

Women's Career Development in Sandwell MBC

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Forward

Gender Equality

Sandwell MBC has worked in close partnership with Sheffield Hallam University, and eleven other local authorities over the last three years to take part in this national research study, the *Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets Project* (GELLM).

In participating in this Project the organisation has made a firm commitment to disseminate and implement the research findings by engaging with key stakeholders during all stages of the project. The philosophy for implementing change in relation to gender equality has been based on the commitment that each Service Area will continue to be instrumental in taking forward the responsibility for aligning their service priorities for gender equality in their Business Plans.

Through active participation in this research project Sandwell MBC is well prepared for its new legal responsibility for implementing the 'Gender Duty' requirements of the Equality Act 2006 in all key service areas and to effectively address gender inequality in the borough.



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Members of the GELLM Team contributed as follows

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Key Findings

This study is about women's employment and career progression in Sandwell MBC. It is one of 4 parallel studies of women employed in local authorities conducted within the GELLM research programme. The findings in this report relate to Sandwell MBC only. They are drawn from an e-survey and focus group discussions with women employees, interviews with managers, and documents supplied by Sandwell MBC's Human Resources Service.

Analysis of the e-survey showed:

- Extensive evidence of working beyond contracted hours
- A concentration of part-time employees in lower paid jobs
- Almost half of women in the younger and older age groups were graduates, compared with only a third aged 35-44.

Drawing on our qualitative data from the focus group discussions and managerial interviews, we also found that:

Women employees make great efforts to avoid compromising either work or 'life'. Sometimes their home life and health bears the brunt of competing demands.

Women manage their work-life balance differently according to their age, personal circumstances and stage in life.

Women employees generally consider Sandwell MBC to be a 'family friendly' employer.

Women with family commitments valued the ability to work flexibly which Sandwell MBC offers them. This was more important to them than securing the most competitive pay.

Women working part-time thought they were well paid by comparison with other employers' rates for part time work.

Women thought Sandwell MBC offered very good training opportunities and was effective in making them aware of training opportunities. 95% of e-survey respondents had received training within the local authority, and 55% believed this training had enabled them to progress in their careers.

When considering an upward career move, the following were important to the women who participated in the focus groups:

- The likely impact of the anticipated workload in the more senior role on other aspects of their lives – whether they could 'cope'. This was a particular issue for those working part-time.
- How the new role would affect them in terms of hours of work. They noted a prevailing attitude that senior jobs cannot be done part time; some worried about the need to 'prove their commitment' by working beyond contracted hours; some were concerned about losing flexibility of start and finish times if they were promoted.
- Qualification requirements of the new post, especially university degrees. Some felt experience was under-rated, and that formal qualifications were given undue importance. Some women found studying while working and caring for children or dependants very difficult.
- Their other sources of support - managerial support and family support - were both crucial.

Women who took part in the focus groups felt there was an organisational culture which 'favoured men', and that *'women have to work harder than men to get on'*.

Black women spoke of a *'concrete ceiling'* - they could not even look up and see successful Black women operating in the highest level jobs.

Very few women felt male colleagues held sexist attitudes, but some women in male-dominated departments felt patronised by male colleagues, and some felt men without experience of family life failed to understand some of the pressures they faced.

Factors enabling women to progress at work and in which good managers played a key role were:

- exposure to new experiences and a wider network of work contacts
- line management which nurtured their belief in their own ability
- training targeted on a promotion opportunity rather than their current post
- secondment opportunities
- personal development training which increased their confidence and helped them assess their own worth.

Introduction

This study is about the career development and progression of women working within Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC). The research has identified factors which are important in women's decisions about career progression, both within the organisation and outside in the wider labour market, and explores how these factors relate to women's family situations and personal aspirations.

Conducted in 2005, the research used a variety of methods including: documentary and statistical analysis; interviews with senior managers; a new e-survey of all female employees¹; and follow up focus groups with women of different ages, employed in different departments.

This report relates to Sandwell MBC only. The full study was conducted in three other local authorities; a comparative analysis of this data is published separately (Bennett et al 2006). The Gender Profile for Sandwell (Buckner et al 2004) provides the district-wide statistical evidence and context for the study.

Women's career development

Through this study we hope to make a different contribution to the debate about women's career progression and commitment to paid employment, by acknowledging the impact of the local labour market context and the workplace culture, as well as the relationship between internal and external constraints which women have encountered in developing their careers. Taking the view that these constraints are not static but change throughout women's lives, the study has tried to highlight differences between women at different stages in the life course. Our aims were:

- To examine women's experiences of employment and career development in the local authority sector.
- To explore the factors and conditions which impede, or support, the career development of women employees in Sandwell MBC.

- To identify policies and practices which encourage and support women's career progression.
- To make relevant recommendations to promote effective workforce development and efficient career management in local authorities.

Women are known to find it more difficult than men to gain promotion and enter higher level occupations. This 'glass ceiling', the artificial barriers preventing qualified individuals from progressing at work and reaching their full potential (Miller and Neathy 2004), has previously been explained in a number of ways:

- hierarchical organisation of the workplace
- hours and working arrangements
- the dominance, in some occupations and sectors, of men and male attitudes.

Other explanations suggest women's lack of progress to senior levels arises from their own preferences and lifestyle choices (Hakim 2000). These claim that many women are not career-focused, and either prioritise family above work or have unplanned careers to accommodate other opportunities that may arise in their lives outside work. Understanding women's choices about their career development in the context of internal preferences and external factors has important implications for Sandwell MBC in making effective human resources decisions to develop the potential of every employee, and in evaluating and implementing options for enhancing work-life balance to become an 'employer of choice'.

The public policy context

The issue of women's productivity in the labour market has been actively addressed by the New Labour government since it came to power in 1997. To support and encourage women with children to make a greater commitment to employment, a variety of measures have been put in place. The *National Childcare Strategy* was introduced in 1998 to extend the quantity of childcare provision and to improve its quality to give mothers more options and more peace of mind. A package of tax credits and benefits for parents was introduced in 2001 to make employment more financially attractive for parents and lone parents. In a parallel move, the government tried to encourage employers to change the way work is structured to better suit individuals' diverse needs. The *Employment Relations Act 1999* provided for employees to take leave to deal with family emergencies and

¹ A link to the e-survey was sent in an email to all employees, male and female, with direct access to Groupwise (internal email system). Only data relating to female respondents has been analysed here. Data from male respondents has been made available to Sandwell MBC.

the *Employment Act 2002* gave some parents the right to request flexible working arrangements. In partnership with employers, the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) launched its *Work-Life Balance Campaign* in 2000, offering Challenge funding to selected organisations which identified relevant issues to help them introduce more flexible working and better leave arrangements.

Celebrating 30 years of the *Equal Pay Act 1975* in 2005, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) again called on employers to address the underlying causes of the gender pay gap. The EOC has promoted positive action to break down occupational segregation (Fuller et al 2005), and has promoted pay audits as a way of driving out discriminatory pay differentials. It has also promoted the business benefits of making the connection between effective human resources management and equal opportunities (Humphries and Rubery 1995). *The Women and Work Commission*, reporting to the Prime Minister in February 2006, endorsed these approaches, and emphasised the importance of extending flexible working arrangements to positions at all levels in workplace hierarchies (Women and Work Commission 2006).

Following the lead of the European Union in calling for action to bring about greater inclusivity and a share in economic benefits for all of Europe's citizens, the UK Government has also undertaken a reform of equality legislation. The *Equality Act* received the royal assent in March 2006. This sets up a single *Commission for Equality and Human Rights* (CEHR) and will harmonise the legislative approach to equalities in line with advances made in the area of race through the *Race Relations Amendment Act 2000*. A new duty to promote gender equality will come into force in April 2007, requiring all public bodies to promote gender equality in their provision of services, and as employers. Public bodies will, for the first time in England, have to demonstrate that their employment practices meet the needs of women and men, and that any inequalities of opportunity and of treatment are addressed.

Employment in the local authority sector

Over a quarter of people employed in the UK work in the public sector, two thirds of them women. Nationally local government employs about 1.2 million women, three quarters of the sector's total workforce², and in most districts the local authority is one of the major employers. Previous research has shown that local government employees have comparatively stable patterns of employment, often remaining with their employer for long periods (Yeandle et al 2002). Employees with long lengths of service pass through many 'life stages' in the course of their employment, and the workforce profile is more likely to be skewed towards older age groups. This presents certain challenges for human resources management in the sector.

Labour and skills shortages in local labour markets have added further incentives for some local authorities, who now compete to be 'employers of choice'. Flexible working and equality of opportunity are important in attracting high quality applicants and in promoting and retaining able female employees. The DTI and the EOC have both drawn attention to the importance of ensuring that women are able to reach their full potential at work, for example in the Kingsmill Report (DTI 2001) which argued that:

Businesses and organisations in the UK are mismanaging their human capital. The clustering of women in lower status and lower paid jobs... suggests that they are failing to properly develop and utilise the skills and talents of women.

The Equality Standard for Local Government, Best Value and the broader modernisation agenda in public services already require local authorities to offer equality of opportunity to all their employees. The new duty to promote gender equality will strengthen this, and oblige local authorities to take proactive steps to improve the status and experiences of women within their workforces.

² Source: Local Government Workforce In England: Trends and Projections, Employers' Organisation 2004, excludes teachers.

Women's employment in Sandwell

Sandwell's local labour market

As shown in the *Gender Profile of Sandwell's Labour Market* (Buckner et al 2004:22), Sandwell did not share in the significant employment growth experienced in the wider economy (in the West Midlands and in England as a whole) in the 1990s. The district suffered a net loss of some 4,000 full-time jobs, offset by a net increase of about 5,000 part-time jobs (mostly taken up by men) between 1991 and 2002.

Behind these figures, as we showed in the *Gender Profile*, lay important structural changes in the local labour market. These included the loss of 5,000 female jobs in Sandwell's manufacturing sector, and (for women) an increase of about the same number of jobs in public administration, education and health. As a result, by 2002 over 40% of jobs in Sandwell held by women were in the public sector, while the manufacturing sector provided employment locally for only 15% of women. These developments underscore the importance of Sandwell MBC as a key source of employment for local women. In 2004/5 women held 42% of all jobs located in Sandwell, a total of some 52,000 jobs³. The local authority thus provides about 1 in 5 of all female jobs in the district, and is a very important source of local employment.

Employment policies at Sandwell MBC

Sandwell MBC has a well developed and established approach to promoting equality of opportunity for all its employees through its adoption of work-life balance policies and development of training opportunities.

Its policies under the heading of work-life balance are numerous and at the forefront of good employment practice. Employees can assess them easily via the staff intranet or in the handbook '*Helping Employees to Achieve Work Life Balance*'. Policies cover emergency caring situations, planned caring situations such as adoption and parental leave, flexi-time, changes to working hours such as term-time working, and options to apply for extended leave in order to deal with major family changes or to fulfil lifetime ambitions. Sandwell MBC also offers crèche provision, currently over-subscribed. The Human Resource Strategy 2003-2008 includes explicit

³ Source: Annual Business Survey 2004

commitments to recognise employees' work-life commitments by adopting modern flexible ways of working and to build up the skills of each employee by promoting a lifelong learning culture.

The authority's own staff satisfaction e-survey demonstrates the success of the commitment to providing training opportunities. In 2003 there was a high level of satisfaction among female employees with the availability of appropriate training (51%). The Corporate Development Strategy 2004-2005 prioritised manager development, and has included programmes targeting women and ethnic minority employees.

Sandwell MBC, in common with the sector as a whole, has undergone considerable structural reorganisation in the last few years, partly driven by new statutory requirements. Whilst this was reported as 'unsettling' by some participants in this study, structural safeguards for equality are in place and have continued to function uninterrupted. There is an Equality Scrutiny Panel (made up of elected members and senior executive officers) and a Gender Champion at senior executive level who has been a proactive advocate for the interests of female staff. Sandwell MBC has made a commitment to reach level 3 of the Equality Standard by 2008 and is monitoring progress on various employment indicators and trends. In November 2004 evidence of a 'glass ceiling' for women and ethnic minority staff at principal officer grade within the authority was presented to the Scrutiny Panel.

About the study of women's employment at Sandwell MBC

Our analysis draws on a mix of qualitative and quantitative information including:

- A new e-survey of women employees completed by 226 women⁴
- Data available from Sandwell MBC
- Analysis of Sandwell MBC policies
- Interviews with 3 senior managers
- 4 focus groups with 25 women employees

The e-survey intentionally over-sampled women who had experienced some degree of 'success' in their careers⁵. 22% of responses were from women from ethnic minorities, somewhat higher

⁴ A response rate of 6% was achieved

⁵ 74% of women respondents to the e-survey were in salary bands £18,000 and above, whose posts had progression opportunities to more senior roles.

than the proportion of ethnic minority staff in Sandwell's workforce as a whole (14% in 2004⁶). The focus groups provided the main evidence about women's experiences, values, aspirations and needs, and of barriers to their progression. Women of different ages were selected and grouped together to try to capture experiences and attitudes at different points in the life course. With each group we explored how far the women's working lives were meeting their current expectations, and the extent to which their views were common to the group. The 4 groups were:

- women in more senior positions, aged approximately 45-59, including some women who had been at the top of their grade for a number of years (who were in a position to look back with hindsight)
- women aged 25-34 (focusing on their career aspirations and longer term goals).
- women aged 35-44 with and without children (focusing on the impact of childcare responsibilities on women's careers)

These groups gave us the opportunity to examine the impact of age, generation and motherhood. Appendix 2 gives a more detailed description of our research methods.

Women employees at Sandwell MBC

Sandwell MBC employs 11,504 women (71% of the total workforce in 2004⁷) in 5 thematic areas across various sites, in Sandwell, West Midlands. All employees contactable by email⁸ were invited to participate in our e-survey about women's careers and employment, conducted in June 2005. A total of 226 women responded, and their characteristics are described below.

Four per cent of e-survey respondents were disabled women, 61% were qualified to degree level or above, and almost half had worked at Sandwell MBC for 15 years or more. Almost all had received some training during their period of service (95%) and just over half (55%) reported that they had received training which enabled them to progress to a higher grade.

Figure 1 Age of respondents

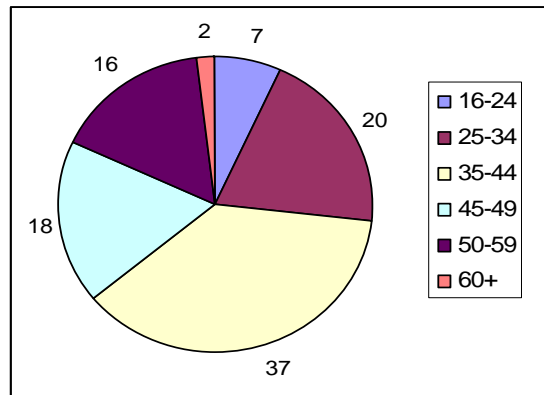


Figure 2 Ethnicity of respondents

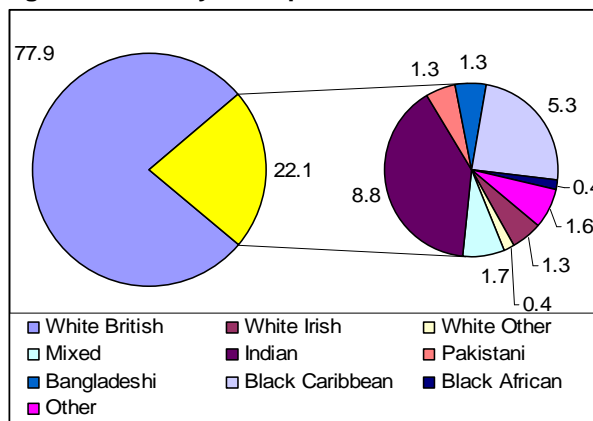
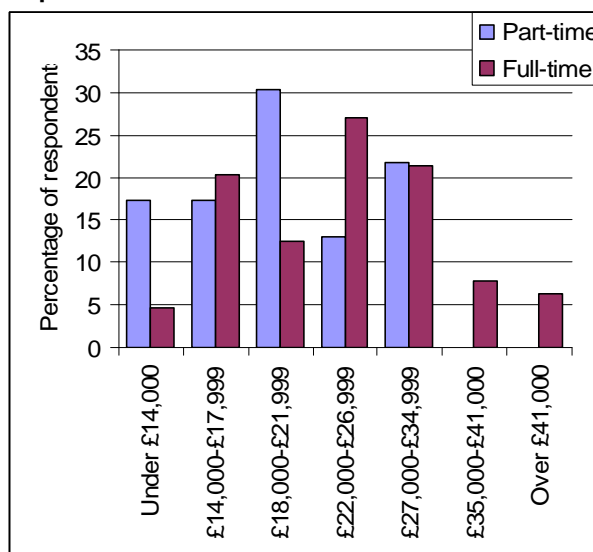


Figure 3 Annual salary (full-time equivalent) of respondents

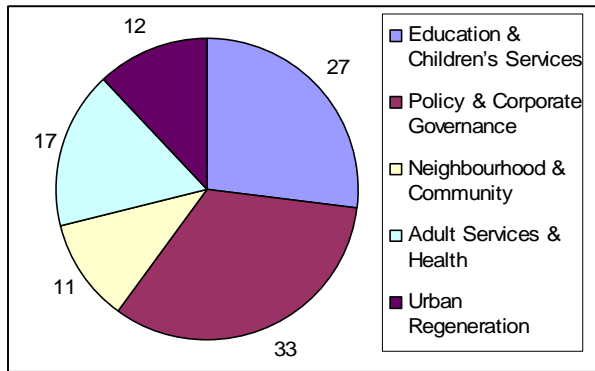


⁶ Source: Equality Scrutiny Panel: Employment Indicators and Trends (November 2004)

⁷ Source: Equality Scrutiny Panel: Employment Indicators and Trends (November 2004)

⁸ Except those in schools.

Figure 4 Distribution of respondents across Sandwell MBC service areas



Although our respondents are not fully representative of Sandwell MBC's female workforce⁹, they include a good representation of the groups we were especially keen to include in the research: mature women in well-established careers within the local authority; women aged 35-44, in mid-career, both with and without children; and younger women potentially at the outset of a career in public sector employment.

Women's experiences of working at Sandwell MBC

Attitudes to paid work

The large majority of women, who are in jobs which are, or could be, part of a career, value their employment highly. For them, it is an important source of satisfaction and income security, and provides a context for enacting their personal values. Women in the focus groups told us that:

- They are committed to their work because it serves local communities, improving the lives and circumstances of local people
- Paid work represents important 'personal' time; they have autonomy to make decisions about how to deliver their work, and can enjoy the stimulation of working with colleagues to achieve a goal
- A meaningful working life, in which they enjoy what they do, and in some cases can leave 'a legacy', is important to them.

⁹ It has not been possible to contextualise fully the e-survey data, as data for the whole workforce at Sandwell MBC was not available in an appropriate format.

We're here to do a job for the people of Sandwell. I'm not particularly interested in whether that gives us £10 an hour or £5 an hour or £200.
(aged 45-59)

I started as an assistant and worked my way up as the manager of that section, so for me it is around the whole public service ethos and the value you bring to your job.
(aged 25-34)

The real motivator for me is that I do see the results - that I make a difference. It may well be a finger in the dyke job – and, you know, later on there will be more issues - but for that period of time, you do see a difference.
(aged 35-44)

For these women, being 'work-oriented' does not preclude being committed to family or having interests outside work. These other commitments stand alongside work, and are of equal importance. Women in this study described making enormous efforts to ensure that neither work nor 'life' was compromised. This is not always achieved, but it is not necessarily productivity at work which suffers; home life and their own health may bear the brunt of competing demands.

The commitment they make to their work is also suggested by the hours they work. A high proportion of respondents to our e-survey are contracted to work full time hours (88%) while at the same time a substantial minority (20%) report having unpaid caring responsibilities which occupy up to 19 hours a week.

Part-time workers in our survey, as shown in Figure 3 above, were much more concentrated in the lower paid grades of employment than were full-time employees. Well over half of full-time respondents earned £22,000 per annum or above, whereas only about a third of part-time respondents were earning at this (full-time equivalent) level. No respondents in the part-time group were among the most highly paid grades.

How women manage their work-life balance varies according to their age, personal circumstances and stage in life. While at times they may alter the level or amount of their input to paid employment to cope with other demands, they emphasised that they remain committed to work outside the home.

The life course: motherhood

For those with children, their age and circumstances at the time of the birth of their first child had affected their attitudes to paid employment. Some women who first became mothers in their late 30s said they had tried to reduce the demands of paid employment to fulfil their new family role. Some of these women were satisfied with what they had already achieved at work, and felt able to 'ease off' in a way which would not have been possible in their twenties.

Before the little one I was very focused. Clear goals of where I wanted to go. I didn't have her until I was 37, quite late really, that motivation that was there, I don't know where it's gone. I get great pleasure out of helping others, I do career development as part of my job, and I love it.
(aged 35-44)

I don't want my daughter to be picked up by a childminder every day. I want to do it, and that's really important to me, because I had her quite late.
(aged 35-44)

Other women of a similar age, but who had their children when younger, still felt they had more to achieve at work.

My children are big now and I'm at the stage where I want to do training now. (aged 35-44)

The birth of a second child was a key moment for some women, and this was when many had decided to reduce their working hours. Most emphasised that this did not involve a reduction in the value they attached to their employment, or their commitment to it.

After having a second child I thought, there is more to life than work, I'm going to reduce my hours. Those (are) kind of key points in your life when you begin to make those decisions. But then when you're back at work - you're still bringing work home.
(aged 25-34)

Some women who had reduced their working hours and input regretted the loss of status at work this entailed:

I was pregnant for the second time and it was, it was getting stressful, so I chose to move. Now, looking back, (...) I made a big mistake, because when I moved, I was moved in with a manager who then started to treat me like an admin person.
(aged 35-44)

Work-family tensions

Many mothers described the pressure and guilt they felt trying to sustain family activities and fulfil

work commitments which satisfied their need for mental stimulation and fulfilment.

If I'm out monitoring, I'm there at 7.00. I know my children are feeling it, my daughter especially. But you then try to reward them, because I've worked longer hours. But I need that job, for me, because I know they're going to grow up and find their own way.
(aged 35-44)

Women commonly described complex timetables designed to meet both sets of commitments. Their arrangements were finely tuned, and relied on stable working arrangements:

When the meetings are overrun, and you're looking at 5.30pm and going into 5.45pm - when you know you have to be at home to pick up the children, but you feel you can't leave because there is somebody there at the top level talking, and you just can't get up and say, 'Actually we were supposed to finish at 5.00. I'm really sorry, I have commitments, I've got to go.' So you're frantically texting.
(aged 25-34)

Women described how family commitments meant not just 'being there', but also holding in their head plans and household related tasks whilst at work:

You're thinking about the washing that you've put out, preparing tea etc, but my husband will just go to work and he's just at work.
(aged 35-44)

Becoming the main earner

Changes in their family/personal lives had reinforced some women's commitment to their career:

I'm lucky because when we had our first child my husband had just been made redundant - so he made the choice, and said, 'You go back to work, and I'll look after our son.'
(aged 35-44)

It was only a couple of months after my husband died, but I knew if I did get the job it would be good for me and my self esteem and good confidence for the children as well, you know if mum can do this and get over this.
(aged 35-44)

I've got one of each, a son and a daughter. I have to be a different role model for each one, and I want them to be professionals. If you look at some pockets of this borough, you've got generations and generations that sit in the house unemployed - I don't want that for my children.
(aged 35-44)

Caring for older relatives

In addition to their paid jobs, 20% of the e-survey respondents had unpaid caring responsibilities for an old, frail or disabled relative or friend. A few

women in the older age groups were providing more than 20 hours of unpaid care each week. These commitments affected them for varying lengths of time, and in some cases had arisen without warning. Such unpaid caring is a common experience of employees: the 2001 Census showed that 15% of all employed women living in Sandwell were carers.

I care for my elderly mother - I get up at 6.30, leave at 7.30 for work until 5.30. Go and cook mum's tea, do the housework- then I've got to take her washing home. I get home at 9 o'clock at night, and I've got to put the washing machine on - and I am doing that four days a week (aged 45-59)

Retirement

For women aged 45+ their pension entitlement was an added motivation to advance their career.

At some point I can presume that's that - I can bank my pension, knowing that I'm going to be OK. I'm not going to impact on the children in any way, like not having enough money for them to go to university. (aged 45-49)

Women who took part in the focus groups indicated that their efforts to remain 'work orientated' across the different stages and demands of family life had influenced their choice of employment in the local authority sector.

Employer of choice

The features they emphasised, in describing what made the local authority their 'employer of choice', included its 'family-friendly' policies, the job security they felt they had, and the training opportunities they were offered.

Women in all our focus groups described the authority as 'family-friendly'. In many cases it was what had attracted them to apply for their jobs, even before they had had their first child. To them, 'family friendly' meant an employer that allowed them to alter their contracted hours and to control their daily starting and finishing times. 30% of the e-survey respondents had altered their contracted hours during their service with Sandwell MBC, and over 60% had used or were using the flexi time system.

Managerial styles were identified as crucial for the effective implementation of these policies.

The thing I love is the fact that my manager trusts me to get the work done. I only do 18.5 hours, regardless of what days, regardless if it's working from home. As long as the work's done, I feel totally trusted. (aged 35-44)

A small number of women had managers who were less trusting and who 'policed' flexible working arrangements. This seemed to occur most in service areas with other formal rules, such as the Finance department.

For some women with family commitments, the ability to work flexibly outweighed pay considerations when they compared Sandwell MBC with other local employers.

If I didn't have children, I wouldn't work for Sandwell Council. I'm here because I can do job share. I'm a qualified associate, so I know I could get quite a decent increase on salary and package if I just went into Birmingham. But they're still quite old fashioned in the private sector. There's no way they would let me work part time. (aged 35-44)

Some women pointed out that the local authority was the major local employer in their vocational field. Women working in these areas (children's services, education, and library services) expressed satisfaction that they were at the forefront of service delivery, addressing new and changing agendas.

I wanted to be part of the social quality change and the bigger agenda that was going on nationally within Childcare and Early Years services. It's something you can really get your teeth into. (aged 25-34)

Some younger women welcomed the increasing emphasis on performance and performance monitoring, as it allowed them to demonstrate their achievements. This was not a common view among women aged over 45 with long service with Sandwell MBC. With less to prove, perhaps, these women felt some targets were superficial, or did not merit the effort involved in achieving them.

The emphasis is very much on money and targets and figures. I sometimes feel a little bit resentful that the team don't get the kudos that they deserve. (aged 45-59)

Some felt their attempts to innovate and make improvements went unrecognised by senior management, who were 'not in touch' with service delivery 'on the ground'.

Training and staff development

Women considered that the training opportunities offered by Sandwell MBC were extremely good. This had been a factor in some women's decisions to apply for employment with the authority. Women generally felt that they could

easily access information about training programmes. The overwhelming majority of women in the e-survey (95%) had received some training during their time at the authority. 55% said they believed this training had enabled them to progress at work. This was particularly true of women working at the higher salary bands.

They're very good on self development, I've had loads of support from my managers within the council. I've moved around several times, but all managers have been really supportive on training courses and self development. (aged 25-34)

The council sponsored me to take my degree; it took 5 years to complete part-time. Sandwell have been very committed and supported me throughout that, and I was getting paid for the day release as well to go to university. (aged 25-34)

The nicer thing about Sandwell is because it's smaller, you tend to find out a lot more information much more quickly, and you get more training opportunities as well. (aged 25-34)

Pay

Women working part-time (less than 37 hours per week) felt they were well paid relative to other local labour market rates for part time work. Many women (not only those approaching retirement) took a longer term view of pay, highlighting the benefits of the final salary pension scheme.

As we demonstrated in the *Gender Profile of Sandwell's Local Labour Market* (Buckner et al 2004:35) pay in Sandwell is well below the average at regional and national levels. In Sandwell, the average annual salary of women working full-time was just £16,500, compared with £19,700 for women across England¹⁰.

Women responding to the e-survey had experienced some variation in their FTE salaries. Women aged 35-44 were more likely to have experienced a variation in their FTE salary than other age groups.

Approaches to career

Women of all ages emphasised the importance of taking personal responsibility for advancing their careers. This could involve a high degree of personal effort, and some pay sacrifices.

I don't think you can always rely on the organisation or the culture or the hierarchy or the set up of the team or section you're working on.

You have to give yourself some responsibility to actually put the effort in, whether it's doing jobs on a high grade and accepting a lower salary, whatever. (aged 35-44)

I asked them if I could borrow their books, and I studied what the different benefits were [at home] - so when the next job became available, I went for the interview and I got the job. (aged 35-44)

Some women feared they might get to the end of their career and feel that they had 'just worked' rather than done something they really wanted to do. Working with the same colleagues for a long period of time could become a 'comfort zone'; others were unsure if they could return to study in order to move on.

If I don't get this qualification I am never going to be able to move from where I am - so I shall leave local government, after probably 30 years by the time I retire, and won't have achieved a great deal, but it's my own fault. (aged 45-59)

You get to a point in life, probably is like mid 30's, early 40's - you've got 20 years left, but you want to get to the end of those 20 years thinking that I've done something that I've really wanted to do. (aged 35-44)

Women described four key factors which were important to them when they were considering their next upward career move:

- Intensity / volume of work
- Long hours of work
- Qualification requirements
- Organisational culture and conduct of staff at senior levels within the organisation

Here they drew on their observations of how managers in the tier above them behaved, and on their experiences of their current workload / pace of work and its fit with the rest of life.

Intensity of work

Intensity of work usually meant increased workloads to meet performance targets, and was often exacerbated by tight staffing, constrained resources or organisational restructuring. Women in middle management positions described their 'balancing act' - undertaking strategic planning, delivering on operational targets and managing a team of people. Several felt frustrated that they lacked the time needed to improve the dynamics and effectiveness of their team, and spent much of their time 'fire fighting'.

¹⁰ Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2005, ONS Crown Copyright reserved

This constant pressure on them at work left them feeling drained. Those with families stressed the negative impact:

I work very well at a high stress level, but that's not good, obviously, for a family life. So that commute [home] actually enables me to wind down and get into family mode. Because there's only myself and my daughter, so there's nobody else there to take a backlash. (aged 25-34)

Some women had decided to reduce their level of responsibility to allow them to function effectively at work, albeit in a job which challenged them less and was a backward step in career terms.

I realised that the pace I was operating at before my child was a pace I couldn't keep up with a baby. She's 3 now, but I've taken that choice to stand back. I know I felt grateful when my boss said that I could go job share. (aged 35-44)

Other women had found reducing their hours actually increased the pressure they felt at work - although they acknowledged they now worked more efficiently.

I know when I dropped my hours I shocked myself. I look back and think, 'What did I do before? I do the same now, and I don't work as long.' (aged 25-34)

You actually have got to have your head down constantly and be getting on with it - and you'll look around, and there's people in the office who are there full time who can afford to go off and have tea breaks - so that's the downside of working part time. (aged 25-34)

Working in this way, up against the clock, reduced the women's enjoyment of being at work and limited the time they could spend on creative thinking and communication with colleagues.

More senior women, in the older age group, testified to the high intensity of work at their level, which produced situations where - as well as managing and planning delivery - some had also stepped in to cover front-line counters to deal with staff shortages.

Many women indicated that when considering an upward career move, they weighed up the likely impact of the anticipated workload on other parts of their lives and made a decision about whether they could 'cope'. They tried to gauge whether the workload could be contained within the designated working hours, and how far it would spill over into non-work time:

If I was to say to my manager, 'I've taken work home', I think he would respond by saying, 'Well, that's quite normal,' because he's always saying how he's 'up to here' with things, that things never stop. And I know he feels under pressure and he's got a huge workload. (aged 25-34)

Women working part time hours were particularly affected by the size of the workload. They often felt no action was taken to align workloads with shorter hours, and that deadlines for work are set on the assumption that everyone works full-time, leaving part-time employees having to catch up in their non-work time:

I got an e-mail two days before I was going on holiday about a report, asking 'Can I have it in two days?' I got it done, but I'm actually supposed to work 5 hours a day and I had to work longer hours to get it completed. They don't take into consideration if you're part time. (aged 25-34)

Women put in this position felt very reluctant to refuse a senior person's request because of the damage they felt it could do to their career.

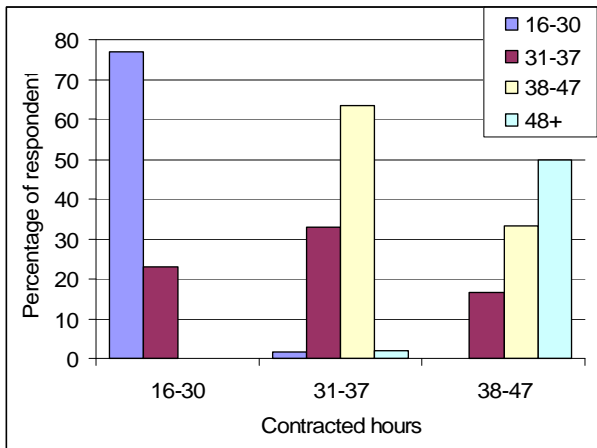
I don't like to say no - perhaps that's my fault. But then I don't want it to hinder me. Because they might think - she's part time, she can't deliver what she's supposed to deliver. (aged 25-34)

Long Hours

As well as determining the expected intensity of work, the volume of work also influenced the hours required to get the job finished. The 'long hours' culture was another key factor in women's choices about whether to advance their careers.

In another recent report, the TUC has shown (in *Working Time in the Public Sector*) that for the most recent year, summer 2004/05, the percentage of public sector employees working unpaid overtime was 25% - around 300,000 women. The average number of extra hours worked each week was 7.7 hours. 65% of employees working unpaid overtime were women, in line with the share of women in the public sector workforce as a whole (TUC 2006). Our e-survey showed that 60% of women respondents in Sandwell MBC were working more than their contracted hours (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Comparison of actual and contracted hours worked in an 'average' week'



Source: E-survey of Female Employees in Sandwell MBC

Women working part-time (16-30 hours each week) were the most likely to be working their contracted hours (77%). Of the women contracted to work 31-37 hours, 65% work said they worked 38 hours or more each week. For women contracted to work 38-47 hours each week, 50% were working 48 or more hours - although in contrast 17% of this group reported that they were working fewer than their contracted hours each week.

Why are women currently working these long hours? Among the women aged 25-34 with children, many described putting in longer hours as a way of proving their commitment to their managers, especially when employed part-time.

I do sometimes think that we [women] have to over compensate. I feel (this) personally sometimes - because I've got children - and that if I'm not staying late when there's a major deadline to hit, I do have feelings of guilt, and this isn't fair.
(aged 25-34)

It's almost like you're not a proper planner, you're only part time. And it's one of the reasons why I've never gone part time, because you'd worry that once you go part time, it's very difficult then to come back full time and get that respect from your colleagues.
(aged 25-34)

Many senior women felt responsible, as managers, for shielding the more junior women in their team from long hours, often at the expense of their own work life balance.

There was widespread agreement, across all age groups, that the more senior you become, the longer your hours are. Women described an informal understanding that, above a certain grade, people were 'paid to do the job rather than

paid to do the certain hours'. This encouraged an attitude that senior jobs cannot be done part-time.

This attitude means in practice that work-life balance and family-friendly policies stop operating above a certain level. Evidence from the e-survey shows that while over 70% women aged 35-44 had used Sandwell MBC's work-life balance policies, among those earning £35,000 and above per annum, fewer than 40% had done so.

Consequently, some women have 'ruled out' their chances of further progression:

What I do find that stifles me is that, time and time again, you come up against barriers - and barriers specifically around the fact that you're a parent. If you're not prepared to work full-time, it's, like, well, forget you. There's nothing there for you at a higher level, unless you want to work full-time.
(aged 35-44)

Women were fearful of losing the flexibility in choosing their hours that they currently enjoyed if they were successful in getting a more senior position.

I would worry that if I progressed to a senior level I couldn't come in at 9.30, I'd have to be there at 9.00 on the dot every day, and that would obviously affect my personal life and how I could sort that out.
(aged 35-44)

They felt that part of the deal in accepting a senior job was agreeing to sign up to any hours, without dissent. In other words, that there was no longer any flexibility; work would always come first. In describing an experience of deputising for her manager, one woman described this unspoken agreement as 'intimidating':

There's almost like a feeling when you go over that [grade]... you can't just get up and say actually we were supposed to finish at 5.00 and I have commitments I have got to go As much as work is my life and my passion, could I possibly commit to that? Or would I actually want to? Is it worth it?
(aged 35-44 with children)

I see a lot of heads of service who are working 12 hours every day. I mean, do you want that kind of life? I think you've got to choose. And it's so unfair, because some people may want to do that level of responsibility, but they can't commit all those hours.
(aged 25-34)

On another practical note, women who were already working a large amount of unpaid overtime highlighted the effort and time needed to apply for new jobs. Longer hours at work mean

personal time is precious, and vacancies which are not easily accessible and straightforward to apply for are rejected.

I did actually make enquiries through personnel - maybe I should have pushed a bit more. You know how it is, and you're a busy person. (aged 45-59)

Finding time to prepare for the next jump up was a significant barrier for many younger women. The effort and process involved in acquiring the qualifications and skills needed to work at the next level was another important factor in women's decisions about progression.

Qualification requirements

As already mentioned, women of all ages were very positive about the type and amount of training supported by Sandwell MBC. They noted that having a degree was an essential criterion in many job descriptions for senior positions in the local government sector.

We're facing a new experience. People used to know you're really good and you could do the job. Whereas now it is about getting degrees. (aged 35-44)

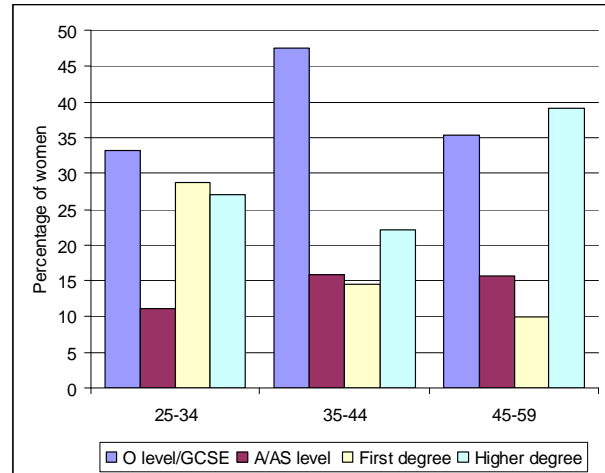
Non-graduates sometimes felt putting a degree qualification above relevant experience was unfair and inappropriate.

I see some jobs advertised [internally], and I read the job description, and think, 'I can do this, I've done all this, I've got experience and expertise in these fields.' But I'm instantly not short-listed, because I don't meet the qualifications criteria. (aged 25-34)

I haven't got a degree, I've got 16 years experience in the childcare sector and the early years sector - and I still think now, every time I have an appraisal, it's pushed. You need to do a degree, you're not going to get any further unless you do a degree - and I find that quite unfair. (aged 25-34)

Our e-survey data show that many older and more senior women in our sample do have higher degrees. However there are fewer graduates among the 35-44 year old group. Here, only a third of respondents had a degree or higher qualification, although in the 25-34 year old group about half of women were graduates. This is likely to reflect both younger women's greater access to higher education, and the tendency for highly qualified women to remain in paid employment when raising children (EOC 2005b).

Figure 6 Highest qualifications achieved by age



Source: E-survey of Female Employees in Sandwell MBC

Some women found the requirement for degree level qualifications in higher level jobs demotivating:

It can knock confidence when you know you could do the job, but that without a degree certificate you will be rejected at the first hurdle. (aged 35-44)

Others saw having a degree as a 'cultural' requirement, needed in order to fit in with colleagues working at a certain level or field.

It was perceptions, people think, 'Well, if she's got a degree, she must be good.' I am exactly the same person as before, just [different] on paper. There is this little club, like the old boys' network, there's a degree network, and that was the reason I did it. And it opened doors. (aged 35-44)

I was the only training officer who wasn't qualified. My background is in [a different area], so I had that particular qualification. All the training officers were qualified, and they were real snobby about the fact that they'd got this degree. So, if you know the rules of the game you can play any game, and I believe that about educational attainment as well. (aged 35-44)

For many women without a degree, the decision to progress involved making the case for training support, and then sustaining a long period of study alongside work. Women tended to see managers as the gatekeepers to this opportunity and to getting study leave and course fees paid.

Women in our focus groups also noted how hard it could be to study while working and caring for children or other dependants. Their experiences demonstrate the high level of commitment needed, and the personal sacrifice many had made to achieve their goal.

I went to university for six years at night to get to the grade that I am now. (aged 35-44)

Many women described how they struggled on, with detrimental effects on their health, work performance and family relationships. The four most important factors helping women with children or other caring responsibilities to study were: managerial support; family support; working hours; and study leave/release.

They would only do [the advanced course] one day a fortnight, but my manager said 'I can't afford you out of the office one day a fortnight at this particular time, go and find something else'. Having young children, you can't go and find something else, because I don't have enough hours in the day as it is. (aged 35-44)

I'm responsible for my in-laws, my parents, my aunt's ill etc, all that on top of [studying]. You really do at times need your manager to actually say, 'Here, have a few minutes', or 'We'll take this off you'. But because they've got pressure as well, it's not that simple. (aged 35-44)

I thought, 'Oh my god, you've got a small child, going to have to do a degree [as part of a new job]. But I've got great family support at home, and my manager totally supported me throughout, and it was a great experience for me to work at that kind of strategic level. (aged 25-34)

Despite having release from work for the afternoon - it was an afternoon and an evening course - but I do an awful lot of evening work in my job, and the authority didn't particularly want to intervene. So by the time I'd got to the end of that 12 month period, I was absolutely exhausted. (aged 35-44)

The final year [of my degree] was the hardest, because any leave I took was to study. So I never had any time for myself or for my family. I became so run down because I was only getting 3-4 hours sleep each night that I just kind of collapsed, and the doctor said, 'Well, you're going to have some time off now'. (aged 25-34)

Women in the older age group working at more senior levels did not share younger women's concerns about the 'degree bar'. However it was no easier for them to fit study in with work commitments. Their difficulty arose from the intensity of their workloads, which left them too tired to study after work, or presented more pressing priorities, so that they postponed training organised in work time. Some women had tried to deal with the pressures of the working week by choosing distance learning courses which they

hoped would fit into spare time at the weekend. But distance learning presented its own challenge; maintaining momentum and interest in the study.

I am still studying for my final professional qualification as we speak, which is ridiculous. And I am finding, in my present job, I get home exhausted because it's very pressurised, and because I have like nearly an hour's drive backwards and forwards each day. (aged 45-59)

The culture surrounding senior positions, and the behaviour of senior post holders, was a further important factor making some women doubtful whether they could - or wanted to - join this group.

Organisational culture

Women talked about a culture which 'favoured men'. The women did not all experience this culture in the same way. However most felt it placed them at a disadvantage, and meant 'women have to work harder than men to get on'.

Some described an 'instant effect of being a male,' which opened access to knowledge and improved men's ability to do well and get noticed.

If you're a new [male] employee... you got almost this kind of instant access to this club - and you got this mentoring and all this background information. So you knew where things were and how things ticked. But I think it's taken me all this time to settle into [the department]. (aged 35-44)

Younger women tended to see higher level culture as bound by rank and notions of seniority. They felt their age put them at a double disadvantage:

I've covered meetings at a strategic level in the past and have gone into the meeting and actually been quite intimidated, not just by the men, but there at that level. I have actually been virtually ignored or not acknowledged at all. (aged 25-34)

Black women spoke of a 'concrete ceiling' - they could not even look up and see successful black women operating at the highest levels of the authority. They were aware that Sandwell MBC had tried to address this with targeted management training initiatives, but were disappointed by a lack of results.

In my profession there are a lot of female role models, but for me in Sandwell at a senior level there are no female black role models - and that holds me back into thinking, 'Should I make that

move or no?' Because it can be quite intimidating [being a sole black female]. (aged 25-34)

Women working in service areas where men predominated described incidences when they had felt patronised by male colleagues who had their own criteria for judging and valuing members of the team.

It's key for me, being valued. A lot (...) in Sandwell is based on how long you've been there, and if you are a man, particularly, how many blokes you've got under you. (aged 45-59)

I manage processes and large budgets. I have quality technical skills, but that's not as important as managing a few blokes sat in the bars. (aged 45-59)

Women with long service suggested this culture arose from the static nature of the workforce, which allowed men who had worked for Sandwell MBC since leaving school at the age of 15 to rise 'inexorably' to senior positions.

I'm OK if I keep my blinkers on. But when I look round and see the incompetence - mainly men who've been here since 1900 on huge salaries with no output. There's no way they would survive outside the sector. (aged 34-44)

Some women questioned whether they wanted to join the 'male' culture they saw in more senior positions:

Fair play, they [senior managers] all do a sound job, but at the end of the day, when you walk into that situation you think, 'Actually, do I want to be here?' (aged 25-34)

I think as a female, when you get to that level ... you take on that persona and then you do tend to then manage in a male style. (aged 35-44)

Support for career development

The importance of managerial support for women's career development has already been mentioned. The women reported various ways their managers had helped them. These included: exposing them to new experiences / networks; building their confidence; creating opportunities which could fit with childcare; and supporting training related to the next job level.

My current manager is very anxious that all the managers underneath her have an opportunity to have a go at something different, and my role has changed quite drastically under her leadership. (aged 35-44)

She raised my level of self esteem and self belief to enable me to move on ...and I perhaps wouldn't have got there this quickly without her backing. (aged 35-44)

I've had fantastic support from my manager; my training was paid by the council. (aged 35-44)

Other relationships which assisted women to progress included mentors external to Sandwell MBC (including professional contacts and colleagues working for different organisations) who shared information and intelligence about vacancies:

I had a fantastic mentor at the university who had this broad understanding of the profession as a whole, not just Sandwell. Because he was external to the organisation, it really helped me. (aged 25-34)

There is a user group for this particular insurance database with other companies. I have met a lot of people from other authorities or other companies who use the same thing, and it can be useful, and it could be an opening for the future if I wanted it to be. (aged 35-44)

Training opportunities

As discussed earlier in the report, women were positive about their ability to access training opportunities and the level of financial support that was available to help them progress their careers.

Women in their 20s and 30s said they had benefited from secondment opportunities in particular. These 'sideways' moves allowed them to build their skills and knowledge in preparation for a career step up, and to profitably mark time waiting for senior vacancies to arise. These secondments provided some of the same benefits as managerial support: exposure to new areas; new challenges and opportunities to build skills; enhanced confidence; create alternative career paths.

Even if you feel that you can't apply for jobs because you haven't got the qualifications or the appropriate experience, you can apply for a sideways move. (aged 35-44)

I've done the secondment now, and I know that if I can move somewhere and be a manager in an area which I didn't know anything about, then I can do anything, so that's really helped me. (aged 35-44)

[My manager] wanted me back [from my secondment], but that was when I got itchy feet and decided that I didn't want to go back to that job, I wanted to go into the IT field. (aged 35-44)

Some women felt their careers had benefited from personal development training. It had given them skills 'to sell' themselves more effectively, and to know their own worth.

I did the assertiveness course years ago - and I suddenly realised that it's OK to say no. It gave me that confidence to choose things and to be me. (aged 35-44)

I did the presentation skills, but about the image that you present. I learned way back then that there's a certain image under the cultural bias that's acceptable, but when you know the rules of the game, you can play. (aged 35-44)

These women were in contrast to those who lacked self-belief and the confidence to try to negotiate the terms and conditions of new positions that they had been offered:

The role that I took on was being performed by a male officer. I was just happy to move, even though he was far more senior than me and I've taken on the same role and more, and I haven't challenged it. (aged 35-44)

Conclusion

This study has shown that, irrespective of family situation or age, many women working within Sandwell MBC are highly committed to their jobs, enthusiastic about training and development, and aspire to have successful careers.

They recognise and value the investment the local authority has made in making training available to them, although most also view their own career development as a personal responsibility.

The women in this study appreciate the policies Sandwell MBC has put in place to support its employees in achieving a good work-life balance, and few reported significant problems with their managers in implementing these.

Nevertheless, many women noted that there is an organisational culture at Sandwell MBC which, in their view, can disadvantage them in achieving the career success they would like. They often

struggle to enact their combined work and personal commitments, and some fear they may pay a high price for this in terms of their health and wellbeing.

Many women in our study were working hours well beyond those they were contracted to deliver, and there was a strong feeling that this was expected in higher level jobs. This meant that some women, part-time employees especially, felt deterred from applying for senior level positions, either because they felt they were only available full-time, or because they felt extra hours, beyond contract, would be routinely expected in these roles.

If experienced and committed women feel unable to apply for senior jobs within their capability, it is likely that Sandwell MBC is not getting the best it could from its female workforce, and that some women are employed in the local authority in positions below their true potential.

The *Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets* research programme has already uncovered other important evidence of this problem, which is a key feature of part-time employment in the UK (Grant et al 2005, Darton and Hurrell 2005). It is now beginning to be widely recognised (Kingsmill 2001, EOC 2005a) that organisations wishing to make good use of their investments in human capital must do more to create more flexible and more part-time jobs at senior levels.

For many women in our study, Sandwell MBC is now their local 'employer of choice', and we were struck by the commitment and enthusiasm of those who took part in our discussion groups. This suggests that many of the steps the local authority has already taken to modernise its employment practices, particularly in relation to workforce training and development and to work-life balance, have paid off.

The future challenge will be to retain this committed workforce in the context of a shrinking working age population, and expected job growth in other parts of the economy (LSC 2005). We turn in conclusion to some recommendations which may assist Sandwell MBC in rising to this future challenge.

Recommendations

1. Implement Sandwell MBC's work-life balance policies at all levels, in particular encouraging part-time and flexible working arrangements in senior roles.
2. Implement *Guidelines for managers on helping employees to achieve work-life balance*, to ensure the workloads and duties of employees are adjusted following an agreed request to work reduced hours, and followed up with regular reviews.
3. Raise awareness among managers of Sandwell MBC's *Childcare Policy*, particularly with regard to the timing of meetings involving employees with parental responsibilities. Champion this approach at senior executive level.
4. Improve the analysis and accessibility of the data held by the local authority's human resources department relating to part time employees. Track women's and men's career progress, and make this data available to employees.
5. Provide further support for ethnic minority women employees:
 - a. Extend managerial training programmes, tracking each cohort's progress over time.
 - b. Build links to external networks of ethnic minority women to provide role models and mentors.
6. Provide a tailored support package for those undertaking long-term study, taking into account the different patterns of learning which those with caring responsibilities may want to adopt
7. Develop further opportunities for personal development training, e.g. assertiveness and presentation skills training, and target women, especially those from ethnic minority groups, in recruiting to these.
8. Review the inclusion of a degree level qualification as an essential criterion in job descriptions, and explore ways of valuing a job applicant's relevant experience.
9. Systematically review women's new skills and experience on the conclusion of a secondment. Explore ways of rewarding these achievements appropriately.

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Appendix 1 Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets

The *Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets* project was funded, between September 2003 and August 2006, by a core European Social Fund grant to Professor Sue Yeandle and her research team at the *Centre for Social Inclusion*, Sheffield Hallam University. The award was made from within ESF Policy Field 5 Measure 2, 'Gender and Discrimination in Employment'. The grant was supplemented with additional funds and resources provided by a range of partner agencies, notably the Equal Opportunities Commission, the TUC, and 12 English local authorities.

The GELLM project output comprises:

- new statistical analysis of district-level labour market data, led by Dr Lisa Buckner, producing separate **Gender Profiles** of the local labour markets of each of the participating local authorities (Buckner, Tang and Yeandle 2004, 2005,2006) - available from the local authorities concerned and at www.shu.ac.uk/research/csi
- 6 **Local Research Studies**, each involving between three and six of the project's local authority partners. Locality and Synthesis reports of these studies, published spring-summer 2006 are available at www.shu.ac.uk/research/csi. Details of other publications and presentations relating to the GELLM programme are also posted on this website.
 1. *Working below potential: women and part-time work*, led by Dr Linda Grant and part-funded by the EOC (first published by the EOC in 2005)
 2. *Connecting women with the labour market*, led by Dr Linda Grant
 3. *Ethnic minority women and access to the labour market*, led by Bernadette Stiell
 4. *Women's career development in the local authority sector in England* led by Dr Cinnamon Bennett
 5. *Addressing women's poverty: local labour market initiatives* led by Karen Escott
 6. *Local challenges in meeting demand for domiciliary care* led from autumn 2005 by Prof. Sue Yeandle (and prior to this by Anu Suokas).

The GELLM Team

Led by Professor Sue Yeandle, the members of the GELLM research team at the *Centre for Social Inclusion* are: Dr Cinnamon Bennett, Dr Lisa Buckner, Ian Chesters (administrator), Karen Escott, Dr Linda Grant, Christopher Price, Lucy Shipton, Bernadette Stiell, Anu Suokas (until autumn 2005), and Dr Ning Tang. The team is grateful to Dr Pamela Fisher for her contribution to the project in 2004, and for the continuing advice and support of Dr Chris Gardiner.

The GELLM Partnership

The national partners supporting the GELLM project have been the Equal Opportunities Commission and the TUC. The project's 12 local authority partners are: Birmingham City Council, the London Borough of Camden, East Staffordshire Borough Council, Leicester City Council, Newcastle City Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Somerset County Council, the London Borough of Southwark, Thurrock Council, Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council, Wakefield Metropolitan District Council and West Sussex County Council. The North East Coalition of Employers has also provided financial resources via Newcastle City Council. The team is grateful for the support of these agencies, without which the project could not have been developed. The GELLM project engaged Professor Damian Grimshaw, Professor Ed Fieldhouse (both of Manchester University) and Professor Irene Hardill (Nottingham Trent University), as external academic advisers to the project team, and thanks them for their valuable advice and support.

Appendix 2 Research Methods

This study focused on women with educational qualifications and already in jobs with career development potential. It therefore identified women via the grading structure (rather than the departmental structure) of the local authority. The study methods involved:

- **Documentary analysis** of the local authority context and of local authority HR data, to map women's and men's employment within the authority. This identified *strategies and initiatives* the authority had already launched to support women employees in their career development, the *service areas/departments* and *organisational structures* in which women and men were working, the *level* at which they were employed, their *working time* patterns, records of *leave* for family, caring (etc.) purposes, and any records relating to *training* and *promotion*.
- Distribution of an **e-questionnaire** to women employees to gather information on *age, ethnicity, disability, level of education, training, working hours, pay, caring/childcare responsibilities, use of flexible employment policies*, and to secure agreement to participate in the focus groups. A link to the e-survey was sent in an email to all employees, male and female, with direct access to Groupwise (the internal email system). Only data relating to female respondents has been analysed for this report. Data from male respondents has been made available to Sandwell MBC.
- **Focus group discussions** were held with women employees identified via the e-questionnaire. The focus groups provided the main evidence about women's experiences, values, aspirations, and needs and about barriers to their career progression. Women of different ages were selected and grouped together to capture the experience and attitudes of women at different stages in their careers:
 - Women in more senior positions, aged approximately 45-59, including some women who have been at the top of their grade for a number of years.
 - Women in the 24-34 age group.
 - Women aged 35-44 with and without children.With each group we explored how far their working lives were meeting their current expectations, and the extent to which their views were common to the group.
- **Semi-structured interviews** (face to face and by telephone) with senior managers and HR professionals. These interviews explored how far the authority has strategies in place for supporting women employees in the development of their careers.

Data analysis

The analysis of the e-survey data focused on women's experiences of working time (both contractual and actual working hours), pay (salary scale and change of pay scale), training (training opportunities and training to promotion), caring/childcare responsibilities and their use of flexible employment policies in relation to age, qualification level and service area.

Qualitative data collected from the interviews and focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed observing data protection regulations. The research questions provided a basis for coding the interview data. The questions to senior managers and HR professionals covered perceptions of corporate commitment and actions to promote gender equality, changes in policy emphasis over time, and the organisational challenges still to overcome. The focus group discussions explored attitudes to job and sector (e.g. features of 'employer of choices'), promotion and advancement in the authority (e.g. the main concerns in developing a career), training and qualifications (e.g. perception of the authority's provision of training opportunities) and 'blue sky' thinking questions on women's future support needs in their career development.