

# Women's Career Development in Leicester City Council

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# Foreword

Leicester City Council 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 Council has built on the findings of its Employee Survey 2004, and learned a great deal more about the aspirations and motivations of the women who provide the greater part of the Council's services, yet are still seriously under-represented at senior levels.

The importance to the Council of being an employer of choice cannot be underestimated. A large and complex organisation spending over half a billion pounds a year needs skilled, enthusiastic and competent people to willingly work for it.

It is clear that, at the time of the research, the Council's Cultural Change Programme had not yet fully engaged women employees. The last two years have been a period of great organisational change, and it is vital to the ability of the Council to continue to deliver services to its citizens that this change has not disproportionately affected women.

The Council needs to revisit its Employee Survey in 2007, and ensure that the issues raised by the women surveyed are being addressed, and that women recognise that the Council is addressing them.

The detailed responses validate the Council's approach to a mixed reward package, and emphasise the real value that staff place on genuinely flexible working arrangements and empowerment. There is much more work to be done to ensure that all managers meet the standards of the best managers in trusting their staff to give of their best.

The Council is very grateful, both to the women employees who gave up their time to provide their honest opinions, and to Cinnamon Bennett and Ning Tang from Sheffield Hallam University, who provided women with the chance to air these issues in a confidential and welcoming environment.

**Councillor Roman Scuplak**  
Vice-Chair of Leicester Economic Action Partnership





# Acknowledgements

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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 Leicester City Council. 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 Leicester City Council only. They are drawn from a questionnaire survey and focus group discussions with women employees, interviews with senior managers, and documents supplied by Leicester City Council.

Analysis of the survey showed:

- Extensive evidence of working beyond contracted hours
- A concentration of part-time employees in lower paid jobs
- That over 82% of women earning £27,000-£34,000 p.a. had a degree, compared with 73% on the pay band below.

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'. Women manage their work-life balance differently according to their age, personal circumstances and stage in life.
- Women with family commitments valued the ability to work flexibly which Leicester City Council offers them. This was more important to them than securing the most competitive pay.
- Women aged 35+ thought that Leicester City Council offered very good training opportunities and was effective in making them aware of training opportunities. 92% of survey respondents had received training within the local authority, and 43% 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 and culture in the more senior role on their enjoyment of their work and on aspects of their home lives.

- 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 long evening hours linked to committee time; 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 disproportionate importance.
- Their access to other sources of support - managerial support and family support - were both crucial.

Women who took part in the focus groups spoke of a 'rule bound' organisational culture which they felt aimed to maintain the status quo rather than to embrace change and innovation, particularly in terms of promotion procedures and working arrangements.

Some women reported that they had experienced cultures which 'favoured men'. However, very few felt male colleagues held sexist attitudes, although younger women and those in the more male-dominated areas sometimes felt they were patronised by male colleagues.

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
- 'acting up' and shadowing opportunities

## Introduction

This study is about the career development and progression of women working within Leicester City Council. 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 and a trade union representative; a new survey of all female employees<sup>1</sup>; and follow-up focus groups with women of different ages, employed in different departments.

This report relates to Leicester City Council 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 of Leicester's Local Labour Market* (Buckner et al 2004) provides the district-wide statistical evidence and context for the study.

### Women's career development

Through this study we aimed 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 the 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 Leicester City Council.

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<sup>1</sup> An e-survey was sent to all employees with direct access to the internal email system. Data relating to female respondents to the e-survey has been analysed here. Responses from men are being analysed separately; results will be made available to Leicester City Council.

- 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 of 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 Leicester City Council 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 the *Employment Act 2002* gave some parents the right to request flexible working arrangements, subsequently extended to other groups through the *Work and Families Act 2006*. 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 will establish 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 workforce<sup>2</sup>, 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, the Best Value processes, 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Local Government Workforce in England: Trends and Projections, Employers' Organisation 2004, excludes teachers.

## Women's employment in Leicester

### Leicester's local labour market

As shown in the *Gender Profile of Leicester's Labour Market* (Buckner et al 2004:23), Leicester did not share in the significant employment growth experienced in the wider economy (in the East Midlands and in England as a whole) in the 1990s. The district experienced a 4.6% decrease in the number of full time jobs, offset by a net 29% increase (between 1991 and 2002) in the number of part-time jobs.

Behind these figures, as we showed in the *Gender Profile*, lay important structural changes in the local labour market. These included the loss of 7,000 full-time female jobs in Leicester's manufacturing sector, and an increase of about 6,000 full-time jobs in public administration, education and health (Buckner et al 2004:26). As a result, by 2002 43% of the jobs in Leicester held by women were in the public sector, while the manufacturing sector provided employment locally for only 12% of women. These developments underscore the importance of Leicester City Council as a key source of employment for local women. In 2004/5 women held 51% of all jobs located in Leicester, a total of some 79,000 jobs<sup>3</sup>. The local authority, with a workforce of 17,500<sup>4</sup>, thus provides over 1 in 9 of jobs in the district, and is a very important source of local employment.

### Employment policies at Leicester City Council

Leicester City Council has a well established and proactive approach to equality of opportunity for female employees through its implementation of work-life balance policies, and *Leicester City Council* has conducted several high profile initiatives to support women in Leicester in recent years. Internally, it has targeted women into management through an accredited leadership training programme, and externally has been an active participant and sponsor of *LeicestHERday*, a city-wide annual event held to recognise and celebrate the achievements of local women, which has drawn women's organisations and politicians together to debate how women can be supported to reach their full potential.

The authority has a well-developed range of work-life balance and equal opportunities policies,

<sup>3</sup> Source: Annual Business Inquiry 2004 via NOMIS, ONS, Crown Copyright

<sup>4</sup> Source: Leicester Workforce Profile December 2004

and champions the different needs of its diverse population. The Corporate Equality Strategy 2004 – 2007 sits alongside the Community Cohesion Strategy, developed by the Council in conjunction with Leicester Partnership. It commits the authority to adopting a corporate approach to equalities implementation based on departmental best practice; providing customer care to meet diverse needs; reviewing equality training for staff and implementation of human resources equality procedures and monitoring performance on equality across all its activities.

Leicester City Council, in common with the sector as a whole, has undergone considerable structural reorganisation in the last few years, partly driven by new statutory requirements, but also in the context of changes in its political leadership. While this reorganisation was reported as 'demotivating' by some women in this study, structural safeguards for equality are in place and have continued to function uninterrupted.

### About the study of women's employment at Leicester City Council

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

- A new survey of women employees completed by 321 women<sup>5</sup>
- Data available from Leicester City Council
- Analysis of Leicester City Council policies
- Interviews with 2 managers and 1 trade union representative
- 5 focus groups with 26 women employees

The survey intentionally over-sampled women who had experienced some degree of 'success' in their careers<sup>6</sup>. 37% of all responses were from women from ethnic minorities, somewhat higher than the proportion of ethnic minority staff in Leicester City Council's workforce as a whole (25%)<sup>7</sup>. 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

<sup>5</sup> The e-survey was sent to all employees with direct access to the internal email system.

<sup>6</sup> 56% of women respondents to the e-survey were in salary bands £18,000 and above, where posts had progression opportunities to more senior roles.

<sup>7</sup> Source: Leicester City Council, Race Equality Scheme Annual Update Report, January 2004

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 5 groups were:

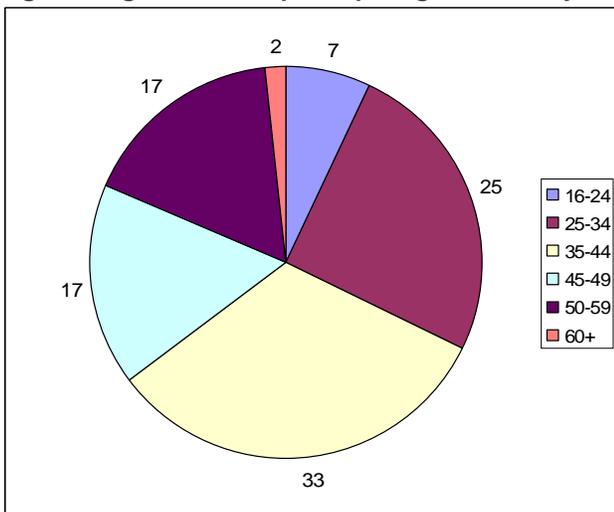
- women in more senior positions, aged approximately 45-59, including some women who had been at the top of their grade for a number of years (who were in a position to look back with hindsight) - 2 groups
- women aged 25-34 (focusing on their career aspirations and longer term goals).
- women aged 35-44 with and without children (exploring the impact of childcare responsibilities on women's careers) - 2 groups

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 Leicester City Council

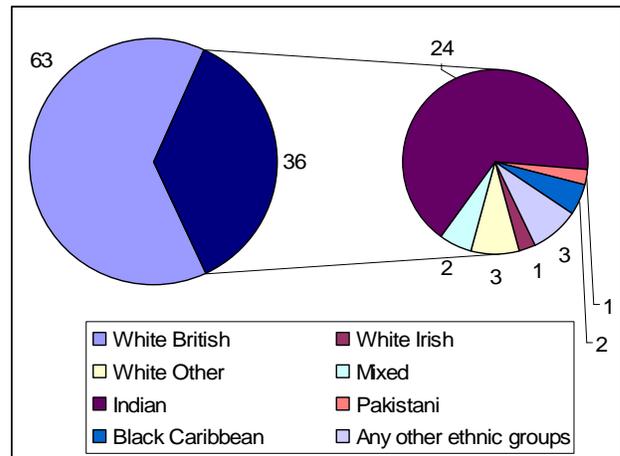
Leicester City Council employs 13,634 women (73% of its total workforce in 2004) in 6 Directorates across various sites, in Leicester, East Midlands. All employees were invited to participate in the survey about women's careers and employment, conducted in May 2005. The characteristics of the 321 women who responded are described in Figures 1-3.

**Figure 1 Age of women participating in the study**



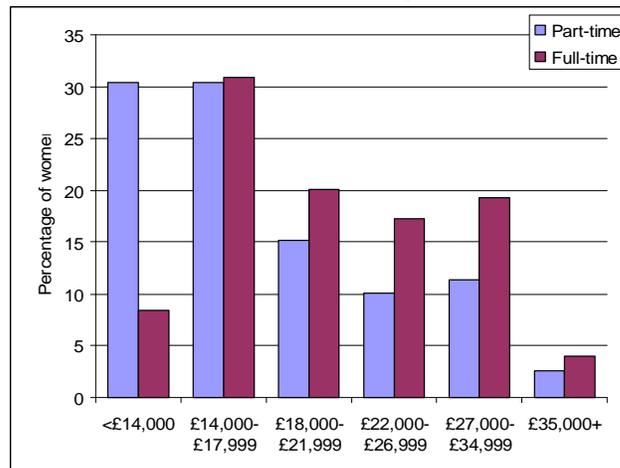
Source: GELLM e-survey of female employees in Leicester City Council, 2005

**Figure 2 Ethnicity of women participating in the study**



Source: GELLM e-survey of female employees in Leicester City Council, 2005

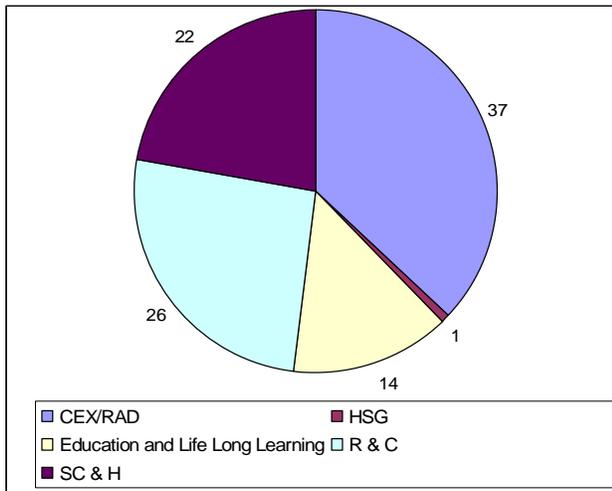
**Figure 3 Current annual salary (full-time equivalent) of women participating in the study**



Source: GELLM e-survey of female employees in Leicester City Council, 2005

Other features of the sample were that 7% of respondents were disabled women, 46% were qualified to degree level or above, and 37% had worked at Leicester City Council for 10 years or more. Almost all had received some training during their period of service (90%) and just under half (42%) reported that they had received training which had enabled them to progress to a higher grade.

**Figure 4 Women participants in the study, by service area in which they worked**



Source: GELLM e-survey of female employees in Leicester City Council, 2005

Note: CEX/RAD is Chief Executive / Resources (back office functions); HSG is Housing, SC&H is Social Care & Health, and R&C is Regeneration & Culture

Although our respondents are not fully representative of Leicester City Council's female workforce, they include good coverage 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 Leicester City Council

#### Attitudes to paid work

Our study found that 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 of income security, and provides a context for fulfilling 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; most felt they had autonomy to make decisions about how to deliver their work, and enjoyed the stimulation of working with colleagues to achieve a goal

- They valued having a meaningful working life, in which they enjoy what they do, and can see results.

*For me it's about opportunities to do partnership work and make a difference to the way things are.*  
(aged 35-44)

*I like the interaction and dealing with other people in the council and knowing that you're able to provide a good service and that I do the best job that I can.*  
(aged 45-59)

*I really like working in local government because it's a non profit making organisation. I can't imagine working for a company that's just making profit out of people.*  
(aged 45-59)

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.

The commitment they make to their work is also suggested by the hours they work. A high proportion of respondents were contracted to work 31-37 hours a week (71%) while at the same time over half had caring responsibilities of some kind. 56% of the women have dependent children, and 18% were providing unpaid care to a relative, friend or neighbour who was frail, sick or disabled.

Part-time workers in our survey, as shown in Figure 3, were much more concentrated in the lower paid grades of employment than were full-time employees. Well over half of full-time respondents earned £18,000 per annum or above, whereas only about a third of part-time respondents were earning at this (full-time equivalent) level. There was only a very small number of respondents in the part-time group who were among the most highly paid grades (£35,000 p/a and above).

How women manage their work-life balance varied 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.

*I'm in my 40s. I'm looking for something a bit more home life balanced, with my daughters being teenagers. When I was single or just married, [hours] didn't matter - it was a career thing. I wanted to get to the top and I worked as hard as I*

*could until I achieved that, but now my priorities are my family.* (aged 45-59)

### **The life course: motherhood**

Whilst having a profound and enriching effect on their lives, motherhood had not lessened most women's attachment to their jobs and careers – although it had made this more difficult to achieve.

Some explained that they had switched their priorities away from their career temporarily, until the time when their children were older and less dependent. Their reasons were not exclusively about their children's welfare and best interests, but also mixed up with practical considerations and with concerns about their ability to continue to perform at work.

*Now, with a five year old child I wouldn't want to enter that world where I have to do 50 hours a week. Maybe later on, when my son is grown up, then I'll be able to follow that path, because I won't have the demands that I do now.*

(aged 25-34)

*If I now changed my job, it would be an added pressure that at this stage I don't want. I'll probably be in this job for the next five years because I've got another baby on the way.*

(aged 35-44)

### **Returning to work after maternity leave**

Women described returning to work as a difficult transition.

*It is very difficult coming back to work. It's not just about the fact that you're returning to work; you're having to deal with leaving your child.*

(aged 35-44)

As well as having to adjust to a new daily caring routine, and sharing the responsibility for their child with others, many women described how they had simultaneously faced new arrangements at work.

*I came back to the same job but in a new team, completely away from everybody I knew.*

(aged 35-44)

*I was off for seven months and there was a massive project introduced whilst I was off, and people were talking acronyms and I had no idea what they were talking about when I came back.*

(aged 35-44)

Some women had been regularly informed about changes at work while they were on maternity leave. However, the degree to which women felt supported and 'in touch' was dependent on the

nature of their relationship with their line manager.

*When I was on maternity leave, he [my manager] kept me informed and we had a good relationship.* (aged 35-44)

*I felt that the only contact I had whilst on maternity leave was, 'When are you coming back?'* (aged 35-44)

### **Work-family tensions**

Many mothers described the pressure and guilt they felt when trying to sustain hobbies and activities, spend time with partners, family and friends and fulfil the work commitments which satisfied their need for mental stimulation and fulfilment. Their decisions relating to their hours of work and career advancement were rarely taken in isolation. This was true for women with and without caring responsibilities.

*I'm 38. I want to spend time doing other things that I like. Work takes up a huge amount of my time, which is great, and I wouldn't want that any other way, but I don't want serious grief. My partner has serious grief, and we couldn't both be in that situation.* (aged 35-44)

Women described complex timetables designed to meet both sets of commitments. Their arrangements were finely tuned, and relied on routinised working arrangements, car use, and in some cases a high degree of paid help with cleaning and out-of-hours childcare.

*As the children are getting older they need other things. I can't take her to parties; getting home takes about an hour and a quarter, and getting here takes about the same. If it wasn't for someone looking after them, they couldn't do all these things.* (aged 35-44)

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

### **Caring for other dependents**

In addition to their paid jobs, 18% of survey respondents had unpaid caring responsibilities for a dependent adult or a disabled child. Of this group, 80% were working full-time contractual hours (31-37 hours per week). Caring commitments affect carers for varying lengths of time, and in some cases arise without warning. Unpaid caring is a common experience of employees: the 2001 Census showed that 15% of

all employed women living in Leicester were carers (see Buckner et al 2004:59).

A few women mentioned their involvement in caring for grandchildren, and that this had prompted them to explore changes in their working arrangements.

*I'd like to do compressed hours so that way I get the pleasure of spoiling my grandson one day a week, and childcare for my daughter will only cost her three days.* (aged 45-59)

### **Retirement**

For women in their forties the prospect of devalued pension rights and a higher age of retirement was an added motivation to advance their career while they could.

*I've been in Leicester local authority for about eight years now, and I want to make sure I have ten years of decent pension contributions before I do anything. I wouldn't mind doing a change, but not right now for me.* (aged 35-44)

Some women who were closer to retirement age still had personal goals that they wished to fulfil, while others had already reached the limit of their ambitions. A common aspiration among older women was to prioritise their work-life balance.

*I think you reach a certain age and you feel you don't want to progress any more. I just want to have a life outside work and want a job that allows me to do that - to just say, 'I'm going home' and I don't have to think about work.* (aged 45-59)

Women who took part in the focus groups indicated that their determination 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 women emphasised, in describing what made the local authority their 'employer of choice', included its commitment to family friendly employment, the job security they felt they had, and, for older women, the training opportunities they had been offered.

### **Commitment to equal opportunities**

As described in the opening section, Leicester City Council has a long-standing commitment to equal opportunities, which women in the focus groups recognised and from which some felt they had directly benefited. They gave examples of how specific policies covering sex and disability

discrimination had assisted them during their period of service in the Council<sup>8</sup>.

22 women responding to the survey identified themselves as having a disability. Of those disabled women who attended the focus groups, one commented:

*Transportation is an issue for my [health] needs. It makes it very restrictive in terms of applying for jobs in the private sector. They're not really as interested in equality as the Council. I can't knock all the flexibility and support that I've had all through my time here.* (aged 45-59)

Older women described how at the time when they were returning to employment after a period at home looking after young children, the Council had been the only local employer which did not discriminate against them because of their family commitments.

*Initially when I started work I had three young children and I went for quite a number of jobs and they didn't want to know, but Leicester City Council had their equal opportunities policy and weren't allowed to ask you how many children you'd got and what would you do if they were sick.* (aged 45-59)

*I first went for the interview at the Council and they didn't ask me about my children, I actually said to them, 'You know I've got children don't you, and I've made these arrangements?' and they said, 'Yes we know that - that's fine.' So that's definitely one of the things that attracted me to the Council.* (aged 35-44)

*At the major company I worked for previously, they'd often say to me, 'You're a single parent. What happens if I want you to work until 10.00pm? Who's going to look after your children?' and I'd say, 'I take exception to you asking me that, I wouldn't apply for the job if I didn't think I could meet the demands of it.' I did take exception to that, and that was one of the reasons I liked about working in the local authority, because it never was an issue.* (aged 45-59)

### **Work Life Balance**

For women of all ages with caring responsibilities the offer of flexible working continues to be one of the most important factors attracting them to work in the sector, and compensating for perceived low pay. In many cases it was why they had applied for their jobs, and why they stayed in them,

<sup>8</sup> No focus group participants commented on race discrimination policies.

having considered employment with other local employers.

*When you've got children, yes, you get poor wages in comparison to the private sector and elsewhere, but then again you do get flexi time and the Council does seem to be more family friendly.* (aged 35-44)

*I think that I'm very fortunate and feel quite privileged to have flexi time and time off in lieu. I can more or less work from home when I choose to, and that's the life choice that I made several years ago when I had young children.* (aged 35-44)

*Flexibility - I do value that tremendously and that's probably one of the things that I value most in Leicester City Council.* (aged 35-44)

Older women felt they had been able to accommodate their commitments as their families grew up, whilst working in part time jobs which were 'worth having'.

*The only organisation that was offering part time work, that had convenient hours for me that wasn't stacking shelves in supermarkets, was Leicester City Council. I started working 14 hours per week, two nights and a Saturday morning. Over the years, I increased my hours as my daughter grew up, and I think you'd be hard pressed to find other organisations who would be able to offer that opportunity.* (aged 45-59)

The importance which women placed on flexibility was not confined to mothers or those with other caring responsibilities. Younger women without family ties also appreciated the universal entitlement:

*I think flexibility is a big advantage to anyone working in the local authority, because I've never worked in an organisation that is so flexible to different people's needs. Parental or religious needs, or anything like that. If you do need to take a day off for whatever reason, it's not much hassle, though I suppose that depends on what sort of manager you've got.* (aged 25-34)

Some younger women felt the flexi-scheme meant they were now paid appropriately for the work they did, increasing the satisfaction they felt about their job.

*I get evenings and lunch breaks, whereas where I worked before these were unheard of. I think they do try to look after their staff.* (aged 25-34)

'Flexibility' meant an employer that was prepared to accommodate any mutually beneficial working arrangement, did not discriminate in favour of

some groups of employees, and did not place a value judgement on the reason why flexibility was needed. As other research has shown, a universal approach is most productive in this area, as it prevents resentment and feelings that one group of workers' needs are privileged over those of others (Yeandle et al 2006).

Over a third of the survey respondents had altered their contracted hours during their service with Leicester City Council (36%). 21% of women aged 25-34 had changed their hours, compared with 53% of those aged 35-44, 32% of those aged 45-49 and 43% of the 50+ group. Parental leave had been widely used by women aged 35-44 (almost 1 in 3 women requesting this form of leave), however there were also small numbers of younger and older women using this form of leave: 19% of those 25-34, 15% of those aged 45-49, and 4% of those aged 50-59.

In the focus groups, women stressed that managerial styles were crucial for the effective implementation of these policies.

*I value the flexibility of my work and my manager is very flexible. I have responsibility. I'm allowed to get on with my own work and do my own job.* (aged 45-59)

### **Working for a public sector organisation**

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

Other women were frustrated by the particular nature of organisational decision-making in local government, as they felt it constrained their own performance.

*Political will is one of the biggest stumbling blocks... you can put all these measures in place, but if they've decided that they're going to put a stop on this because they need the money for something else - then it all just gets lost.* (aged 35-44)

Some felt that their performance suffered because of the bureaucratic nature of administrative processes. This had been compounded by organisational restructuring which some women felt had disrupted functions which were working well.

*I went to a conference in London which cost £40.00 and to get the invoice paid must have cost well over £100.00 in admin time. At manager level you think, 'why am I chasing around for £40.00?' (aged 35-44)*

*That frustrates me, because instead of being able to be proactive and improve my service, I'm too busy spending all year merging my two departments, bringing systems together and picking staff up off the floor. It's taken me a year to just to get to the point where I can start improving things. I've lost a year, just because they've messed things around again. (aged 35-44)*

*I can't keep up today with who is who within the different departments. And job title changes - if I go on to the intranet to find a personnel manager in a different department, I can type in 'personnel' but come up with nothing because they're 'human resources' now. (aged 45-59)*

Some younger women felt that perceptions of local government outside the sector meant that by continuing as public sector employees, they were limiting their longer-term career development options.

*I found it very difficult to get into the private sector, because in the finance field it was seen that public sector finance was very different. (aged 35-44)*

Most women, of all ages, shared a perception that employment in Leicester City Council was 'more secure' than that offered by other local employers. This was based on the organisation's greater range of employment policies and on unionisation, which was thought to safeguard employees' interests. However, women on fixed term contracts, awaiting further funding to be secured from external sources, or those who were faced with redeployment, felt the uncertainty they experienced was a serious and distracting anxiety which affected their performance at work.

*I think the terms and conditions are one of the benefits of local government. It's not as safe as it used to be, because they put you through a review every year, but it's hard for them to get rid of you. We do get a good pension, we've got the union fighting our corner, we've got flexi time. (aged 35-44)*

*I feel much safer here, when I see how my friends are treated by private companies - I say, 'They can't do that! They would never get away with it in a month of Sundays here.' (aged 35-44)*

*I value my job because of the fact that the trade union is recognised and it's possible to be a union member and be active in the union. (aged 45-59)*

### Training and staff development

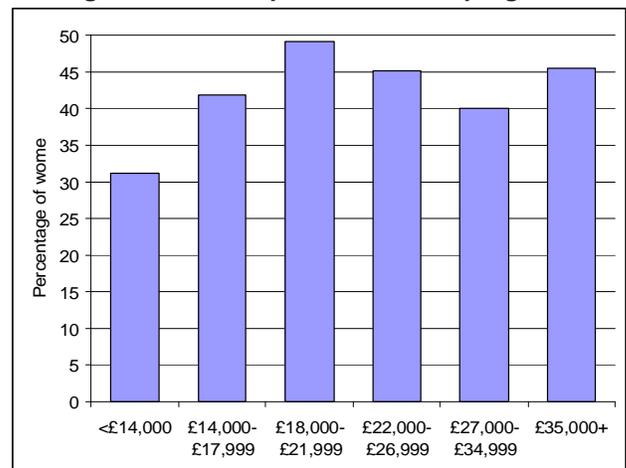
Younger women considered that the training opportunities offered by Leicester City Council were good. This had been a factor in some women's decision to apply for employment in the local authority sector.

*The training opportunities are great and anything you want to go for, as long as your manager agrees, as a rule it probably will be agreed. In just the 10-11 months I've been working here, I've had more training than I had in 4-5 years in my previous jobs. (aged 25-34)*

*Last year I got the chance to go on the Black Women's Development Programme in first line management, and that was really good because it had the training in terms of the course, but they also put in a couple of personal development days. That was a really good point, where I felt I was achieving things. (aged 24-35)*

The overwhelming majority of women in the survey (90%) had received some training during their time at the authority. Overall 43% said they believed this training had enabled them to progress at work. This was particularly true of women earning £18,000-21,999 p.a. (49%).

**Figure 5 Participants who felt they had received training which had helped their career progress**



Source: GELLM e-survey of female employees in Leicester City Council, 2005

## **Pay**

As we demonstrated in the *Gender Profile of Leicester's Local Labour Market* (Buckner et al 2004:36), pay in Leicester at the time of the study was well below the average at regional and national levels. The average annual salary of all women working full-time in Leicester was £17,682, compared with £19,700 for women across England<sup>9</sup>.

During the time they had worked for the local authority, many women in the survey had experienced variation in their full-time equivalent salaries. 61% had experienced an increase, while 11% of respondents had seen their salary both increase and decrease. Some of these women are likely to have 'acted-up' in more senior roles, or taken higher paid secondment opportunities for a temporary period.

Many women approaching retirement took a longer term view of pay, highlighting the benefits of the final salary pension scheme.

*The main benefit for me working in the local authority sector is that you can get the final salary pension which is not specific to the role that you perform.*  
(aged 45-59)

## **Attitudes to career development**

Women in the focus groups felt they had taken personal responsibility for advancing their careers, often involving a high degree of personal effort, and in some cases pay sacrifices.

*I just feel that you either stay where you are, or you get the jobs bulletin and think, 'OK, this week I'm going to apply there.'*  
(aged 24-34)

Younger women placed greater reliance than other age groups on their managers to provide direction to their development, and to find opportunities for them to work at a higher level. Many were frustrated that their potential had not been recognised by their managers and then developed in a structured way.

*The way you learn and the way you develop is to work through things yourself and make a few mistakes, but that's not the way our manager works. That has stopped development, challenge and opportunity for me within this job.*  
(aged 25-34)

*It all depends on your individual line manager and what skills or qualities they've got. When I first started here I was working under a line manager who really helped me, and any time I was uncertain, would coach me through. But my current manager is constantly looking up and not looking down at the team. We get the minimum once a year supervision, and that's it.*

(aged 25-34)

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 external performance targets, and was often exacerbated by tight staffing, constrained resources or organisational restructuring.

*We often struggle with the faster pace of change that's dictated by central government - it's not about local politics. Procedures have changed every year for the last three years. This year it's been particularly bad. We've had four major releases in about four months, whereas we normally have two a year.*  
(aged 35-44)

*As a result of the last review, we all became managers of our buildings - but what was hidden was that we were also health and safety officers and premises officers, which was added on to your other job. You say, 'I don't want to spend my time checking out the building every day and reporting if somebody breaks the window, etc., because the thing that I'm really good at is encouraging adults and children into using the services.' But all of these other things take over.*  
(aged 45-59)

Women in middle management positions described their job as a '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 output.

<sup>9</sup> Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2005, ONS Crown Copyright reserved. These data refer to all female employees in the Leicester district.

*I very rarely get the opportunity to do anything proactive. This recent piece of work I've done was the first proactive piece of work that I've done for several months. Most of my job is fire fighting or maintaining what we've got.* (aged 45-59)

More senior women, in the older age group, testified to the high intensity of work at their level, which produced situations where - as ultimately responsible for front line delivery - they had to step in to cover front-line counters when they were short staffed. This constant pressure on them at work left women feeling drained.

*Your expertise and the value you add is just getting squeezed up more and more. There's a list of things to do, and you do it. At times I feel so demotivated that I've started to come down sick now, and I just don't want to come in to work. I used to be incredibly driven and seriously achievement orientated, but I just feel like a cog in the wheel.* (aged 45-59)

Other women saw reducing their working hours at Leicester City Council as a preferable solution. However reducing their hours would, they felt, involve a lower level of responsibility. Most considered that their new role would challenge them less and would be a backward step in career terms. A few women had found reducing their hours had in fact increased the pressure they felt at work. Working in this way, up against the clock, reduced these women's enjoyment of being at work and limited the time they could spend on creative thinking and communication with colleagues. The social side of work was an important reason why some women continued in their jobs.

*What really frustrates me is that everyone can go on conferences, day trips and have smoking breaks and tea and coffee breaks, and yet when colleagues occasionally, once every two months, come over just for a chat at my desk, my manager is like, 'Don't you think you better be getting on with some work?' I feel I'm being treated differently.* (aged 35-44)

These women often felt no action was taken to align workloads following a reduction of hours, and that deadlines for work were set on the assumption that everyone works full-time, leaving part-time employees having to 'catch up' in their non-work time.

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 considered the personal

satisfaction they would gain from a more senior position.

*Look at our Heads of Service, the things they have to put up with. There's just all this hassle from elected members, from service managers. It's not just about the number of hours that you are working, it's about actually being able to enjoy those hours and not spending them in a permanent argument.* (aged 35-44)

### **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. It affected women with and without caring responsibilities.

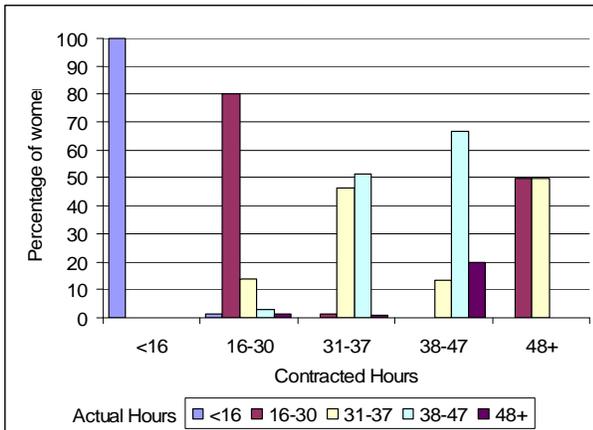
*I was working weekends, and it's all very well saying about flexible working arrangements - but I would accrue time and it was made really difficult to take that time back. They make you feel bad for doing it.* (aged 35-44)

In a 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 the 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 42% of women respondents in Leicester City Council were working more than their contracted hours (Figure 5).

While 71% of all survey respondents were contracted to work between 31-37 hours per week, only 47% reported that, during an average week, they actually worked these hours. 51% reported that they routinely worked between 38-47 hours and 1% worked 48 hours or more. Long hours were prevalent among the women, regardless of age. The greatest difference between contracted and actual hours was reported by women aged 35-44.

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



Source: GELLM e-survey of female employees in Leicester City Council, 2005.

Why are women currently working these long hours? Some women described putting in longer hours as a way of proving their commitment to their managers, especially when employed part-time. Others had been made to feel guilty and a 'maverick' for not doing so.

*You'll do extra hours if you love it, and you want to do it if you're really into something - but I won't do it because it's expected of me or the pressure is on, or they think I can't do my job if I haven't got it delivered.* (aged 35-44)

Many senior women felt responsible, as managers, for shielding the more junior women in their team from long hours. Other senior women put in extra hours so that operations didn't suffer. This extra time was often at the expense of their own work life balance.

*I come in at 7.00 and I get more done in that two hours before anyone gets here than I will for the rest of the day, because as soon as they get there I'm doing the staff management rather than the work.* (aged 35-44)

In the women's view, the impact of restructuring, and the corporate drive to improve performance had contributed to the long hours culture, as they believed their workloads were too big to complete in contracted hours and that large parts of their working day were spent completing paperwork.

*I think we're really shackled by the government's desire to measure absolutely everything that the local authorities do. I spend so much of my time ticking boxes instead of [preparing reports] which is what my job should be.* (aged 45-49)

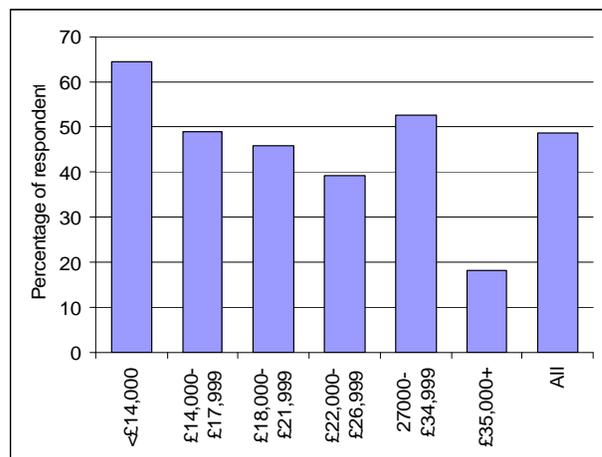
*There's so many demands on managers these days in terms of paper delivery plans, not actual service provision that is happening. But we are tied to delivering on these pieces of paper. There's no satisfaction.* (aged 45-59)

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.

*I think part time working in this authority is quite easy up to a certain grade. It's almost seen as acceptable at a lower grade, but the more senior you get, the more there is this expectation that you will be there every day and you will put in the hours. 8.00 until 8.00.* (aged 35-44)

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 49% of all respondents had used Leicester City Council's flexible working arrangements, among those earning over £35,000 p.a. fewer than 20% had done so.

**Figure 6 Use of employment policies by salary band**



Source: GELLM e-survey of female employees in Leicester City Council, 2005

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

*I've considered the hours sometimes. I look at it and think, 'Oh god, no, I'm going to have to do loads more hours!'* (aged 35-44)

*I'm just about to go on maternity leave and I'm not clear at all about how things will change. I imagine that coming back part time will block me immediately in terms of career, because service*

*managers don't work part time or job share, so that will be that.* (aged 35-44)

*Frankly I don't want to get any higher in this organisation because it's bad enough at my level - I'm PO2<sup>10</sup>, and when I look at my manager and his role, things like attending committee meetings, I don't want to be attending committee meetings at 5.00pm to 8.00pm, I'm just not interested in that.* (aged 45-59)

They felt that part of the deal in accepting a senior job was agreeing to sign up to any hours, without dissent.

*I regularly do three or four hours a week over my contracted hours, I know it doesn't sound like a lot, but they add up and I never get to take it back because there is this pressure to get on - and a pressure, at a certain level – 'well this job needs to be done'.* (aged 35-44)

In other words, it meant accepting that there was no longer any flexibility; work would always come first. Older women in more senior roles agreed that it was easier for men to fulfil a 'long hours' culture because of the different social expectations placed on them.

*It is still the woman who carries most of the childcare and most of the cooking and family shopping, etc., and without changing male attitudes so that a woman can say, 'I'm sorry but on Monday, Wednesday and Friday I've got committee meetings at work that last from 5.00pm until 7.00pm. You'll have to feed the kids, take them to the swimming lessons, get the lunch ready for tomorrow.' We've got a choice, we can either change men - which is impossible in my experience. Or we can change the way that authorities work, so that women or people are not required to come in between 5.00pm and 7.00pm for committee meetings.* (aged 45-59)

Finding time to prepare for the next 'jump up' was a significant barrier for many younger women in Leicester City Council. 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.

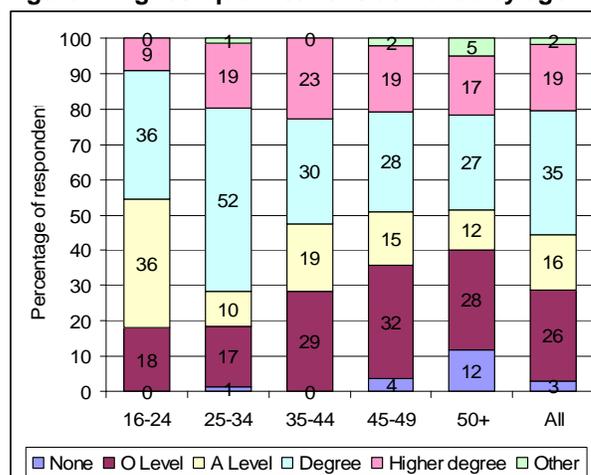
### Qualification requirements

Across the city, Leicester has fewer men and women aged 35 and above with higher qualifications than the East Midlands region or England as a whole (Buckner et al 2004:22-23). In the 35-49 age group only about 17% of all

women in Leicester have higher qualifications, compared with the regional average of 20% and national average of 23%.

As would be expected from overall trends in educational attainment, among the women responding to our survey, more women aged 25-34 held a degree (or higher degree) than any other age group - 71% compared with 53% of those aged 35-44, 47% of those aged 45-49 and 44% of those aged 50+. Also, 48% with higher degree earn £27,000+ compared with 24% with a degree and 10% with just A levels.

Figure 7 Highest qualifications achieved by age



Source: GELLM e-survey of female employees in Leicester City Council, 2005

Non-graduates in the study focus groups expressed dissatisfaction, and spoke of a 'degree bar'. Women noted that having a degree was an essential criterion in many job descriptions for senior positions in the local government sector, and was a way of advancing more rapidly.

*We've had a position come up in our department. It was 'must have a degree in a relevant subject'. Personally I couldn't see why that would make a difference, but it was one of the essential criteria. I think that would have excluded a lot of people from applying.* (aged 24-35)

Non-graduates sometimes felt putting a degree qualification above relevant experience was unfair and inappropriate. This was an issue for women of all ages.

*If it's something like a technical role, or solicitor, you'd need a particular level of qualification, that's fine, but if it's something like in our position – asking for degree level or equivalent – it's about wanting people to work to a complex level or writing complex reports, then they should say*

<sup>10</sup> Principal Officer Grade 2

*that's what they want and don't just say, 'You need a degree.'* (aged 25-34)

*When my own manager left a couple of years ago I knew I could do that job. I'd been performing 90% of the functions, but I was not allowed to apply for it because they put a specific qualification [in the job description] that I did not have.* (aged 45-59)

A few women considered that qualifications were included on job descriptions by some managers deliberately to exclude known individuals from applying, or because he or she wished to justify offering the post at a certain level.

*The manager will write the job description to favour a particular person as much as possible. There are ways to follow the [equal opportunities] policy but actually make it so that no-one else has got a chance anyway, and that does happen.* (aged 25-34)

The opportunity to undertake a degree had been offered to several women who participated in the focus groups. However, others complained that the training they were encouraged to undertake related specifically to the job they were doing now, rather than preparing them to progress to a more senior job in the future. Others had a clear goal, but were unclear how to obtain the necessary experience.

*I've had mainly IT training here and most of it's been almost like ticking the box, so it's not really made a difference career wise.* (aged 25-34)

*If you start to think about moving to service director level you'd be looking at taking over a whole range of services, some of which I know very little about and some of which I know absolutely nothing about. So how do you make that step from being a specialist to being a manager?* (aged 35-44)

Women tended to see managers as gatekeepers to training and career enhancing opportunities. They thought that some managers were reluctant to develop people, fearing their promotion would lead to additional work for them and put the current team under more pressure until the vacancy was filled. Some women who were managers admitted to feeling this way.

*We don't train people to progress, because if I train staff to progress they're going to leave and then I'd be short staffed.* (aged 45-59)

They also gave as a reason the lack of budgets and limited capacity, within teams, to release staff for training, without a detrimental effect on the

service. This was more of a problem in some departments than others. Women working in teams or departments which were being re-organised said that managerial responsibility for agreeing staff development was unclear, and felt little training was taking place.

*We just sit there in the crossfire thinking, 'Who is my manager?' I have a formal manager and an informal manager and a project manager - and another manager who used to be my manager but isn't really now.* (aged 25-34)

For many women the decision to progress involved making the case for study or training support, and then sustaining a long period of study. They recognised that studying alongside work required a high level of personal motivation, commitment, and personal sacrifices to achieve this goal. For some, studying was simply not possible because of caring responsibilities or the demands of their current job.

*It wasn't until having a child that these issues came up. Now I don't have the same access to training, although that's not explicitly said. It's things that are said like, 'Your time is very precious now and we need to think very carefully about what training you do.' and 'That's on a day that you're not at work, so perhaps it will come up again.'* (aged 35-44)

*You can't commit to doing evening courses when your kids are young you can't commit to go to evening meetings.* (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 described their experience of career development within the authority as 'rule bound'. They recognised the need for rules to ensure fair and consistent recruitment decisions. However, they also felt that procedures which insisted on treating everyone the same did not always lead to the best outcome:

*I never understood what I'd done right to be offered the job. It sounds ridiculous, but it's a mysterious process and lots of people ask 'How did you get your job?'* (aged 25-34)

*In the private sector you wouldn't necessarily have to apply to get a promotion if you're doing a good job. There are disadvantages about that - a manager could hate an employee and then they'd*

*be stuck on that basis - but the flip side is, it's really difficult for an internal applicant here to get another job internally because their work record, or what the interview panel know about an individual, can't be taken into account because of equal opportunities.* (aged 45-59)

Senior women in the focus group supported the Council's move towards designing jobs based on generic competencies as a way of opening up opportunities for employees to move more easily between positions in the organisation – and avoiding the situation which this younger woman described:

*The horrible policy element is going to kick in again. Because I was recruited on the assistant post which is a different job criteria, I might have to go through the whole application process and compete against other candidates [for the development officer post], when I've proved I'm competent enough to do the job [by acting-up into that role].* (aged 24-35)

*There's a lack of flexibility because of the equal opportunities recruitment process. Even if you develop in your job, unless you meet the exact criteria for another job, you never get promoted.* (aged 45-59)

*Where the disadvantage lies at the moment in the recruitment process is that it's the only open door in terms of advancement. And that's why it is such an emotive thing, because there isn't any other mechanism in place.* (aged 45-59)

These women stressed the need for different ways of measuring individual performance and of providing alternative opportunities for progression, for example through rotational secondments:

*I think there are big steps that we can take to try and change the way that we recruit. In my last post in the Civil Service, I was recruited as a clerical officer originally and applied for promotion and was promoted to executive officer. And both those jobs were generic jobs, and I had the opportunity to work in different sections doing different jobs, building different skills - which was not only advantageous to me, but to the organisation as well, because they could move people around.* (aged 45-59)

*A secondment opportunity is just a risk of three months to get someone to a working level. It's not the qualification route, it's the practice of doing things which have been really important for me - someone taking a chance with you. The thing with local government they're so risk-averse they won't take a chance with anyone, and there's a real detriment.* (aged 45-59)

Women commented that some managers also approached the area of flexibility and work life balance arrangements in a similar 'rule bound' way. They felt that managers' interpretations were deliberately bureaucratic because their aim was to avoid putting in place different or more complex management arrangements. Other research has shown that managerial reticence about implementing work life balance arrangements can also be due to managers' own lack of confidence or inadequate knowledge about their discretionary powers (Yeandle et al 2006).

*I wanted to be working three days and they said I couldn't do that, I had to do either two and a half or four days. It all got really silly, and there wasn't anything to justify it. Sitting here now you think - well why didn't you argue it this way? But at the time it's hard, and especially when you're pregnant and there's so many other things going on that you're trying to deal with. It does depend a lot on who is managing you and who is managing them.* (aged 35-44)

*We need to get it signed in triplicate, to have any time off or to do anything, and again it depends on your manager and your personal relationship with them.* (aged 35-44)

Women who praised their manager's approach to flexible working frequently pointed out that they had broken rules - adhering to the principle rather than to the letter of organisational guidance.

*I'm very fortunate with my manager. He allows me not to follow the flexi scheme to the letter. On Friday I work late so that I can pick up my daughter from school and take her to my mum to look after her. I'm allowed leave and have my lunch break between 3.45pm and 4.45pm and I know that wouldn't be the case corporately - but I don't see why it can't be. I don't see why we have to have lunch between 12.00 and 2.00. There's a lot more scope for flexibility, and I think the authority could do a lot more in that area.* (aged 45-59)

*I've worked from home, which isn't part of the policy, it's down to the individual manager and whether they're that flexible.* (aged 35-44)

Women with longer lengths of service suggested that this culture was linked to the static nature of the workforce, resulting in 'cosy' arrangements in which individuals jealously safeguarded the status quo.

*People have been in the positions here for so long, people have not moved around. When I got the job last year with the team, they just saw me as a threat. It was like two males in there seeing me as*

*a threat. They're sort of fixed in the way they do things- 'we don't change, we've always done it historically this way' - and new ideas are not taken on board.* (aged 34-44)

*There's always the wise person in the corner who's seen it all, and done it all, and tells you so. And you think, 'No! I am going change it!' I think we must all go through that process of your energy being zapped and motivation going - and then you turn into that person in the corner.* (aged 45-59)

Some women thought that the size and structure of the authority was a key cause of its 'stagnation'. In their view, departments were run autonomously with their own unique sets of rules, with little communication or direction from the corporate centre or cross-fertilisation of ideas from other departments.

*Because the authority is so vast, although there are some HR guidelines about how you should be treated and what should happen, I think it's applied in varied, different ways - and it does very much depend on who your manager is.* (aged 35-44)

*I think one of the things about this Council is that it's not one organisation, and that's a big difficulty. You may [work across] different departments, anticipating that things are going to be the same, and they're not. There's no particular management style either, each manager is different.* (aged 45-59)

*I asked a colleague who's worked here for about 15 years, I said, 'Would people apply for jobs in other departments?' and in reality she said, 'No it doesn't happen that frequently, unless you're in a profession like HR.' The people I've worked with seem to have been in the same department for the whole duration of their career.* (aged 25-34)

*It's not often a 'can do' culture, it's a 'can't do' culture - and bureaucracy has a lot to do with that. A lot of people are protecting their own team or divisions or departments and their own budget.* (aged 35-44)

The women did not all experience organisational culture in the same way. However, many women, particularly those working in male dominated departments, felt the prevailing culture placed them at a disadvantage as women. They felt they had been excluded from office interaction or required to act like one of the men to fit in and 'get on'.

*I have no problem with them [male colleagues] going drinking - it's not in work time, it's lunchtime. You can tell they've been talking about stuff [at work] and you do feel a bit left out, because obviously I'm the only female in the team. They*

*don't have to let you come, because at the end of the day, it's their lunchtime, I don't have to take them shopping with me.* (aged 35-44)

*If you speak out against it [male banter] you're seen as being difficult, or you've got no sense of humour. You're the one who's labelled and you think to yourself, 'Am I going to go and do my job and keep my head down? Or am I going to fight every day?' because it's really hard to change culture.* (aged 35-44)

*Although I think there are career prospects for all, we're still very male dominated, and we have a very macho management style, and that's even true in social care and health.* (aged 35-44)

A few women with outward-facing roles considered that patriarchal attitudes that existed in the wider local community and sometimes among elected members reinforced this 'macho' culture within the authority. Younger women appeared to be particularly affected by male patronage, which was also linked to their age and perceived inexperience in relation to more senior male colleagues.

*Male attitudes and patronage is a big one for me. Trying to push things forward is a real battle ground, because the chair of the partnership is a man, the vice chair is a man, you look round the table at each of the senior groups and meetings and they're all men bar one or two women.* (aged 25-34)

*In meetings [male senior managers] give you reassuring smiles, like it must be so overwhelming for us support officers, all these little women, being there in the room with all these senior men.* (aged 25-34)

Women of all ages said there was a lack of female role models. They felt that some women in senior positions modelled themselves on their male colleagues and were sometimes the least supportive line managers.

*Part of the thing that has stopped me from looking for career advancement within the authority is about role models, not just about female role models, but about what happens further up. It's about how people behave when they are in a senior management position, and the compromises they have to make on their own values and their own judgement. That's what stops me from looking at something at that particular level of jobs, because I wouldn't be interested in that.* (aged 35-44)

Black women felt the lack of black role models more acutely than a lack of women at senior level.

*I worked in a very male dominated area and I was the only female and an Asian woman and I think I had my education there basically. But you move forwards from there and you learn to know your rights and you can stand up to it. But then if you're the one treated as the problem and you're not supported by managers, then you will be the one who's ostracised - and it's really difficult.*

*(aged 35-44)*

Others identified a 'male club' at senior level as the most significant barrier to their career progression, questioning whether they wanted to or would be able to join, were they to advance their career.

*I think 15 years ago there was a tokenism towards women and they got to different parts of the organisation. We've had a male corporate directors board for years, and I was amazed when I walked into that office the first time, this sea of white men sitting around - whereas you walk into any other meeting in this council and you've got a mixed group of people.*

*(aged 45-59)*

### **Support for career development**

The importance of managerial support for women's career development was a common theme, particularly among younger women. They reported various ways their managers had helped them. These included: exposing them to new experiences and networks; building their confidence; creating opportunities which could fit with childcare; and supporting training related to the next job level.

Other relationships which assisted women to progress included mentors external to Leicester City Council (including professional contacts and colleagues working for different organisations) who shared information and intelligence about vacancies and put the individual's interests, rather than the organisation's interests, first.

*When I have moved to more senior jobs it's been partly because I know people who are doing similar sorts of jobs and have talked it through with them. When I came to Leicester Council the woman who was the chair of the organisation that I worked for, she did some mentoring with me. I don't think we do enough to allow people to shadow and all that stuff that is about helping people to get the next step up.*

*(aged 35-44)*

### **Opportunities to develop different skills**

Some women said that their careers had benefited from structured progression opportunities in the form of 'acting up' placements and positions with career development opportunities 'built in'.

*I'm on a career development contract so that helped. Progression is related to the tasks and qualifications needed to do that job, not the person.*

*(aged 35-44)*

*I was very lucky that after the co-ordinator stint I managed to get head of service for a year - it was a fantastic experience, and looks great on the CV.*

*(aged 35-44)*

Several women in the focus groups had undertaken accredited management training which was delivered externally to the Council. They had found it motivating and useful, but were frustrated that they had not subsequently been given an opportunity to use the new skills they had gained. Women commented that training opportunities which were cross-departmental offered a welcome opportunity to network. This experience had enabled them to gain information which they otherwise would have found difficult to access.

*They're running finance sessions now at lunchtime. People within the council do an hour's slot on what they do. Those are quite good, because there's a couple of people there that you know and a few more that you don't, so you do get to meet different people from each department.*

*(aged 35-44)*

A few women held voluntary roles outside the authority, such as school governors, and felt that these opportunities had also given them skills which they could not have gained working as an employee.

## Conclusions

This study has shown that, irrespective of family situation or age, many women working within Leicester City Council are highly committed to their jobs and aspire to have successful careers.

Older women recognise and value the investment the local authority has made in making training available to them. Younger women are less satisfied and blame a lack of budgets, and the pressures of service delivery, which tie the hands of managers in supporting training opportunities. Most view their own career development as a personal responsibility, but many younger women would like more guidance and support from their managers to enable them to identify realisable career paths.

The women in this study appreciate the policies Leicester City Council has put in place to support its employees in achieving a good work-life balance, although many reported problems with their managers in implementing these. They noted that managers tended to be reluctant to change the status quo and often had a limited interpretation of flexibility.

Many women noted that there is an organisational culture at Leicester City Council 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 may be paying 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 these jobs 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 Leicester City Council 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; 2006, 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, Leicester City Council remains their local 'employer of choice', and we were struck by the commitment and enthusiasm of those who took part in our discussion groups. The future challenge will be to retain this committed workforce in the context of a shrinking working age population, expected job growth in other parts of the economy (LSC 2005) and competition from the private sector offering equal or better terms and conditions. We turn in conclusion to some recommendations which may assist Leicester City Council in rising to this future challenge.

## Recommendations

### **Implement Leicester City Council's work-life balance policies at all levels**

1. Managers are the key to the successful implementation of work-life balance policies<sup>11</sup>. While Leicester City Council's policies already offer flexible working arrangements to solve business problems, implementation is perceived to be inconsistent and conservative. We suggest that guidance and support to managers is reviewed, to encourage fair and appropriate application of the policies, and greater innovation in their implementation of flexible working arrangements.

2. Further promotion of working arrangements that achieve a better work-life balance could be undertaken for all employees, in particular encouraging part-time and flexible working arrangements in senior roles.

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<sup>11</sup> Where an organisational culture is based on trust between managers and staff, and prioritises outcomes over 'presenteeism', considerable organisational benefits arise from implementing flexible working arrangements (Yeandle et al 2006).

### **Provide further support for Black and ethnic minority women employees**

3. Leicester City Council already has a good range of management training opportunities. Given the importance of enabling ethnic minority staff to benefit from these opportunities, more work could be done to promote appropriate role models at senior level, and greater attention could be given to providing support and guidance to women after their training is completed.

### **Extend training opportunities to develop and prepare women for promotion**

4. Some women in the focus groups reported that 'acting-up' opportunities had been very important in enabling them to move forward in their careers; they had helped them to gain skills, experience and confidence. Women in our focus groups suggested that a formalised system of placements (through which departments could exchange staff for mutual gain, sharing information and overcoming staffing shortages) would be useful. They also felt that centralised information about 'acting up' or secondments was needed, with opportunities communicated to all staff. It was perceived that this could help to increase the number of female applicants and ensure women are able to benefit from the available opportunities.

5. Many women in the focus groups felt they had benefited from external networks and mentors. These contacts had helped them to make more informed career choices, and had helped them to improve their current performance. More opportunities for mentoring, including arrangements for cross-departmental mentoring or networking outside the authority, could be considered. This might be an effective way of transferring the skills and knowledge which already exist within the female workforce, and of ensuring that the experience and organisational knowledge of senior and older staff is made available to less experienced employees.

6. Some women in the study felt that although they had the potential to perform a more senior role, they were held back by their lack of formal qualifications, with particular reference to degrees. Ways of recognising and valuing relevant experience (as an alternative to formal qualifications), need to be explored within appointment criteria.

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## **Documentation made available to the research team by Leicester City Council**

Leicester City Council's Corporate Equality Strategy 2004 - 2007

Leicester City Council's Race Equality Scheme Annual Update Report, January 2004

Leicester Fact and Figures <http://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council--services/housing/living-in-leicester--and-home-advice/facts--figures>

Leicester City Council Best Value Performance Plan Summary, 2004-2005

Leicester City Council Staff Survey 2004 (questionnaire, results and action plans)

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Report of Employee Survey Findings: Cultural Services & Neighbourhood Renewal, research study conducted for Leicester City Council by MORI, March 2004

Developing Tomorrow's Leaders – How to create gender equity in management progression at Leicester City Council, a report on behalf of the Women into Management Steering Group, Maple Consulting, October 2003

Corporate Directors' Board, Developing Tomorrow's Leaders – How to create gender equity in management progression at Leicester City Council – Communicating and Implementing research report, 18<sup>th</sup> November 2003

Corporate Directors' Board, Developing Tomorrow's Leaders – How to create gender equity in management progression at Leicester City Council – Implementation plan, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2004

Corporate Equality Strategy Group, Developing Tomorrow's Leaders – Progress Report, April 2005

## Appendix 1 Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets (GELLM)

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](http://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](http://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 Stiehl
  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 by Professor Sue Yeandle

### The GELLM Team

Led by Professor Sue Yeandle, the members of the GELLM research team at the *Centre for Social Inclusion* were: Dr Cinnamon Bennett, Dr Lisa Buckner, Ian Chesters (administrator), Karen Escott, Dr Linda Grant, Christopher Price, Lucy Shipton, Bernadette Stiehl, and Dr Ning Tang. The team is grateful to Dr Pamela Fisher and to Anu Suokas for their contributions to the project in 2004-5, and for the advice and support of Dr Chris Gardiner.

### The GELLM Partnership

The national partners supporting the GELLM project were the Equal Opportunities Commission and the TUC. The project's 12 local authority partners were: 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 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. In Leicester, 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. Where data was available it also included 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 with direct access to the internal email system. 507 employees completed this questionnaire of which 321 were women.
- **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. 26 women participated in 5 focus groups as follows:
  - 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. (2 groups)
  - Women in the 24-34 age group (1 group)
  - Women aged 35-44 with and without children (2 groups)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.
- **Semi-structured interviews** (face to face) with 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. Interviews were completed with 2 people.

Parallel research was also carried out in 3 other English local authorities

### 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.

