupt, that infighting put people off and that there was little room for political debate.

Political parties are losing membership and people are less likely to trust party members. Labour's membership has fallen from almost a million in the 1950s to 200,000 today, while the Conservative party membership has fallen from 2.5 million to around 250,000 in the same period. Membership of the Liberal Democrats has also fallen, from around 145,000 in the early 1980s to 72,000 in 2005.

The political party remains the dominant channel through which people become elected representatives but there is a strong perception that party machines have not changed much over the last 50 years. For example, parties have not developed adequate information systems and collect very little information on candidates pre or post election. What information they do hold does not always include gender, age, ethnicity or occupation. So parties do not know what types of councillor get selected or might need to be targeted.

There also appears to be little guidance from regional and national parties on how to engage with local communities in more relevant and challenging ways. For example, while the Labour party guidance stipulates at least one in three of the candidates in a ward should be female, the party does not know how many wards in London actually put forward female candidates.

It is difficult to see how the parties can make any progress in the quality and diversity of candidates and councillors with such a paucity of information. If parties are going to develop a long-term strategy for London councillors and get more representative quality candidates, they will need to have the baseline information to which they can relate their performance in this area.

Key issues

- Political parties to collect and analyse baseline data on candidates' pre and post election
- Political parties to conduct exit interviews
- Political parties to develop skills of potential candidates
- Identify ways to encourage more people to engage in mainstream political activities

What councillors say

Our exit survey of councillors leaving after one term came to very similar conclusions about what needs to change to make the role more attractive to both potential candidates and those already in post.

For all the many reasons people become councillors the most important one is that they want to make a difference to people's lives. How those interviewed felt about their experience as a councillor depended very much on whether they believed they had done that, and how much the council structure had helped or hindered them.

Time was the biggest issue for them all – most feeling you couldn't work nine to five and be a councillor, with those that did finding the demands on them almost unbearable. Worse was the feeling that a lot of the time and energy they put in was wasted in unnecessary meetings, politicking and 'presenteeism'. They felt the public had a lack of understanding of what councillors are there for and what they do, that there was too much bureaucracy, and that backbenchers didn't have enough power.

Set against these negative feelings was the real sense of achievement when they did manage to make a difference, either to an individual's life or to the community more widely. There was also great satisfaction in getting involved in the community, particularly among those who had children – and yet parents of young children make up a tiny proportion of councillors. One on London council just two out of 50 councillors were mothers of young children. On another only five out of the 63 had school-aged children.

One councillor who became a father during his term of office summed up the difference having children made: *'When I became a father and started using the authority's services it opened my eyes to the council's services, gave me a user's perspective. Being a parent brought my life skills to the table but it was difficult to balance my real life with being a councillor.'*

There was no shortage of suggestions about how to make the role of councillor more attractive to a wider variety and range of people. They started from the point that being a councillor was an interesting and worthwhile thing to do, and every participant in the survey, even the most disillusioned, would still recommend others give it a go.

Practical suggestions for making the job more attractive to a wider range of people revolved around making the role easier to fit into life, resourcing councillors better, paying councillors, giving councillors more power to change things, explaining the job better, getting employers onside and offering role models.

There were also more ambitious ideas for restructuring the job completely, changing the numbers of representatives, dividing the roles more explicitly into executive and backbench roles, doing job shares etc.

For all the councillors, the difficulty of fitting in the requirements of the role with a career and family – prerequisites if we are going to have more younger people and women involved – dominated their lists of things that needed to change. *'It would be fantastic to tap into women with children in some way, but the job would need to be restructured to attract women of 35-50. You'd have to be kinder on the distribution of hours.'*

There was a general frustration about what councillors could actually achieve, either because of the role of the backbench councillor in the new arrangements, or because of lack of resources, or support from officers - or because their representative role was not fully recognised.

Giving councillors the resources to do the job they've been elected to do comes high up the agenda. There was a call for specific political and administrative support for councillors, something most felt they lacked.

There was also a feeling that councillors aren't used for what they've been elected for – to represent the community's views. One councillor believes authorities spend too much time consulting widely before making a decision. *'Consultation fouls things up,'* he says. *'It slows the process down and costs a lot of money. And most of the time you only get the usual suspects anyway. Why are they any more representative than councillors? When the councillors from my ward and two neighbouring ones got together to discuss a traffic calming scheme that affected all the wards, we made a decision in 45 minutes – and it was no better or worse than if we'd taken six months and consulted everybody. We are the representatives – use us.'*

Between a half and a third of our sample were self-employed – and this is not coincidental. Most felt that being a councillor and working for an employer were pretty much incompatible, not just because of the time needed to do the job properly but also because the nature of the job meant some of that time inevitably had to be during the working day.

Part of the problem is that despite the wide range of things that a councillor gets involved with and skills they develop, such as public speaking, chairing meetings, absorbing and understanding large amounts of information, employers don't appreciate its value: *'Employers don't value my experience as a councillor – whereas they do think volunteering for the Territorial Army is worthwhile.'*

Employers, constituents, potential candidates – these former councillors agreed with stakeholders that almost no one has a very good idea about what councillors actually do and that raising the profile of the role is vital if more people are going to be attracted to stand for election. Articulating the job, explaining what councillors do, was seen as an urgent requirement. *'We need to make sure people understand the opportunities to get experience and grow. We haven't sold the role properly,'* says one councillor.

The paradox is that in order to attract different types of people into the councillor role, they need to see other people like them already doing the job. As one ethnic minority councillor put it: *'When I talk to them, black and ethnic minority people are interested in what a councillor does. They are very enthusiastic but only because I am there as a role model.'*

Many of these former councillors felt that the role of councillor as it is presently structured will always limit the numbers and types of people who will be attracted to it. There were lots of ideas and suggestions as to how the role could be reshaped to become more desirable.

Some felt there should be a smaller number of full-time members who would be better resourced. Another suggestion was smaller wards so that the electorate has a more personal relationship with their councillor – it was pointed out that the UK has the highest number of voters per councillor in Europe.

The issue of whether councillors should be paid for what they do divided opinion. For one participant, unpaid councillors are a sign of the *'terrible British love of being an amateur.'* He believed that councillors should be paid for between one and three days a week. They should work from an office somewhere in the ward, where people could depend on finding them. *'As well as allowing working people and mothers to become councillors this system would get the job done better. You'd get better value out of councillors.'*

Others felt differently – as one participant put it: *'Having a salary might add to people's scepticism of local politics. It was useful to sometimes be able to say, "this is voluntary".'*

Key ways to attract more people to stand

- Be more flexible about the role
- Improve local government's image
- Cut down on meetings
- Too much time in the town hall means less time for constituents and being a community leader
- Take the politics out of it
- Internal politicking within the group uses up unnecessary amounts of time and energy
- Give more weight to the councillors' representative role
- Provide better support
- More political and administrative resources would make councillors more efficient and more effective
- Get employers to be more flexible
- Explain the job better to the public, potential candidates and employers
- Cut the red tape – make the councillor's job easier to do





Solutions and suggestions

Improving the image and perception of councillors is a vital step towards encouraging more and different types of people to stand for election, but a large generalised recruitment campaign – such as the kind currently being used to recruit magistrates and members of the Territorial Army – was not felt to be the answer. A more targeted campaign which identifies key council leaders, local authority chief executives and community activists and develops a programme that takes into account the politics of place and local people would, stakeholders believed, have more effect. Such a campaign would need the joint support of political parties, central and local government and agencies.

There were a number of other suggestions as to how councillors could better market and manage their profile:

- More localised and joint campaigns with political parties to promote the councillor role; this could be a politically neutral activity promoted by the local authority
- Councils should publicise the role of councillors and chief executives on their websites and publications
- Councillors should take more responsibility for their own profile, and use as many media as possible to gain recognition e.g. blog pages, free comments on national newspapers
- Councillors should profile issues that matter to local people e.g. environment, cleaning river beds, transport; 'When a councillor is seen as a community campaigner or raising funds for charities, that gets positive media coverage.'

- Opportunity with the London Olympics to better profile councillor role and the role of the local authority. The five boroughs could demonstrate how local government could influence national policy on a delegated legacy for local communities
- Consider having an oath for councillors as part of their inaugural ceremony: *'my duty to the party and to represent people in the area...'*
- Councils should encourage people to stand as local candidates with a series of campaigns that entertain, attract and fund people to stand as councillors (they would need to work within the code of conduct on political publicity)
- Councillors could develop a specific theme that would categorise their period in office.

Possible role of support organisations

- London Councils could promote a London-wide debate on the councillor role
- Do research on what is marketable – is getting councillors' photos in the local press the best way to achieve greater profile?
- London Councils/LGA to promote the role of councillors, including the role of frontline councillors



Conclusion and next steps

The aim of this research was to discover ways of making the role of councillor more attractive to a more representative group of people than presently stand for election. It also wanted to find out how to retain the talented councillors local government already has.

The councillor role is by measure challenging and rewarding - but the case for how local councillors can make a real difference to their communities and how the role can be an invaluable experience for people who want to see an improvement in local public services has not been properly articulated.

Councillors are close to the public and have a responsibility for the delivery of large services in their area. This makes the job both interesting and complex. As local government takes on greater role for other parts of the public sector, the councillor becomes a true community leader at the local level. There is, therefore a need to make the job more attractive and find more people to take on the role.

The stakeholders interviewed for this research were very passionate about local democracy and the councillor role but wanted their councillors to be able to make a real difference in the quality of their life and the wider public good. The same was true of the councillors we spoke to: most left local government still believing that being a councillor is a worthwhile thing to do – just not for them at this moment in their lives. A number thought they might pick up the role again at some later point.

In the meantime the onus is on government and local government to look at ways of giving the job a higher profile and making it more attractive for people to do. While most of the issues identified in this report are not new, political parties, central and local government as well as support organisations need to take action now.

The May 2006 local elections demonstrated a new trend in voting with fewer and fewer people engaging in mainstream politics. With the next round of local elections only three years away, none of the political parties can afford to ignore large sections of the community that are despondent and disconnected from politics. These groups need to be reengaged in the political process. The best way to do this is to promote and profile the councillor role in a more inclusive way, so that Londoners can look at their representatives and see themselves – and believe that they too could make a difference by undertaking that role.

Throughout this publication a range of key issues have been highlighted, from defining and promoting the role of councillor to developing strategies to increase the diversity of council candidates and to encourage employers to view the role of councillor more positively. Raising the profile of the councillor role and selling the job of councillor is one that the Leadership Centre is already undertaking through our Civic Pride project. **We will be working with other agencies in local government and councils themselves to look at other ways of improving the job and profile of councillors and communicating to a wide range of people that local government welcomes their contribution and needs their different skills, voices and talents.**



Appendix 1:

We would like to thank the following for taking part in the research:

- Stephen Bubb, Association of Chief Executives in Voluntary Organisations
- Robert Gordon Clark, London Communications Agency
- Stephen Knight, London Councils
- Bharat Mehta, City Parochial
- Valerie Shawcross, London Assembly
- Colin Stanbridge, London Chamber of Commerce
- Irving Yass, London First

- The Association of Chief Executives in Voluntary Organisations
- Political advisers at London Councils (formerly the Association of London Government)
- City Parochial
- CLORE Leadership Programme
- Common Purpose
- Officers and a member at the Greater London Authority
- Officers at the Local Government Association
- London Chamber of Commerce
- London Communications Agency
- London First
- Westminster City Council
- The Lyons Inquiry team

Appendix 2:

Analysis of London's election results, May 2006

The political map of London changed significantly following the 2006 local elections. As a result the Conservative Party controlled 14 councils, Labour eight and Liberal Democrats, three. The remaining seven councils had no overall party control.

The Conservative Party gained control of seven councils (Bexley, Croydon, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Harrow, Havering and Hillingdon), as well as maintaining control of Barnet, Enfield, Redbridge, Bromley, Wandsworth, City of Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea. It lost control of Richmond.

The Liberal Democrats won back Richmond, held onto Sutton and The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames but lost overall control of Islington.

Labour lost control of eight boroughs (Bexley, Brent, Camden, Croydon, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Hounslow and Merton) but retained Barking and Dagenham, Greenwich, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Haringey. It won control in Lambeth and in Lewisham failed to win a majority of seats but remain in control through the directly elected mayor.

The councillor profile has also changed with 67 per cent of the councillor population being male and 33 per cent female. Approximately 20 per cent of the councillors are of BME origin, of which 74 per cent are BME male and 26 per cent BME female. London's population is 7.4 million people, of which a third of the population is of BME origin .

Party breakdown by gender

The number of female councillors in London has slightly increased from 30 per cent in 2002 to 33 per cent in 2006. In 2002 there were 558 female councillors; in May 2006 this increased to 612 female councillors, an improvement of 3.3 per cent. This is slightly better than the national average, where female councillors in England represent 29 per cent of the councillor population.

Total female councillors

	Con		Lab		Lib Dem		Total	
2006	235	30%	245	36%	102	32%	612	33%
2002	174	27%	260	31%	112	36%	558	30%

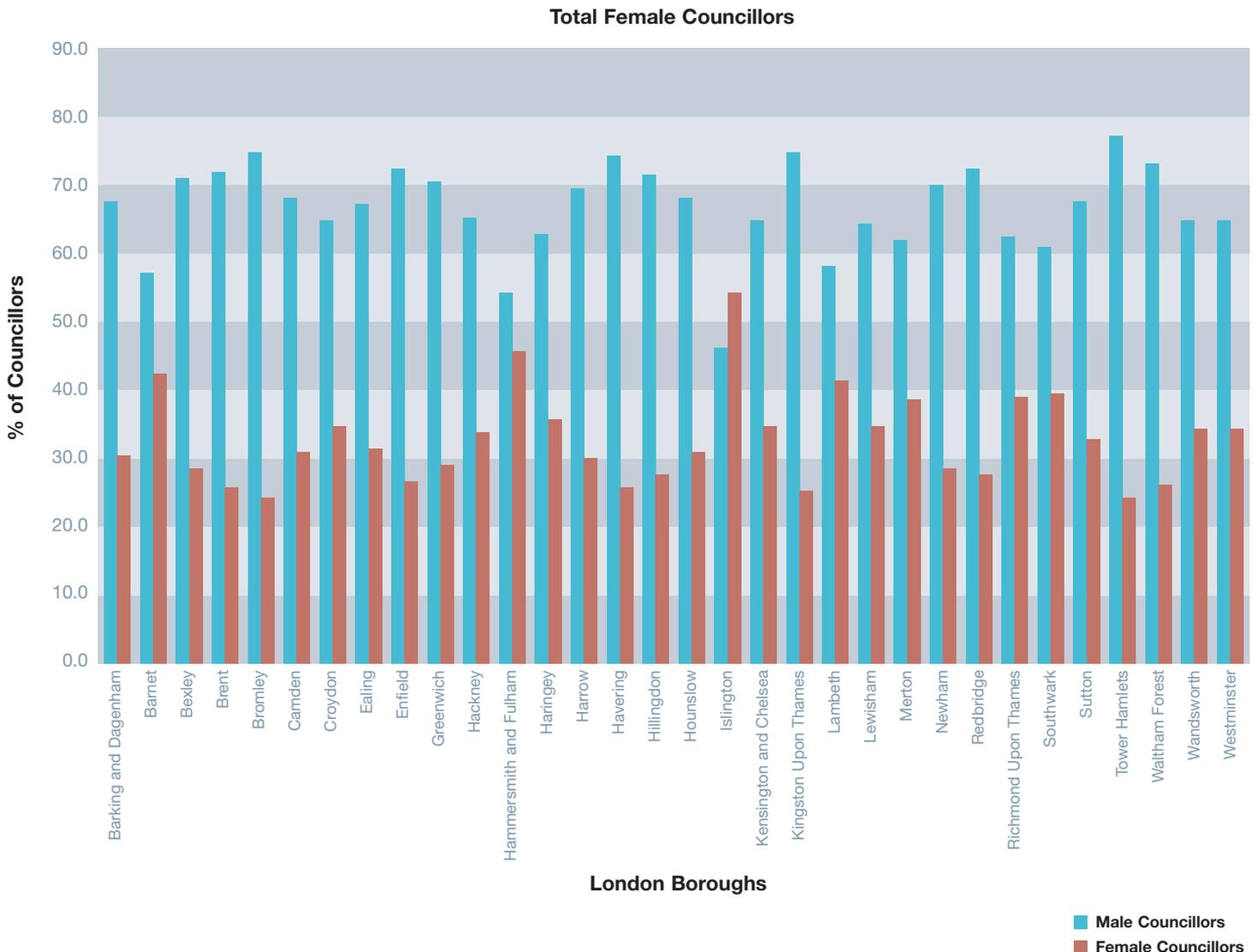
² Source: GLA Report "Focus on London" 2003.

The three main political parties in London had similar proportions of female councillors with the Conservatives having 30 per cent, Labour 36 per cent and Liberal Democrat 32 per cent. Islington elected the largest number of women, with more than 50 per cent of its councillors female, followed by Hammersmith and Fulham (45 per cent), Barnet (43 per cent) and Lambeth (41 per cent). Tower Hamlets had the least number of female councillors (23 per cent), Bromley, Havering, The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and Waltham Forest did slightly better with 25 per cent female councillors.

Liberal Democrats on the other hand have fewer female councillors in 2006 (32 per cent compared to 36 per cent in 2002).

The Green party and Independents increased the percentage of female councillors: 67 per cent of Green party councillors are female, compared to none in 2002. Thirty four per cent of Independents councillors are female, compared to 20 per cent in 2002. However in real terms the number of Green and Independents councillors is still small.

Both main political parties are moving in the right direction – almost 30 per cent of Conservative councillors are female compared to 27 per cent in 2002, and almost 36 per cent of Labour councillors are female, compared to 31 per cent in 2002.



Party breakdown by ethnicity

The number of BME councillors in London has improved significantly in the last four years, from 14 per cent to 20 per cent. In 2002 BME councillors in England constituted 12.3 per cent of the total councillor population. The majority of BME councillors are from the Labour party 37.1 per cent, with Conservatives having 6.8 per cent, Liberal Democrats 15.1 per cent and Green party 16.7 per cent. The majority of Respect councillors were from a BME group.

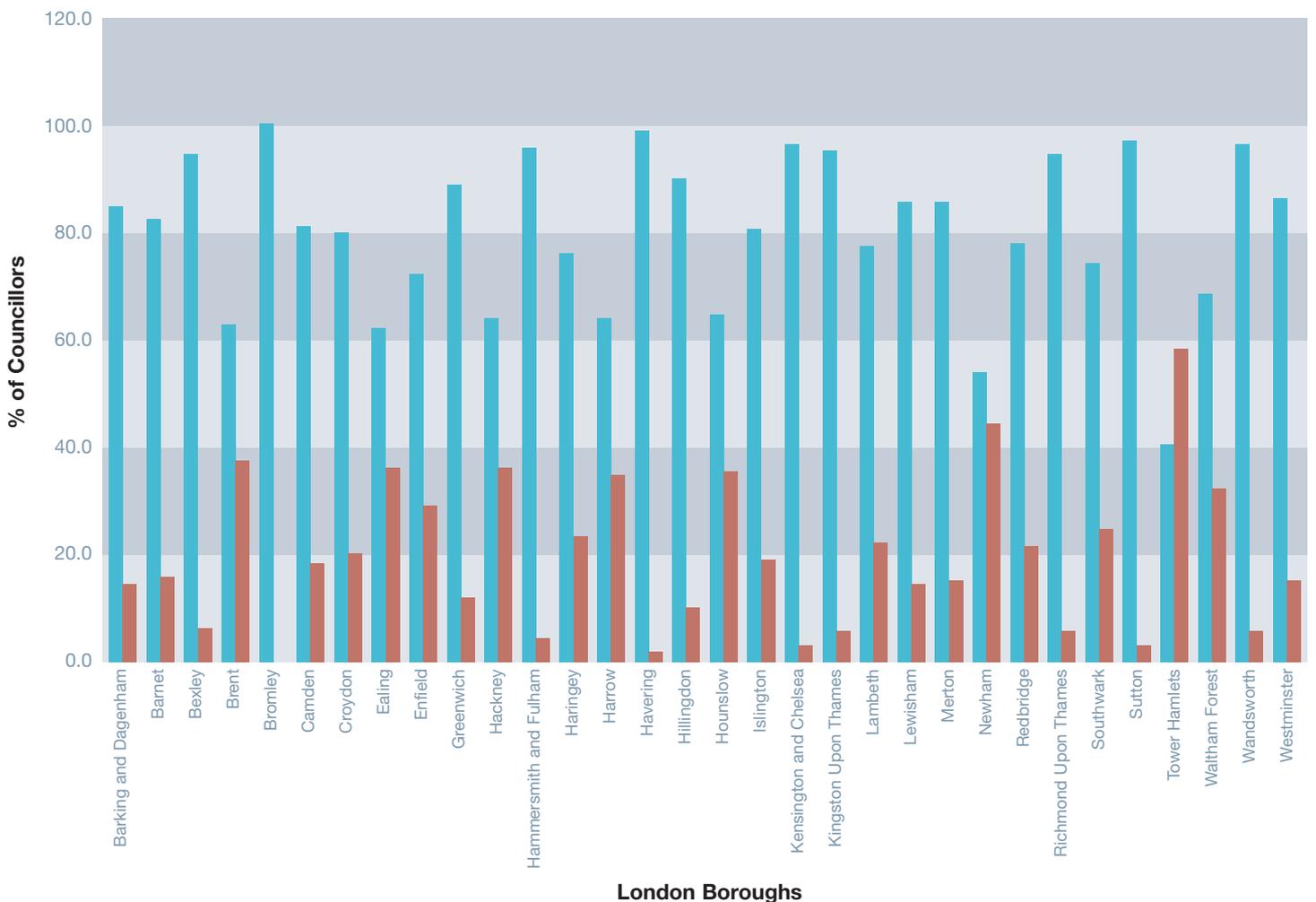
BME councillors made up more than 30 per cent of the councillor population in Tower Hamlets (60.8 per cent), Newham (47 per cent), Brent (38 per cent), Hackney (37 per cent), and Ealing (36 per cent), Hounslow (35 per cent) Harrow (35 per cent) and Waltham forest (32 per cent). The majority of BME councillors are from the Labour party. However, the Conservative councils of Brent and Harrow have made improvements in this area; almost

40 per cent of Conservative councillors in Brent and 26 per cent of Conservative councillors in Harrow are of BME origin.

The percentage of BME female councillors is low; of the 1861 councillors; BME female councillors made up five per cent of the total councillor profile and 26 per cent of the BME councillor total. As a snapshot figure, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat had almost the same proportion of BME female councillors (five per cent), while 26 per cent of Labour councillors are BME women. It is worth noting that ethnic minority populations make up more than half the borough population in nine London boroughs .

Overall, it is difficult to ascertain the age profile of councillors or percentage of younger councillors newly elected. It will be useful for IDeA to include this information in their survey autumn 2006 as it will give a baseline data to monitor the profile of London councillors more effectively.

Total Councillors vs BME Councillors



³ Source: IDeA "National Census of LA Councillors in England 2004", published 2005

⁴ Source: GLA "London the world in a city", 2006

■ Non BME Councillors
 ■ BME Councillors

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