

The 'representativeness' of councillors

Local government reform is an important part of the Government's programme for democratic renewal. A new study, by Professor Alice Brown, Amy Jones and Dr Fiona Mackay of Edinburgh University, examines the 'representativeness' of councillors. They investigate why certain groups are under-represented on councils in Britain. Their research raises questions about what should be done to make the membership of councils more closely resemble the communities they serve and what difference a more socially representative system might make. Finally, options for reform are presented. Their key findings are:

- f** The majority of councillors are still white, male and middle-aged. A large proportion do not have other paid employment.
- f** Barriers to participation are varied, complex and inter-connected. Political systems, recruitment and selection procedures, local government cultures and practices are such that it is difficult for women, young people, people with full-time jobs, those from minority ethnic backgrounds, and disabled people to get involved and stay involved.
- f** There is broad agreement among central and local government, political parties and other organisations that the membership of councils needs to more closely reflect today's society.
- f** Although all political parties are concerned about the under-representation of certain social groups in local government, policies to open up opportunities for participation are not fully developed and in some parties no specific policies exist.
- f** The willingness of individual political parties to use positive action measures to ensure fairer social representativeness is limited.
- f** Creating socially representative councils is seen by many to enhance local democracy and increase the legitimacy of the local government system. Support for reform is also given on the grounds of equity and fairness.
- f** The researchers conclude that:
 - Councils of 'all talents' will not occur without specific policies to improve the recruitment and retention of a more diverse body of councillors.
 - A holistic approach to reform is needed which recognises the many factors which inhibit or discourage people from standing as local councillors.
 - Commitment and political will are crucial at all levels - government, party and local authority - in order to effect change

Background

Improving the social balance of our elected representatives is now on the political agenda and is increasingly linked to other aspects of modernisation and what has been described as the 'new politics'. The Government is conscious of the low esteem in which politics and politicians are held by the general public, and concerned to take on board criticisms of sleaze and corruption in central and local government. Opening up the process of recruitment and selection of political candidates from a wide cross-section of British society is thus part of the programme of opening up government and renewing the democratic system as a whole. The Government has stated its desire to see a body of councillors which more fully reflects today's society. However, there has been less attention paid to the means to achieve change and a lack of specific policies.

The under-representation of certain groups in British local government is not a new phenomenon; it was recorded over thirty years ago and is still evident today. Although contemporary studies show a gradual trend towards greater social representativeness, the social make-up of councils does not reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.

Why are some groups under-represented?

The reasons why certain groups are under-represented are varied, complex and well-documented. They include:

- *systematic factors* which include the political, electoral and legal context and structure of opportunities in which selection takes place;
- *recruitment factors*, such as selection procedures for candidates; and
- *individual supply and demand factors* which influence whether people are able or willing to put themselves forward for selection (supply) and the decisions of those selecting potential candidates (demand).

Barriers are best understood as operating on a number of levels and are inter-connected.

The case for reform

Changing the social composition of local government councillors to ensure that it reflects the composition of society as a whole is supported on the grounds of equity and fairness, and in terms of improving legitimacy and democracy. Councils are at present unable to tap the skills and experience of a diverse range of people who would have valuable contributions to offer.

It is possible to argue that greater social representativeness is more likely to include the perspectives and experiences of all members of society and thus impact positively on policy processes and outcomes. Empirical evidence is patchy and most of the studies that have been conducted tend to focus at the level of national assemblies and on women as a group. However, some studies suggest that more representative elected bodies may make a difference to the style, process and substance of politics and public policy. There are also strong perceptions amongst activists that changing the social composition of elected institutions will have an impact on process and policy.

Current political debate and practices

All of the main political parties have stated their desire to improve their selection procedures and encourage wider participation in the process. There is evidence that some of the political parties have made reforms to their selection and recruitment processes. In general, it can be said that there is a willingness to consider proposals that will enhance the professionalism of the recruitment process, but there is still considerable resistance to the adoption of positive action measures to break the mould of under-representation of specific groups.

Options for reform

Change will not be achieved easily or overnight. Reforms are required which recognise the many factors that may inhibit or discourage some people from standing as councillors and the structural and other barriers which may operate against some marginalised groups. A holistic approach to improving the

recruitment and retention of a more socially representative group of councillors is needed. This has implications for the policies and practices of the government, for other political parties, and for councils themselves.

The options for reform can be summarised and categorised under four broad headings (see Table 1):

- **Political system:** Changes are required at the level of the political system which sets the context and the political culture and ethos in which recruitment and selection takes place. A key factor discouraging people from coming forward as candidates is the image and standing of local government, or the perception that ‘people like them’ are unlikely to be selected or build a career. Thus reforms are required to local government itself in addition to changes to the terms and conditions of office, and the introduction of codes of conduct. Changes to the electoral, political and legal system will also offer different opportunities to alter the composition of councils.
- **Recruitment process:** Improvements to the recruitment process can be made by the provision of clear information, taster events, and candidate and selector training. Operating on the basis of fair

rules, open and equal opportunity procedures, application forms with explicit criteria, and allowing self-nomination would all combine to make the process fairer and more transparent. Positive action measures are the most likely to ensure greater representation of marginalised groups.

- **Supply of candidates:** In order to encourage a more diverse supply of candidates, it is necessary to remove the most obvious barriers to their recruitment and identify and support applications from under-represented groups, providing training targeted at specific needs. The payment of salaries or the operation of secondment schemes would encourage different people to come forward. Better working conditions, childcare facilities and allowances for carers would also make the job more attractive to some. Making the job of a councillor more worthwhile and attractive would improve the pool of candidates.
- **Demands of selectors:** Better information and training for selectors are also necessary to improve the process of recruitment. Publicising the open process, encouraging an ethos of serving communities and ‘re-imagining’ the typical councillor would also work towards a different culture of recruitment and

Table 1: Options for reform

| <i>Political system</i> | <i>Recruitment process</i> | <i>Supply of candidates</i> | <i>Demands of selectors</i> |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Legal changes | Clear information | Identifying candidates | Political will |
| Electoral changes | Taster events | Training | Information on process |
| Party system | Candidate training | Salaries | Training |
| Terms of office | Selector training | Secondment | Publicising open process |
| Conditions of office | Self-nomination | Allowances | ‘Re-imagining’ councillors |
| Code of conduct | Application form | Childcare facilities | Serving communities |
| Local government reform | Open procedures Fair rules Equal opportunities selection procedures Positive action | Working conditions | |

selection. A crucial element in making significant changes to the 'representativeness' of local councillors is the political will to move beyond the rhetoric of greater diversity to the introduction of policies directed at ensuring that marginalised groups are not discouraged from coming forward and have an equal chance of selection as councillors in the future.

The adoption of some or all of the above options would go a long way to improving the social composition of councils and encouraging a pool of high calibre and highly motivated people from all walks of life to come forward to serve as local councillors.

Conclusion

The researchers argue that there is a strong case to be made for changing the social composition or representativeness of local councillors. In the current climate of concern about democratic processes and accountability and the reforms proposed for local government, there is the possibility of introducing policies specifically designed to alter the social composition of local government. There is the opportunity to change the political culture and the ethos of public office so that being a councillor is seen as a highly worthwhile and respected activity. Local government is an important site in which people can enjoy having a voice, a place, services and a better democratic system. As studies have shown, people are more likely to find it easier to be involved in local issues. Participation at local level also provides a pathway and a pool of people who may consider other forms of political office in public bodies or in parliament.

About the study

The primary purpose of the study was to propose options for reform based on lessons that can be learned from past studies and practical experience. The researchers did not conduct a new survey of local councillors in different parts of the UK. Instead an

overview of existing research was undertaken with evidence drawn from a wide range of studies carried out by others in UK, Europe and elsewhere. The project was concerned to place the current under-representation of certain groups in local government within an historical and comparative background. Secondly, information on current debates, policies and practices in respect of social representativeness was gathered from all the political parties. Thirdly, briefings were conducted with a range of politicians, commentators and campaigners.

How to get further information

The full report, **The 'representativeness' of councillors** by Alice Brown, Amy Jones and Fiona Mackay, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 01 6, price £12.95 plus £2 p&p).