

Women's Local Government Society
www.womeninlocalgovernment.org.uk
ESTABLISHED ON A NON-PARTY BASIS

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New Unitary councils and the election of women

Dear Secretary of State,

WLGS had planned to write to John Healey as Local Government Minister. However given your recent article in MJ on 'Heroines of the town hall' we thought it would be appropriate to write to you direct with a copy to John Healey. We are addressing questions to a number of organisations as a result of a discussion at our recent AGM. They concern the move to unitary authorities. Inevitably, moving to a unitary structure will substantially reduce the total number of elected members in those communities. You will understand that we are anxious that not only will the current proportion of women councillors at 29% not fall, but if possible should grow. We are therefore seeking to establish what guidance the Department and/ or political parties are giving to local authorities to ensure that women continue to represent their communities in the contest for seats? And as women without cars and with children may find it difficult to travel considerable distances to meetings in unitary counties, how will women be enabled to participate? We have written to the three main political parties, as we recognise, as stated by the recent councillors' commission, that equality will best be achieved by a range of different measures, not just one.

We also want to acknowledge that achieving equality for women in elected representation in local government is only part of wider goals, and welcome your focus on younger ethnic minority women who are particularly under-represented.

Our AGM also approved the principles of our campaigning activity for the year, which will include a 'find a friend' initiative. Based on research showing that women are more likely to need to be asked to stand as candidates, we will be encouraging all women councillors to find another woman, preferably from a different background or age group to themselves to stand as a candidate. I would be happy to keep the department informed as the initiative develops.

Our questions concern the specific plans for local government reorganisation, now due to go ahead in Bedfordshire and Cheshire as well as various locations announced previously. Could you please inform us:

1. What measures will be incorporated in regulations to ensure that the new unitary authorities are more representative of the communities they serve?
2. Has there been any internal discussion about the findings of the councillor's commission and how they might be implemented in the new unitary authorities?



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3. Will consideration be given to incorporating equality considerations around elected representation into any central performance monitoring of the implementation of the new unitary authorities?
4. We are aware that the commission included specific findings about the benefit of dual member wards to women candidates. Is that issue addressed in the regulations setting up new structures?

In writing we would like to congratulate the ministerial team in having the foresight to set up the councillors' commission. We look forward to contributing to its implementation. I hope you will be able to give these issues a considered response, which we intend to summarise in a newsletter to all our members and place on our web- site.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Lesley Clarke,
Chairman Women's Local Government Society

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