

LGIU Local Government Information Unit

Independent Intelligent Information

Taskforce to encourage more BME women councillors (LGIU)

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Overview

A taskforce has been set up to encourage more women from black and ethnic minority communities to become councillors. It is chaired by Baroness Uddin, will last for twelve months and will report to the Minister for Women and Equality.

There is a worrying under-representation of BME women councillors and those who hold positions of leadership responsibility.

Affiliates may wish to contact the task force to highlight examples of their good practice in encouraging BME women to become active in political life locally.

Briefing in full

Last summer, the Government set out its priorities for women. These included increasing the number of black and asian and minority ethnic women on local councils as part of the government's ambition for empowering black, asian and minority ethnic women. The other two priorities the government set out are: supporting families, particularly as they bring up children and care for older and disabled relatives; and tackling violence against women and improving the way we deal with women who commit crimes.

Of the first of these priorities, the government has considered the scale of the under-representation of BME women in political life in terms of numbers who stand for political office which is significant. Black, asian and minority ethnic women account for less than 1% of England's 20,000 councillors, despite the fact they make up more than 5% of the population. To be more reflective of society as a whole, the number of black, asian and ethnic minority women councillors would need to be increased more than five-fold - from 168 of all councillors in England to nearer a thousand. The number of BME women councillors increased from 0.6% in 1997 to 0.9% in 2006, meaning at the current rate of increase it could take more than 130 years.

To address this under-representation, the Government has launched a taskforce aimed at encouraging women from ethnic minorities to stand as councillors. In a written statement to the House of Commons the Minister for Women and Equalities, Harriet Harman, said the taskforce would also work to identify and tackle barriers within political parties.

The taskforce will last 12 months, with an option to review and take account of some of the recommendations of the independent Councillors Commission (published last December) and

extend it.

It will be chaired by Labour's Baroness Uddin of Bethnal Green, a former councillor who was a Deputy Leader of Tower Hamlets, and the first Muslim woman in the House of Lords. The task force will include black and ethnic minority women councillors and former councillors from England, Scotland and Wales ([see list below](#)).

The taskforce will be supported in its work by the Ministers for Women and Equality and a secretariat will be provided by the Government Equalities Office. Full details of the taskforce, its membership and terms of reference are available on the Government Equalities Office website.

The taskforce will identify actions to increase awareness and build confidence and skills; reach out into communities to encourage women to step forward to become local councillors; identify and tackle barriers within political parties; and reduce disadvantage and stereotyping from within and outside the communities.

The taskforce will take practical action to address this under-representation, such as provide mentoring, hold outreach events in community centres to make the role of councillors more widely known and better understood. It is expected to work with organisations such as the Local Government Association, Operation Black Vote and the Fawcett Society to develop awareness training, establish networking groups and to conduct research. It is also expected to work with local councils, political parties and organisations like the IDeA to improve the recruitment, training and selection and support given to candidates as well as working with others producing guidance and advice.

The taskforce will also be working closely with the Department of Communities and Local Government, who will soon be responding to the Councillors Commission report *Representing the Future* which made recommendations aimed at reducing barriers and increasing the incentives for people to stand and serve as councillors. The report looked at the wider issues of widening the pool of local councillors to increase representation from all under represented groups—women, people from black and minority ethnic communities, people of working age, young people and disabled people.

Ms Harman's announcement comes after a report from the director of Operation Black Vote, Simon Woolley, which highlighted the extent of under-representation among ethnic minority women.

The Prime Minister has proposed to the Speaker that he call a Speaker's conference to consider, against the backdrop of a decline in turnout, a number of important issues including the representation of women and ethnic minorities in the House of Commons.

The government does not consider that the time is right to take legislative measures to permit all-BME election shortlists.

The list of taskforce members is set out below, all of whom are or have been local government councillors themselves:

- Cllr Lurline Champagne is a Conservative Party councillor and executive member in the London Borough of Harrow, past Mayor of Harrow, and a candidate for the Conservative Party nomination for Mayor of London. In 1992, she stood for election to Parliament in Islington North, when she became the first black woman to stand as a parliamentary candidate for the Conservatives.

- Cllr Maya de Souza
is a Green Party councillor in the London Borough of Camden. She is a lawyer and is a Policy Officer, Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- Cllr Meral Ece
has been a Lib Dem councillor on Islington Council since 2002, and prior to that she served as a councillor on Hackney Council 1994-2002. She was one of the first women from a Turkish speaking background to be elected a councillor in the UK in 1994.
- Cllr Anwara Ali
is a Labour councillor and executive member in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets where she is also a local GP
- Cllr Humaira Javed
is a Lib Dem councillor in the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
- Carol Francis
formerly a Labour councillor in Gloucester where she served for seven years she became the first black woman to be appointed Deputy Mayor of Gloucester and Gloucester's first black woman Sheriff in 2002-2003
- Cllr Mimi Harker
is Conservative Group Chairman on Chiltern District Council and has been a councillor since 1999
- Cllr Manjula Sood
is a Labour councillor in Leicester and the first asian female Lord Mayor in the UK, she also became the first asian female High Bailiff in the UK in 2007-08. She was a school teacher for almost 20 years, having become the first female asian Primary school teacher in Leicester and was instrumental in introducing multiculturalism in the education sector.
- Cllr Salma Yaqoob
is a Respect councillor in Birmingham City Council and she is the vice-chair of Respect – The Unity Coalition. She is also the head of the Birmingham Stop the War Coalition and a spokesperson for Birmingham Central Mosque.
- Cllr Svetlana Rodgers
is a Lib Dem councillor from Scarborough Borough Council
- Cllr Mia Jones
is a Lib Dem councillor from Chester and a previous parliamentary candidate
- Thea Khamis
is a college lecturer and former Derwentside district councillor.
- Neelam Bakshi
a former councillor and an advisory board member for the EOC Scotland.
- Yvonne Jardine
a former Labour party councillor in Swansea she is Vice-Chair of the Minority Ethnic Womens Network in Wales

Comment

Significantly, 2007 marked the 100 year anniversary since the first woman councillor was elected. Since then women have increasingly played more visible roles in public life, but they remain significantly under-represented numerically. Over recent years, there has been a very slow increase in the numbers of women councillors – 27.8% in 1997 and 29.3% in 2006 (compared to 52.0% of the adult population).

Black and ethnic minority councillors (male and female) represent 4.1% of the total number of councillors, while 9.5 % of the population come from an ethnic minority background.

For BME women studies notably show their absence in holding elected office: less than 25 % of BME councillors are women, and this is significantly lower than the proportion of white

councillors who are women (30.1 %). There are also gender differences between ethnic groups; as only 14.6 % of asian councillors are women. These figures (taken from the 2006 National Census of Local Authority Councillors in England) show that the proportion of BME councillors who are women is heavily influenced by the under-representation of women amongst asian councillors (who constitute almost 70 % of all non-white councillors), and particularly Pakistani councillors, only 8.0 % of whom are female. By contrast it appears from the Census figures that approximately 40 % of councillors from both 'mixed' and 'black' ethnic groups are women. Some caution must, however, be exercised when interpreting these figures due to the very small numbers of BME councillors in the population and in the Census sample. In terms of region, councillors of non-white ethnicity are most numerous in London (17.7 %) but even here the proportion is considerably lower than the proportion of the local population who are of non-white ethnicity (30.3 %).

Some of the barriers to people becoming councillors are widespread and affect large swathes of the population. Others, however, disproportionately disenfranchise specific groups from becoming and remaining councillors. For example, women often face additional time-related barriers because of caring responsibilities, employed people find it difficult to balance being a councillor with work life, people from BME communities may be disproportionately affected by barriers related to deprivation and social exclusion. Research published by the Government Equalities Office and Fawcett Society last October identified the top barriers which stop black, asian and minority ethnic women becoming councillors as:

- Being a councillor is still seen as a white male middle class hobby
- Gate-keeping political parties: ethnic minority women get poor support and even discrimination from local political parties
- Lack of recognition: the skills and experience of black and asian women are often ignored
- The hard work of bringing up a family and making a living: Women have most of the work to do at home, caring for children and elderly relatives, going to work and have the least of the money available.

The consequences of these barriers to participation result in an under-representation of BME women overall, but there is also the problem of BME women's representation in other positions of power and influence, such as an under-representation of women on executives and under-representation on LSPs.

Looking at figures for women overall, despite the slow increase in women becoming elected this has been matched by a decrease in the numbers of women leaders from 16.6% in 2004 to 13.8% in 2006. The number of women on executives is also proportionately lower than the overall proportion of women councillors (approximately 27% according to a Centre for Women and Democracy study conducted in 2007).

Similarly, according a recent report *Where are the women in LSPs?* published by the Urban Forum, Oxfam and the Women's Resource Centre, LSPs are not performing well in terms of engaging the active participation of women in their work. The taskforce could also consider activities and research to ensure that BME women are able to secure leadership roles and to be adequately represented in LSPs. It is essential that BME women are encouraged to play their part in developing local services, are able to contribute effectively to the decision-making processes and to have their contributions recognised.

The LGiU welcomes the setting up of the task force and will make contact with the members of the task force in due course. The LGiU has actively promoted initiatives to encourage a more diverse and wide range of elected representatives who can engage with their local electorate. For example, in 2005 the LGiU produced a good practice publication entitled *Promoting Councillor Diversity* to highlight what some local authorities and their councillors are doing to

attract a more representative range of councillors.

The question of improving the diversity of our elected representatives cannot be answered by political parties alone and there is a greater need for all those involved in local democracy including local authorities to seriously consider ways in which practical measures and actions can address the lack of diversity amongst our democratically elected representatives.

Promoting Councillor Diversity is a free to download publication as a pdf. Please click on the link attached to this briefing to download (1.7MB).

Bristol City Council, which is cited in *Promoting Councillor Diversity*, has received national recognition, including in the report and recommendations of the Councillors Commission, for its Councillor Shadowing Scheme that it runs in partnership with Operation Black Vote (OBV) to encourage more BME residents to consider becoming councillors. The idea of which germinated at an LGiU conference on councillor diversity at which Simon Woolley of OBV challenged delegates to consider ways to encourage a greater diversity of candidates and for local political parties to also consider the ways in which they select their candidates. Liverpool City Council has also recently announced that it is considering running a similar scheme with OBV.

The task force will undoubtedly wish to consider this scheme and other examples of good practice. Affiliates may wish to contact the chair of the task force with their own examples and the LGiU would be interested to hear of these and to share experiences more widely.

The Government is currently considering the Councillors Commission's report which considered the difficulties in attracting a diverse range of candidates generally and will be publishing a response in the Empowerment White Paper in the Summer.

The LGiU will continue to keep affiliates informed of the work of both the task force and the response to the Councillors Commission.

Additional Information

Local authorities interested in equalities issues may also be interested in becoming signatories to the Council for European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) European charter of equality of women and men. CEMR (a pan-european umbrella organization for national local government associations – such as the LGA) together with the European Commission launched "The town for equality" aimed at collecting local authority case studies of promoting gender equality locally and setting up a methodology to help attain gender equality for representatives. The charter aims to encourage local politicians to commit themselves publicly to implement the measures in the charter.

Covers

- Equalities, Social inclusion, Community cohesion
- Democracy, Governance, Councillor issues, Standards board, Neighbourhood governance, Regional governance, Local government information
- Community involvement, Partnerships and LSPs, Voluntary sector

Question

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- [Promoting Councillor Diversity](#)
- [BAME Women Councillors Task Force](#)
- [Representing the Future](#)
- [CEMR Charter for Equality](#)

Related briefings

- [Women in Local Strategic Partnerships](#) 
- [Councillors Commission Report and Recommendations](#) 

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