

The Effect of New Unitary Authorities on the Representation of Women

Introduction

In a number of areas, current two-tier systems of local government are being re-organised into large single-tier unitary authorities.

To date, 9 new unitaries have been agreed (Bedford, Central Bedfordshire, Cheshire East, Cheshire West & Chester, Cornwall, County Durham, Northumberland, Shropshire and Wiltshire. A further 3 (Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk) are under consideration.

The 9 authorities already agreed come into full operation in April 2009, but are currently in existence as shadow councils with the transition from current to new arrangements being overseen by variously titled bodies.

4 (Cheshire East, Cheshire West & Chester, County Durham and Northumberland) held elections for their shadow councils in 2008. The remainder will hold elections in May 2009.

Cornwall, County Durham, Northumberland, Shropshire and Wiltshire are existing county councils which will acquire the functions of the district councils they are replacing.

Cheshire East, Cheshire West & Chester and Central Bedfordshire are new councils, and Bedford is an existing shire district which will become a unitary (and retain its elected mayor).

In total, 46 existing councils in these areas will be replaced by 9 new ones.

This paper looks at the effect these changes either may have or have already had upon the representation of women at leadership levels, and makes proposals for measures to ensure that women's representation at senior levels of local government is not adversely affected by future changes.

It should be noted that, since Bedford is currently a single authority with a (male) elected mayor, and will remain one, it is not included in the sections which follow unless specific reference is made to it.

The Current Position

Of the existing 45 authorities:

- 24% (Bedfordshire, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Bridgnorth, Chester, Chester-le-Street, Mid Bedfordshire, Penwith, Restormel, Sedgefield, South Shropshire, and Wiltshire) currently have women Leaders¹.
- 11% (Carrick, Crewe & Nantwich, Macclesfield, North Wiltshire and Shropshire) have women Deputy Leaders².
- 20% (Berwick-upon-Tweed, Cornwall, Ellesmere Port & Neston, Macclesfield, Mid Bedfordshire, North Shropshire, Salisbury, Shropshire and Vale Royal) had women Chief Executives³.

The percentage for women leaders is significantly above both the national average (16%), and the average for the types of authority affected - 18% in the shire districts and 14% in the counties. The percentage for deputies is below the national average (20%) and that for Chief Executives matches it (20%).

The Shadow Authorities

Of the new shadow authorities:

- 2 (Central Bedfordshire and Wiltshire) are led by women
- 1 (Shropshire) has a woman Deputy
- 4 have so far appointed Chief Executives; 2 of these (Cheshire East and Shropshire) are women

Each new unitary has an executive, cabinet or implementation executive, which has the responsibility of guiding the new authority through the transition stages. Of the 120 members of these committees, 25% are women.

However, this overall figure masks a wide variation ranging from Cheshire East, where none of the 10 members of the Implementation Executive are women, to County Durham where 40% (4) of the 10 members are female.

¹Correct as at June 2008; *Leadership & Gender in Local Government in England: Part 2* published by the Centre for Women & Democracy, July 2008

² Ibid

³ Ibid

Elections to the New Authorities

4 of the new unitary authorities (Cheshire East, Cheshire West & Chester, County Durham and Northumberland) held elections for their shadow councils in May 2008. The remainder will elect new councils in May 2009, after they have come into existence.

The Centre for Women & Democracy has looked at women candidates and councillors elected for the 4 shadow councils concerned, and found that:

- 33% of candidates for the 3 main parties were women (as opposed to 35% in the 2008 local elections in the north of England overall)
- 27% of councillors elected in these 4 new unitaries were women (as opposed to 31% overall).
- 29% (approximately - allowing for the fact that some women will be members at both district and county level - 292) of councillors in the 22 local authorities which will be replaced by these 4 new unitaries are women.
- 27% of councillors elected to the new authorities are women - this means that 292 women councillors in these four areas alone will be reduced to 95.

These elections are by definition whole council elections (even where there is only one seat per ward); women always do less well in whole council elections than in those where councils are elected by thirds, if only because they are less likely to be fielded as candidates in the more winnable seats⁴.

Outcomes

On the basis of what has happened so far, it seems clear that the failure to take issues around the representation of women into account in local government reorganisation has resulted in a reduction of women's presence, visibility, and therefore influence.

When the new authorities come into being in April 2009:

- The number of women Leaders will fall from 59 (16%) to 50 (15%)
- The number of women Deputy Leaders will fall from 70 to 66, (although the percentage will rise from 20% to 21%).

⁴ 2007 Local Elections, CFWD, 2007

- The number of women councillors will fall - in the first 4 unitaries to hold elections, approximately 195 women will cease to hold elected public office (other than as town or parish councillors) in April 2009.

The position with Chief Executives is less easy to ascertain, since not all of the new unitaries have yet appointed them. The position so far (2 women out of 4 appointments) is encouraging, however.

In many places, new town and parish councils will be created, and it is possible that many of the women councillors displaced by the creation of the new unitaries will be elected at this more local level. The net effect of that, however, would be to concentrate the representation of women at the lowest level of local government; clearly, although women should be adequately represented there as at all other levels, membership of town and parish councils should not be regarded as an acceptable replacement for representation at district or county level.

Recommendations

The government is committed to increasing the representation of women in local government, and has taken a number of steps to promote this. It is also committed to removing some of the complications, anomalies and expenses of current local government structures. However, implementation of the latter commitment is actually damaging and undermining the former, and, in order to avoid this in future reorganisations it is suggested that:

- a) there should be a duty - as part of the consultation and inquiry processes - for the effect of reorganisation on women's representation to be considered and reported on. Presumably the effect in terms of service delivery issues is already taken into account.
- b) there should be a requirement on Implementation/Shadow Executives to have women members. Ideally this would be 50%, but it is recognised that at a time when having no women at all seems to be acceptable this may be an unrealistic aspiration. It is assumed that the current gender duty applies to shadow bodies as well as to those they are replacing, and that gender considerations are therefore taken into account in their decisions without the need for further regulation:
- c) steps should be taken, in conjunction with the main political parties, to encourage women to stand as candidates in winnable seats. Indeed, it might be possible for each new council to have a target agreed for the number of women members it has; this target should not be lower than the percentage of women overall on the councils being replaced.

- d) new unitary authorities should be specifically asked what steps they have taken/are taking to ensure that their decisions comply with the requirements of the gender duty.

It is difficult to take effective steps to ensure that the numbers of women in leadership positions does not fall, and this position will need to be monitored. However, political parties should be made aware of concerns, and should be encouraged to develop gender-balanced leadership teams in all authorities, including newly created ones.

Implementation of all or any of these recommendations would require consultation and some measure of agreement; however, if steps are not taken, it is likely that, over the next few years, the very small increases in women's representation as local government leaders and councillors will be reversed, and the government will achieve simpler and cheaper local government structures at the expense of one of its key equality initiatives.

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