

# Women's Career Development in Wakefield MDC

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## Foreword


### Changing, improving, and sustaining progress

Wakefield MDC 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).

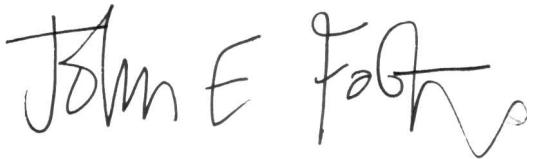
In participating in this project the Council has made a firm commitment to disseminate and implement the research findings by engaging with key stakeholders during all stages of the project. The Council is keen to take forward both the research and the outcomes from the local research studies.

We will use this learning to inform reviews of key strategic and service plans. This will help us to meet the:

- **Changing** legislative requirements around gender through the public sector duty on sex equality
- Council's commitment to continuous **improvement** and **sustainability**



**Cllr. Peter Box**  
Leader of the Council



**John E Foster**  
Chief Executive



# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank those in Wakefield MDC who guided and assisted us in carrying out this research: Celia Sweeney (Equalities and Diversity Manager) and Sue Bearder (Equalities and Diversity Officer - Secondment) and Melanie Chan (formerly of Wakefield MDC). There were also a number of senior managers and trade union representatives who, as key informants, gave us an organisational perspective on women's career development, and women from across the authority who contributed their experiences and views to discussions in four focus groups.

## **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 Wakefield MDC. 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 Wakefield MDC only. They are drawn from a questionnaire survey and focus group discussions with women employees, interviews with managers and trade union representatives, and documents supplied by Wakefield MDC's Human Resources Department.

Analysis of the e-survey showed:

- Extensive evidence of working beyond contracted hours
- A concentration of part-time employees in lower paid jobs
- Over 60% of women paid £27,000-£34,000 had a degree compared with only 38% 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'. Sometimes their home life and health bears the brunt of competing demands.

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

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

Women aged 35+ thought that Wakefield MDC offered very good training opportunities and was effective in making them aware of training opportunities. 92% of e-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 in the more senior role on other aspects of their lives – whether they could 'cope'.

- How the new role would affect them in terms of hours of work. They noted a prevailing attitude that senior jobs cannot be done part time; some worried about the need to 'prove their commitment' by working beyond contracted hours; some were concerned about losing flexibility of start and finish times if they were promoted.
- Qualification requirements of the new post, especially university degrees. Some felt experience was under-rated, and that formal qualifications were given undue importance. Some women could see no way of studying while working because of caring responsibilities or the demands of their job.
- Their other sources of support - managerial support and family support - were both crucial.

Women who took part in the focus groups felt there was an organisational culture which 'favoured men', and that *'female managers have to be twice as good as the men'*.

Very few women felt male colleagues held sexist attitudes, but younger women and those in more senior roles felt 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
- secondment opportunities
- personal development training which increased their confidence and helped them assess their own worth.



## Introduction

This study is about the career development and progression of women working within Wakefield Metropolitan Borough Council (MDC). 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 HR professionals and trade union representatives; 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 Wakefield MDC 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 Wakefield'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 hope to make a different contribution to the debate about women's career progression and commitment to paid employment, by acknowledging the impact of the local labour market context and the workplace culture, as well as the relationship between internal and external constraints which women have encountered in developing their careers. Taking the view that these constraints are not static but change throughout women's lives, the study has tried to highlight differences between women at different stages in the life course. Our aims were:

- To examine women's experiences of employment and career development in the local authority sector.

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<sup>1</sup> An e-survey was sent to all female employees on the Stepping Up database, with direct access to the internal email system. A paper copy of the survey was distributed via the Stepping Forward representatives to women without email access. Data relating to the e-survey has been analysed here however, the paper based element will be analysed by Stepping Forward and communicated within the Council to complement this research.

- To explore the factors and conditions which impede, or support, the career development of women employees in Wakefield MDC.
- To identify policies and practices which encourage and support women's career progression.
- To make relevant recommendations to promote effective workforce development and efficient career management in local authorities.

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

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

Other explanations suggest women's lack of progress to senior levels arises from their own preferences and lifestyle choices (Hakim 2000). These claim that many women are not career-focused, and either prioritise family above work or have unplanned careers to accommodate other opportunities that may arise in their lives outside work. Understanding women's choices about their career development in the context of internal preferences and external factors has important implications for Wakefield MDC 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. In partnership with employers, the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) launched its *Work-Life Balance Campaign* in 2000, offering Challenge funding to selected organisations which identified relevant issues to help them introduce more flexible working and better leave arrangements.

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

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

## Employment in the local authority sector

Over a quarter of people employed in the UK work in the public sector, two thirds of them women. Nationally local government employs about 1.2 million women, three quarters of the sector's total 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, Best Value and the broader modernisation agenda in public services already require local authorities to offer equality of opportunity to all their employees. The new duty to promote gender equality will strengthen this, and oblige local authorities to take proactive steps to improve the status and experiences of women within their workforces.

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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 Wakefield

### Wakefield's local labour market

As shown in the *Gender Profile of Wakefield's Labour Market* (Buckner et al 2004:23), Wakefield did not share in the significant employment growth experienced in the wider economy (in Yorkshire and The Humber and in England as a whole) in the 1990s. The district experienced only a 3% increase in the percentage of full time jobs, off set by a net increase of about 33% in part-time jobs between 1991 and 2002.

Behind these figures, as we showed in the *Gender Profile*, lay important structural changes in the local labour market. These included the loss of 4,000 female jobs in Wakefield's manufacturing sector, and for women an increase of about 12,000 part time jobs in public administration, education and health (Buckner et al 2004:27). As a result, by 2002 almost 40% of jobs in Wakefield held by women, were in the public sector, while the manufacturing sector provided employment locally for only 8% of women. These developments underscore the importance of Wakefield MDC as a key source of employment for local women. In 2004/5 women held 47% of all jobs located in Wakefield, a total of some 65,000 jobs<sup>3</sup>. The local authority with a workforce of 18,677<sup>4</sup>, thus provides over 1 in 5 (29%) of jobs in the district, and is a very important source of local employment.

### Employment policies at Wakefield MDC

Wakefield MDC has a well established and proactive approach to equality of opportunity for female employees through its implementation of work-life balance policies, and its *Stepping Forward Initiative*, which promotes gender mainstreaming throughout the organisation and provides women's training and career development aimed at supporting each individual to realise their potential.

Its policies under the heading of work-life balance are numerous and at the forefront of good employment practice. Employees can assess them easily via the staff intranet or the booklet *Working Choices*. A manager's pack is also available which details employees' rights and the extent of managers' discretion in agreeing any

change in working arrangements. Policies cover emergency caring situations, planned caring situations such as adoption and parental leave, flexi-time, changes to working hours such as term-time working, and options to apply for extended leave in order to deal with major family changes or to fulfil lifetime ambitions.

In response to an employee survey which showed limited awareness of Wakefield's employment policies, a *Work Life Balance Group* has been created to run a campaign about the benefits of work life balance and of conducting a review of implementation practices. This group comprises members of the Human Resources Department and Stepping Forward representatives from each department.

The *Stepping Forward Initiative* was launched in 1996 as 'Stepping Up', by officers from the Equal Opportunities and Strategic Human Resources Team. Over time, as a network developed, it has grown to include women from all departments who are organised into operational groups and given one day a month to develop activities, events and resources for female employees. The initiative is led by a steering group consisting of senior officers from each directorate, and is responsible for promoting gender equality and diversity across the whole organisation, including increasing the proportion of women at senior levels. Positive action, women-only, events are regularly programmed to provide women with the opportunity to reflect on their careers and to build skills to allow them to reach their potential. Officers also organise campaigns to tackle wider gender equality issues, for example, celebrations marking International Women's Day, a conference to promote public appointment opportunities for women and a 'Bring your daughter to work day' aimed at challenging gender stereotypes and encouraging the aspirations of girls and young women. The Stepping Forward Initiative has won national awards.

Wakefield MDC has shown clear support and leadership for gender equality at a corporate level. The authority's *Corporate Performance Plan 2004-05* sets out a target of 36% for the Best Value Performance Indicator 11a relating to the percentage of women in the top 5% of earners. The percentage in August 2004 was 34%. The authority has also set a local target for the top 25% of earners, which in 2004 was 43% women. A positive action drive to recruit more

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

<sup>4</sup> Source: Wakefield WDC Workforce Profile December 2004

women to stand as elected members has been championed by the Leader of the Council in consecutive elections. In 2004 the number of female Councillors was 19 out of 63. The *Corporate Equality and Diversity Plan 2004-05* commits the authority to achieving Level 2 of the Equality Standard by March 2005. This is implemented by an authority-wide group of Equality and Diversity Officers.

Wakefield MDC, in common with the sector as a whole, has undergone considerable structural reorganisation in the last few years, partly driven by new statutory requirements. Whilst this was reported as 'unsettling' by some 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 Wakefield MDC

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

- A new e-survey of women employees completed by 477 women<sup>5</sup>
- Data available from Wakefield MDC
- Analysis of Wakefield MDC policies
- Interviews with 4 senior managers, 1 trade union representative
- 4 focus groups with 27 women employees

The e-survey intentionally over-sampled women who had experienced some degree of 'success' in their careers<sup>6</sup>. Almost 4% of responses were from women from ethnic minorities, somewhat higher than the proportion of ethnic minority staff in Wakefield's workforce as a whole (1%)<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 life course. With each group we explored how far the

<sup>5</sup> The e-survey was sent to all female employees on the Stepping Up database, with direct access to the internal email system. A response rate of 20% was achieved.

<sup>6</sup> 60% of women respondents to the e-survey were in salary bands £18,000 and above, whose posts had progression opportunities to more senior roles.

<sup>7</sup> Source: Wakefield WDC Workforce Profile Dec 04, ethnicity data incomplete 11.7% of employees unspecified, remainder are White British.

women's working lives were meeting their current expectations, and the extent to which their views were common to the group. The 4 groups were:

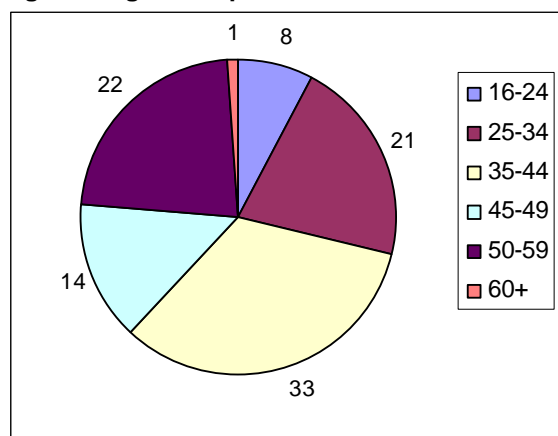
- women in more senior positions, aged approximately 45-59, including some women who had been at the top of their grade for a number of years (who were in a position to look back with hindsight)
- women aged 25-34 (focusing on their career aspirations and longer term goals).
- women aged 35-44 with and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

Wakefield MDC employs 13,634 women (73% of its total workforce in 2004<sup>8</sup>) in 6 Directorates across various sites, in Wakefield, West Yorkshire. All female employees on the Stepping Forward email list<sup>9</sup> were invited to participate in our e-survey about women's careers and employment, conducted in May 2005. A total of 477 women responded, and their characteristics are described below.

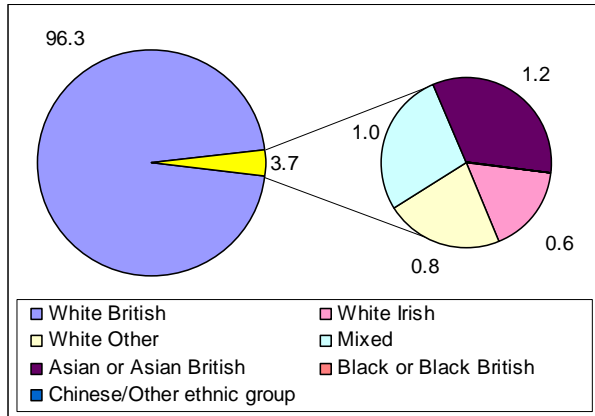
Figure 1 Age of respondents



Source: E-survey of Female Employees in Wakefield MDC

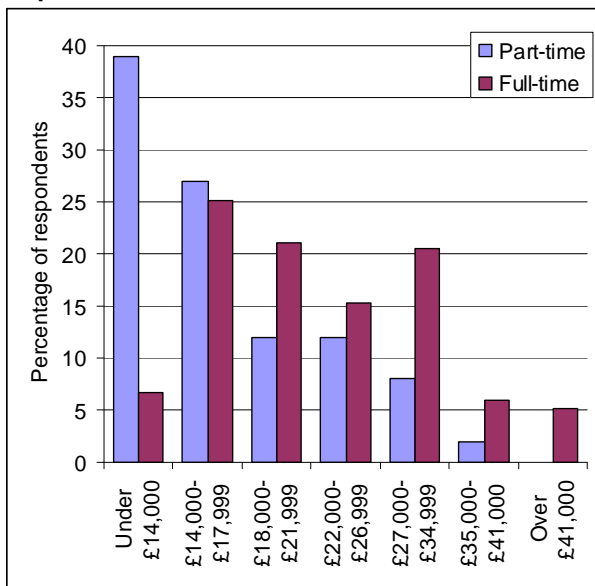
<sup>8</sup> Source: Wakefield WDC Workforce Profile, Dec 04

**Figure 2 Ethnicity of respondents**



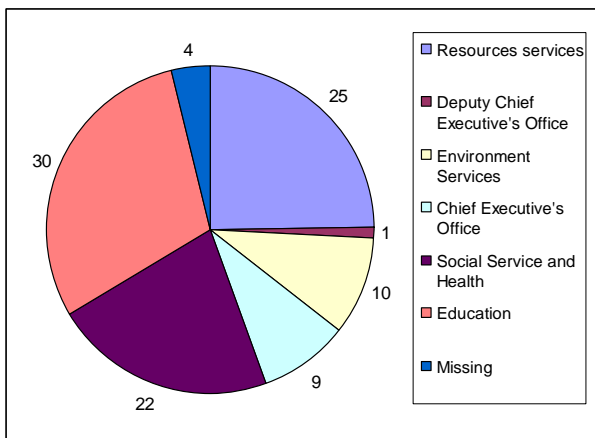
Source: E-survey of Female Employees in Wakefield MDC

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



Source: E-survey of Female Employees in Wakefield MDC

**Figure 4 Distribution of respondents across Wakefield MDC service areas**



Source: E-survey of Female Employees in Wakefield MDC

Three per cent of e-survey respondents were disabled women, 35% were qualified to degree level or above, and 44% had worked at Wakefield MDC for 10 years or more. Almost all had received some training during their period of service (92%) and just under half (43%) reported that they had received training which enabled them to progress to a higher grade.

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

### Women's experiences of working at Wakefield MDC

#### Attitudes to paid work

The large majority of women, who are in jobs which are, or could be, part of a career, value their employment highly. For them, it is an important source of satisfaction and income security, and provides a context for 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; they have autonomy to make decisions about how to deliver their work, and can enjoy the stimulation of working with colleagues to achieve a goal
- A meaningful working life, in which they enjoy what they do, and in some cases can leave 'a legacy', is important to them.

*I made a definite decision to work for the public sector because for me it is about being able to help the people of Wakefield, so the value I get from my job is feeling in some way I may have helped someone.* (aged 35-44)

*I can develop a direct service that I think meets those challenges, rather than someone directing it and telling me what I should be doing* (aged 35-44)

*We work in partnership with a lot of other agencies to reduce crime disorder. For me a great part of the job is getting out and seeing what everybody*

*does and being able to join things up so we can do things a bit better.* (aged 25-34)

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

The commitment they make to their work is also suggested by the hours they work. A high proportion of respondents to our e-survey are contracted to work 31-37 hours a week (74%) while at the same time a substantial proportion of women have caring responsibilities. 68% of women with dependent children and 81% of women providing unpaid care to an adult dependent or disabled children are contracted to work 31+ hours per week.

Part-time workers in our survey, as shown in Figure 3 above, were much more concentrated in the lower paid grades of employment than were full-time employees. Well over half of full-time respondents earned £18,000 per annum or above, whereas only about a third of part-time respondents were earning at this (full-time equivalent) level. No respondents in the part-time group were among the most highly paid grades (£41,000 p/a and above).

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

*You want different things from a job at different periods of your life. I want something challenging now, but I didn't want something challenging 20 years ago when I had my children.*(aged 45-59)

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

Whilst having a profound effect on the organisation and enrichment of their lives, motherhood had not lessened women's attachment to their jobs and careers - only made this more difficult to achieve.

*I didn't want to come back to work at all up until he was 6 months, and then I just went all career in my head. So the barriers for me are work ones I would say.* (aged 25-34)

*I am still made to feel guilty [for going back to work full time], not by my husband but by other women. A lot of my friends don't work or do part time jobs.* (aged 35-44)

Some women 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, they were mixed up with practical considerations and concerns about their ability to perform at work.

*I had a good job with Wakefield district council 16 years ago and I had my son and there weren't the job the opportunities then for job share - but I gave that job up because I would have hated to have to go in there and say, 'Sorry, my son is poorly, I've got to go' because I am dedicated to my colleagues. I would have felt worried about letting them down.* (aged 35-44)

*When I had children, I knew I could not work elsewhere, and I have restricted my own career development because I could not work without the extensive family support. My parents still live here, so when my child is sick it's not me that takes the time off, I ring my parents up.* (aged 35-44)

### **Work-family tensions**

Many mothers described the pressure and guilt they felt trying to sustain family activities, spend time with friends and fulfil work commitments which satisfied their need for mental stimulation and fulfilment.

*I still want to see the kids at some point. For an 8 o'clock meeting I have to get up an hour earlier, my husband does a lot of the childcare, but there's things I like to sort out, like their clothes, whatever. It just eats into to your personal time .. there's just not enough hours in the day.* (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.

*I try and fit my work hours around childcare and my husband's shifts, I couldn't possibly go [to work] on a train, it needs to be easy to get back [home]. I worry about getting to the children.* (aged 35-44)

Women described how family commitments meant not just 'being there', but also holding in their head plans and household related tasks whilst at work. Women joked that they regularly 'saved the family from starvation' by placing the weekly food shopping order over the internet in their half hour lunch break.

Changes in their personal lives and relationships with their children's father had reinforced some mothers' commitment to their career:

*I've brought [my children] up on my own since the oldest one was 4, so if I needed any childcare I've had to pay for it, and it's cost me a fortune over the past 4 years - but what do I do say? 'Right, no more work, I've got to stop at home'. (aged 35-44)*

### **Caring for older relatives**

In addition to their paid jobs, 15% of the e-survey respondents had unpaid caring responsibilities for an old, frail or disabled relative or friend. A few women in the older age groups were providing more than 20 hours of unpaid care each week. These commitments affected them for varying lengths of time, and in some cases had arisen without warning. Such unpaid caring is a common experience of employees: the 2001 Census showed that 16% of all employed women living in Wakefield were carers (see Buckner et al 2004:57). Women in the focus groups had put in place different coping strategies; for example moving house or changing their working hours. They recognised that the dual role was draining, and impacted on their levels of energy whilst at work.

*I chose to move house. I am still 30 miles from work, but I'm closer to my elderly parents now. So I looked at it heavily 3 years ago and asked myself, 'Now, do I want that commuting?' (aged 45-59)*

*I just worked job share so I could take care of my mum, and it was when my mum passed away that I looked at more hours. (aged 45-59)*

*Over the last couple of years my son has had a serious health problem and my 80 year old mother is descending into Alzheimer's and the problems that brings. I haven't had the emotional energy [to consider my professional needs]. (aged 45-59)*

### **Retirement**

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

*When I got on to this course I wondered - would I want to go for promotion? I'm going to be 45 when I finish it - is too late? But what convinced me was when you look at how long you are going to have work now. (age 35-44)*

*I think the fact is I have quite a few years left and that's what made me really think - I'm going to do it [a further qualification], because you could possibly have 20 years left [at work]. (aged 35-44)*

Some women who were closer to retirement age still had personal goals that they wished to fulfil, and were clear about the time needed to achieve them. Others had reached the limit of their ambitions.

*I've just applied for one more promotion, which I didn't think I would do, but I've decided that I do want to learn a bit more. I think you get to the stage where you think, 'Oh no, I need a bit more of a challenge now' and I just want a little bit more frisk in my job. (aged 45-59)*

*I shall be extremely busy until 2008. But I am basically hoping to go at 60, leaving an extremely tidy ship with a lot of very good people in it. And that's what I see as my aim, to produce something that I can hand over. And I shall walk away, close the door, and start another thing. (aged 45-59)*

*I don't want to progress any further. I feel as if I've clawed my way to where I am now, and I haven't got the strength or motivation to go any higher. (aged 45-59)*

*I've always worked in the centre of Wakefield and I've always worked for the local authority, so I can't see how I will ever move - it's too convenient, and I don't even look for jobs any more. (aged 45-59)*

A common aspiration among older women was to 'ease out' of the world of work by reducing their working hours.

*I have already told my manager that when I get near the day that I want to retire I shall be asking for a reduction in my working week. I think, for me, that is crucial. I just hope they will allow me to do that. (aged 45-59)*

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

### **Employer of choice**

The features they emphasised, in describing what made the local authority their 'employer of choice', included its flexible working

arrangements, the job security they felt they had, and, for older women, the training opportunities they had been offered.

Women in all our focus groups gave examples of flexible working arrangements. In many cases it was what had attracted them to apply for their jobs. The importance they placed on flexibility was not confined only to mothers or those with other caring responsibilities. To them, '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.

*It's being able to go out for childcare or whatever reason - something crops up. You know that your manager or your team aren't going to be saying, 'Oh, look at her swanning off' - because that's defined as what you are allowed to do.*  
(aged 25-34)

*I did a 10 hour day because we had a public consultation meeting, but I know that if I go home at 3 o'clock this afternoon I'm not going to be penalised.*  
(aged 25-34)

*I cannot fault it [Wakefield MDC]. If my children have been ill, I have been able to drop things at a moment's notice, because they have known that I will take it back up afterwards, and that they don't lose out. I don't think you can put a high enough value on that.*  
(aged 35-44)

Almost a third of the e-survey respondents had altered their contracted hours during their service with Wakefield MDC. A third of women aged 25-34 and aged 50+ have used flexible working arrangements, compared with just over half of respondents aged 35-49. In the e-survey, women aged 35-59 have made most use of Carers Leave (approximately 1 in every 3 women). Parental leave has been most popular with women aged 35-44 (1 in 3), however there are small but significant numbers of younger and older women using this form of leave: 25-34 (16%) 45-49 (16%) and 50-59 (9%).

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

*If your line manager doesn't have a problem with it, and their service manager doesn't have a problem with it, they can pretty much come up with any sort of working [arrangement].* (aged 25-34)

For some women with family commitments, the ability to work flexibly outweighed all other considerations when they compared Wakefield MDC with other local employers.

*Flexibility is important - 14 years ago it was because of childcare responsibilities, it's now because of elderly relative responsibilities... and I know that a lot of private sector employers have developed their flexible working arrangements, but at the time that I wanted to go back to work, 14 years ago, this [Wakefield MDC] was the best option and that was it really - I didn't look beyond that.*  
(aged 45-59)

*I've got a young baby and I was lucky enough to be able to come back and do 4 days for a year, that wouldn't have happened somewhere else.*  
(age 25-34)

*Flexible working hours would depend whether I took a job or not, regardless of salary really.*  
(aged 25-34)

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

*When I first started here I just carried on working the way I had been in my previous job and because I was writing it down I suddenly realised how much time they had got out of me that I wasn't being paid for.*  
(aged 25-34)

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

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

*For me it's always been working for the local authority and in effect they are the best in my field and also they have got the best idea what we are trying to do.*  
(aged 45-59)

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

*I would like to stay in [working in this area], but I don't know if I would like to stay in local government... I do like the private sector because it's quicker. I can't do with it - it's just far too slow, everything is so slow.*  
(aged 35-44)

*[The political dimension] makes us a very, very different animal to the private sector, so your*



*creativity and innovation sometimes can be sapped, but it's a personal choice, I think. You may wish to stay, but you may want to explore other opportunities.*  
(aged 35-44)

Some younger women described how the perception of local government outside the sector meant that by continuing as public employees, they were actually limiting their career development options.

*They look at your career history and see - local authority, local authority, and they just think - no, this person doesn't know how to make a profit. ...I've even phoned up and said why didn't I get an interview? and some of them have been quite honest and said we don't feel that with a total local authority background you would be able to work in business.*  
(aged 25-34)

Women in all age groups shared a perception that employment in Wakefield MDC was 'more secure' than that offered by other local employers. This was based on the greater range of employment policies which safeguarded employees' interests.

*In the private sector they can just literally get rid of you for whatever reason they want to, and within the council that's just not going to happen, so there's a level of stability and security with your job.*  
(aged 25-34)

*I have been made redundant [in the private sector] and value the security of being in the public sector. All the years I have been [working here] things have been changing. It is not a job for life - but it's so much more secure than being out in the real world.*  
(aged 45-59)

### **Training and staff development**

Women aged 35+ considered that the training opportunities offered by Wakefield MDC were good. This had been a factor in some women's decision to apply for employment in the local authority sector. Younger women were less satisfied.

*I don't think that local government people are given the credit they deserve, because they really are professional, they are well trained. I think I've been trained very well in local government.*  
(aged 35-44)

*I wanted to come to the council just because I want to train. I want to get a degree and I could do it here.*  
(aged 35-44)

The overwhelming majority of women in the e-survey (92%) 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 salaries over £41,000 (61% agreed) and for women aged 35-49 (48% agreed) but less applicable to women aged 25-34 (38% agreed).

### **Pay**

As we demonstrated in the *Gender Profile of Wakefield's Local Labour Market* (Buckner et al 2004:35), pay in Wakefield is well below the average at regional and national levels. The average annual salary of women working full-time in Wakefield was just £17,500, compared with £20,000 for women across England<sup>10</sup>.

During the time they had worked for the local authority, many women responding to the e-survey had experienced variation in their FTE salaries. 66% had experienced an increase, while 7% of respondents had seen their salary both increase and decrease. These women may have acted-up to 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 older I get - knowing I'm on a salaried pension is a really good thing... I've planned around that money. That's one of the things when you compare [your salary] with what you might get in the outside world doing consultancy, or whatever, you think - actually I've got my salaried pension sitting there.*  
(aged 45-59)

### **Attitudes to career development**

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

*I've been quite determined, since probably 18, to work with people ...but I haven't had the support to do that. That's been all under my own steam... it's quite a big gamble, because I'm actually going to take an £8,000 pay cut [to re-train] and basically start again.*  
(aged 25-34)

Younger women appeared to place greater reliance than other age groups on their managers in Wakefield MDC to provide direction to their development, and experience and opportunities for them to work at a higher level. Many were

<sup>10</sup> Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2005, ONS Crown Copyright reserved. These data refer to all female employees in the Wakefield district.

frustrated that their potential had not be recognised by their managers and developed in a structured way.

*I think as a graduate coming into the council they don't value the skills that you've already got and ...you are better moving on or moving somewhere else than just waiting for somebody to actually say, 'yes you've got those skills and we're going to invest in you to do this training course.'*

(aged 25-34)

Older women spoke of being 'lucky' - appropriate opportunities had arisen for them in their section to apply for, at a point when they were ready to move on. Only a small number of more senior women felt that once you reach a certain level it is possible to create your own opportunities within Wakefield MDC.

*The career opportunities have also arisen for me at the right time - so at a point I have been ready to move on and there is a job presented itself... I have been fortunate, and that doesn't always happen for a lot of people and you have to go outside [Wakefield MDC].*

(aged 35-44)

*I don't think people have ever said to me, 'You must go and challenge yourself', it's been me that's said, 'I'm going to challenge myself, I'm going to see what is out there that can improve', usually the service rather than my job, but it does improve my job as well.*

(aged 45-59)

Women who had not entered employment with training in a vocational area were reluctant to describe their progression within the organisation as a 'career' because they had not stuck to a single area or function.

*I don't have a speciality, I never have, it's always been one job to the next, and I jump up a grade and jump up a grade... but I never went 'Ooh, I think I'll work in so and so', I just kind of fall into the jobs I am in. I don't really see mine as a career per se.*

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

*We had a middle tier. The managers got rid of the section head tier and put in a management strata tier. So that 1 manager - first on the rung - is doing the jobs of the section head and the management, so that's a stressful position to be in.* (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 spent much of their time 'fire fighting'.

*That's how it works in my department, where you have a day or three days where it's just absolutely manic, and you haven't got time to think. Then I have a whole week where you can plan ahead and catch up on things, but it's not month by month, it's usually just days.* (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.

*My job isn't structured round long and unsociable hours; it's structured round me being absolutely exhausted, and having done nothing but operational work during the day, instead of thinking strategically about the service. You only need a couple of people to be ill long term - holiday - training - whatever, and suddenly because the operation has to keep going you're doing their jobs as well as yours.* (aged 45-59)

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

*I want to be able to give my children my love, time and support but also give my job my all and sometimes end up exhausted as a result.*

(aged 35-44)

*My parents-in-law are old and ill, needing more support. It's coming to the point where I have started to consider whether I need to reduce my*

*working hours as I cannot deal with this extra pressure.* (aged 35-44)

Intense workloads can act as a trigger for women to look for alternative employment within the local authority sector at a similar level that is better resourced and hence less pressurised.

*The reason for going [for another job] is because I've got to that point where I said - no more! They can't keep giving me more and more, I have no staff underneath me, so I'm delivering at the front line, and this job came up I looked at it I thought it's actually easier - it's a whole team delivering what I'm delivering on my own at the moment, that's it, I'm going.* (aged 35-44)

Other women saw reducing their working hours at Wakefield MDC a preferable solution. However, by reducing their hours and hence level of responsibility, they accepted that their new role could challenge them less and would be a backward step in career terms. A few women had found reducing their hours had actually increased the pressure they felt at work.

*I don't get to do flexi, because I only work Monday to Thursday, but I've always been asked to come in on a Friday for team leader meetings, and you say, 'Well I don't actually work Fridays' – 'Well you are a team leader now, you have to come in, if you don't come in, I'll expect that you don't want the job.'* (aged 35-44)

They often felt no action was taken to align workloads with shorter hours, and that deadlines for work are set on the assumption that everyone works full-time, leaving part-time employees having to catch up in their non-work time. Women put in this position felt very reluctant to refuse a senior person's request, because of the damage they felt it could do to their career.

Working in this way, up against the clock, reduced the women's enjoyment of being at work and limited the time they could spend on creative thinking and communication with colleagues. The social side of work was an important reason why some women continued in their jobs.

*After 10 years at home with my children I realised how much work is a 'social' thing, and gives me more identity and individuality. I enjoy both roles.* (aged 45-59)

Many women indicated that when considering an upward career move, they weighed up the likely impact of the anticipated workload on other parts of their lives and made a decision about whether

they could 'cope'. They tried to gauge whether the workload could be contained within the designated working hours, and how far it would spill over into non-work time:

*If I took on something else [higher position] I would barely see the children, so you have to say - well I'm not going to do it until they get to an age where they are more independent.* (aged 35-44)

*Before [having children] I wanted to get as high as possible. Now I just want reasonable pay, but I will not take on excessive pressure.* (aged 35-44)

### Long Hours

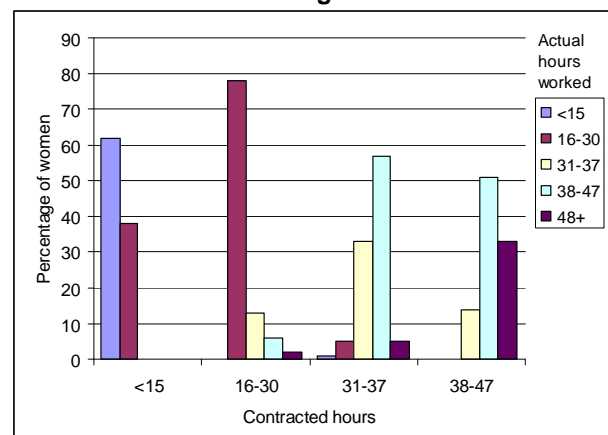
As well as determining the expected intensity of work, the volume of work also influenced the hours required to get the job finished. The 'long hours' culture was another key factor in women's choices about whether to advance their careers. It affected women with and without caring responsibilities.

*I look for work life balance rather than just work, work, work. My personal life has become more important.* (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 52% of women respondents in Wakefield MDC were working more than their contracted hours (Figure 5).

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



Source: E-survey of Female Employees in Wakefield MDC

While 74% of all respondents were contracted to work between 31-37 hours per week only 28% reported that they actually worked these hours during an average week. 45% reported that they routinely worked between 38-47 hours and 6% worked 48 hours or more. Long hours were prevalent among women, regardless of age. The greatest difference between contracted and actual hours was reported by women aged 50+.

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 for not doing so.

*It was suggested [by management] that if we still can't get the work done we might have to come on at weekends... there's a few people that haven't got children, they managed to get in on a Saturday and Sunday and now because they managed to get in, you're looked down on when you can't or don't want to.* (aged 35-44)

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

*I've taken on more responsibility as that requirement [to work longer hours] has really intensified. A lot of it is about being there for the staff, and being supportive to them and also having to make sure that everything is done at the end [of every day].* (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 that their workloads were too big to complete in contracted hours.

*I was looking forward to that day, because I'd got that out the way - I can have a break now, but then there's always something else. It's just a nightmare - whilst you are saying to everybody else [in the team] you've got to go home now, you stay alone [to meet your own deadlines].* (aged 35-44)

*I am committed to doing extra hours when required to, but actually then I'm not allowed to take it back, because it is not allowed to affect the service.* (aged 35-44)

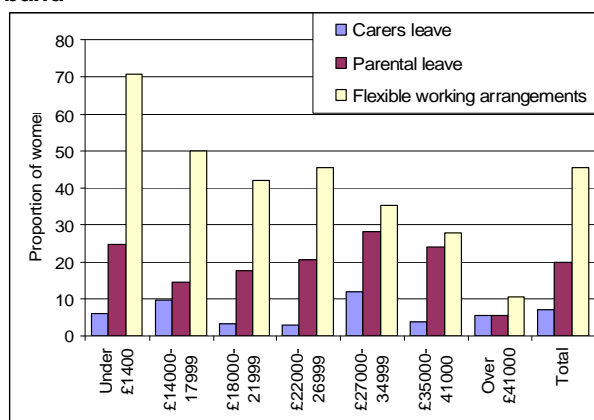
There was widespread agreement, across all age groups, that the more senior you become, the longer your hours are. Women described an informal understanding that, above a certain

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 always had a good interview, but someone else always got the job. Then someone said, 'Well, people are scared because you are on job share that you are going to take a full time job and then immediately want to go back onto job share again.'* (aged 45-59)

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 45% of all respondents had used Wakefield MDC's flexible working arrangements, among those earning £35,000-£41,000 per annum, fewer than 28% had done so. For women earning above this figure, only 11% have made use of the option.

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



Source: E-survey of Female Employees in Wakefield MDC

*Flexible working policies for me are important for everyone else wrapped round me, and I do encourage people to go home early, spend time with their children. But I don't apply the same policy to me... I don't see how I can - the expectation above me [is for me] to be there constantly is I think worrying, really, because if you have a normal life you just couldn't possibly do that.* (aged 35-44)

Consequently, some women have '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)

Women were fearful of losing the flexibility in choosing their hours that they currently enjoyed, if

they were successful in getting a more senior position.

*It depends on flexibility. My biggest worry at the moment - before I accept [a higher level job], is I have to say, 'Will you let me drop my daughter off at school at 9 o'clock? Which means that I won't start with you until quarter to 10, but I will work through into the early evening etc - that's fine - but I need to start at quarter to 10 rather than at half past 8.'* (aged 35-44)

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

*This whole idea about having to play the game if you want to get on, I mean that makes me really angry, because you know when people start being pressured into doing that I mean that is basically colluding with a culture that I don't agree.* (aged 35-44)

In other words, it meant accepting that there was no longer any flexibility; work would always come first. For a few women their work life was so demanding that it precluded time to reflect on their priorities and plan their future development.

*Sometimes I wonder whether it's worth what I'm doing because of [having no work life balance] - but then on the other hand, you know it goes with the territory. But I find my work life balance is appalling, and that worries me because you can easily just become a workaholic - so that is quite important for me to try and sort out, but I never seem to get the time to do that.* (aged 35-44)

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

### Qualification requirements

As already mentioned, women aged 35+ were positive about the training they had been offered at Wakefield MDC. Younger women were less satisfied and spoke of a 'degree bar'. Women noted that having a degree was an essential criterion on many job descriptions for senior positions in the local government sector, and was a way of advancing more rapidly.

*If you haven't got a degree there's only so far you can go, and I'm doing a degree now and even though I've got other qualifications.* (aged 35-44)

*When you talk to some people still going through the scales - 1, 2, 3, 4 - but I haven't - I jumped a*

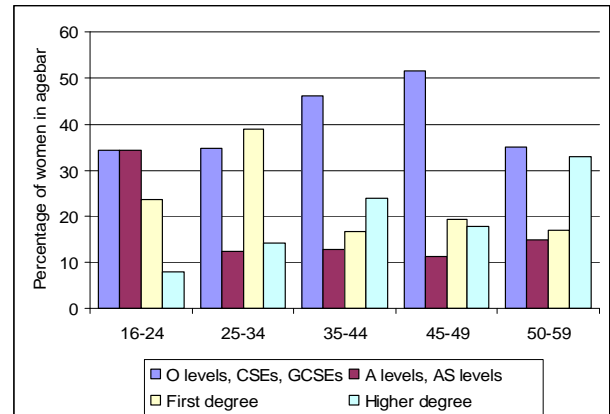
*lot in between, so I do think that it has been the accredited course that has made me do that.* (aged 35-44)

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

*I think I've got the skills that they want on a day to day basis what is a degree going to prove? It's not like social work where you've got to have particular qualifications to be able to legally do the job* (aged 25-34)

Our e-survey data show that 35% of respondents had a degree or above, and 20% had a higher degree. There was a correlation between qualification and salary band. Over 60% of women paid £27,000-£34,000 had a degree, compared with only 38% on the pay band below. The majority of those earning £35,000 or above had a higher degree. The *Gender Profile of Wakefield's Local Labour Market* (Buckner et al 2004) shows that Wakefield district has fewer men and women with higher qualifications than the region and England as a whole. In the 35-49 age group only about 15% of all women in Wakefield have higher qualifications, compared with regional averages of 20% and national averages of nearly 25%.

Figure 7 Highest qualifications achieved by age



Source: E-survey of Female Employees in Wakefield MDC

Some women thought that getting a degree level qualification, supported by Wakefield MDC, increased their confidence in their own ability, even if the degree subject did not relate very closely to their daily work.

*I don't feel confident until I get that degree, even though I might have other qualities and probably I could do [a higher management level job] without having that.* (aged 35-44)

*Looking back, I think I got a lot of confidence from it [the degree] because I felt like I had a broad range of understanding of things, knowing where to go to find that information, how to work with other people - so I think that has actually been a really good start. (aged 35-44)*

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.

*I am sort of just below the level where I will be expected to manage people, so why can't I do a management qualification? So that when I get to that level I'm ready for it. (aged 25-34)*

*They just want you to do your everyday job, and they are not really interested in developing you. (aged 25-34)*

*I don't really feel as if we are serious about developing people, either within their own jobs or moving on to cover other areas. We just accept people as they are, and it's just status quo. (aged 35-44)*

*Although we do have appraisals the focus is mainly on delivering what there is in the work programme, and although there is a little bit at the end which is your personal development plan, it just seems to be, it doesn't take very long to cover that area. (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. They also gave as a reason the lack of budgets and capacity within teams to release someone on a day to day basis, without a detrimental effect on the service. This was more of a problem in some departments than others.

*Our manager at that time said, 'You can't go on that course, we're not giving qualifications for you to get a job elsewhere'. (aged 35-44)*

*But that problem is with the training budgets ... you have to look at prioritising training that is appropriate to the post that people presently hold. We've actually written a training policy now saying that's what we'll do. Anybody who is looking at their future career development, we cannot afford to support them. (aged 34-44)*

A few women had taken the opportunity of a secondment or acting up to a higher position to widen their experience, but had not felt that this had brought any long term benefit; they had returned to their previous position and faced uncomfortable relationships with colleagues and managers who felt threatened by their new skills and knowledge.

*I did that [secondment] and gained a lot of respect through that, a lot of contacts etc., and I went back to my own job - and that has been part of the frustration, in that people still see me as being part of the [strategy team]. Externally people still come to me. Now the problem I face then was, I feel as if I've been seen as a threat to the men above me. (aged 35-44)*

*My manager was off for about 6 to 8 months last year through illness, and I stepped into her shoes while she was off, and since she's come back and I've gone back to my old job, I do feel it's caused a little bit of tension between us, about who's doing what, and who's responsible for what ... For me, well, do I stay now, or is it time to move on? (aged 35-44)*

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.

*A lot of jobs further up are now asking for management qualifications, and I think in Wakefield that it disadvantages women, especially those of us with children, because I keep looking at doing a MA etc and with the hours I work, the amount of unsociable hours I work, plus having 2 young daughters, then I cannot do the studying on top, it's just too much. But that's then limiting my progression. (aged 35-44)*

*It's an evening course, I can't do that the amount of times I would just say 'Sorry, I'm working tonight [in my paid job], I can't come on the course'. (aged 35-44)*

Women in the older age groups working at more senior levels did not share younger women's concerns about the 'degree bar' and lack of training opportunities to progress. It was also easier for some of them to fit study in with work commitments as their caring responsibilities were not as demanding.

*I'm lucky, my son is nearly 16 - I've got that space to do it [study] and work full time, because he's older.* (aged 45-59)

*My experience of appraisals and the processes has been very good, and that has been what has helped me progress. 14 years ago I came in as admin support, and I've progressed through to the management team in the service, and it has been largely because of the training that I have done along the way.* (aged 45-59)

For a few older women, any form of training presented a difficulty, due to the intensity of their workloads which involved more pressing priorities, so that they postponed training organised in work time.

*I wonder just how many people have had to cancel training sessions because somebody was off work and you've got to cover - it happens all the time.* (aged 45-59)

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

### **Organisational culture**

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

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

*Walking into meetings, I feel like I do get treated slightly different to the male colleague who is doing the same job. I had to cover one of his meetings once - I felt like I was being treated like the admin assistant taking the minutes, whereas I think when he goes in there, they respect his opinion a bit more.* (aged 25-34)

Younger women tended to see higher level culture as bound by rank and notions of seniority. They felt their age put them at a double disadvantage. They were angered by the lack of respect afforded to them and were ready to challenge ageist stereotypes.

*I found that, with me, because we work with senior management, getting them to take me seriously is difficult. I'm actually 30 and they think I'm 18.* (aged 25-34)

*I'm not going to take any rubbish from them ... but it's that initial, when you walk in the room, and it's irritating. You get that look of 'Who is she?' and then they start listening, and what's coming out of your mouth is intelligent... and then they will listen.* (aged 25-34)

*She [my manager] said, 'Well, why don't you try wearing more make up?' [to look older]. But I never wear any. I think, 'Why should I get up even earlier to put some extra slap on, when I don't need it?'* (aged 25-34)

Women working in service areas where men predominated described occasions when they had felt patronised by male colleagues. They had a variety of different ways of coping. Many women faced it down, others played along as 'one of the lads'.

*You sit in a meeting with senior managers and you will be the only woman in the room, and they will turn to you and say something like 'who is going to be mother and serve tea?' Now I don't do that, I always go - 'I don't drink tea or coffee, you'll get a crap cup of tea from me'... and now they know not to ask.* (aged 35-44)

*There's a handful of women, compared to the amount of men. I suppose it depends on your personality. I've never had any problems with it, because I've always been one of the lads really... I've done IT all the way through university, and it has always been male dominated, so to me it's not really an issue, because I've grown up with it.* (aged 25-34)

In general, women commented that sexist attitudes were dying out in the organisation. They recalled how blatant the discrimination against women had been in the past.

*When I first started in local government with the county council years ago I remember distinctly there was an opportunity came up in accounts, and I'd done the BTEC National in accountancy and my immediate boss wanted to move me to that position, and someone higher up moved this young lad in there. He'd got nowhere near the grades I'd got, and he was moved in because he was a male. I couldn't believe that.* (aged 35-44)

*The only time it ever felt sexist was if you were going to go to a Committee, you'd got to go to Labour Group beforehand if you were a man. And we were told to go into town to have a coffee for an hour.* (aged 35-44)

Any remaining discriminatory attitudes were likely to be hidden, since the wider culture and policies did not support them being openly expressed.

*We've got a member of staff on maternity leave at the moment, and I feel that he has said things to me that he shouldn't have said to anybody, never mind about one of my colleagues. It would make me extremely nervous about going and telling him I was pregnant. He doesn't believe that her job is a job that can be done part time, but because of all the schemes that are running within the council he is going to have to accept it, so he doesn't portray those attitudes, but you know he's got them. I think there is quite a lot of that [in Wakefield MDC]*  
(aged 25-34)

Women with longer lengths of service suggested that these attitudes persisted because of the static nature of the workforce, which allowed men who had worked for Wakefield MDC since leaving school at the age of 15 to rise 'inexorably' to senior positions.

*I have a lot of respect for a lot of the female managers in the authority, there's very few I would go - 'God how did they get their job, they're crap!' But the amount of men that I could say that about. There was this traditional culture within Wakefield years ago - we appointed managers for their technical knowledge, not for their management ability.*  
(aged 35-44)

They also considered that patriarchal attitudes that existed in the wider local community were sometimes reflected in the democratic and public bodies and boards associated with the authority.

*There are in some parts of the council still those very traditional hierarchical cultures existing ...the new [senior management] team that came on to the council tried very much to change that management culture. There are some bits that hide in there, and just aren't affected by what's been going on.*  
(aged 35-44)

Younger women were particularly frustrated by a *dead man's shoes situation* - the preservation of the status quo and lack of a mobile workforce. Many felt that they did not have anywhere to progress to.

*If I took a sideways [move] over to another team I might go up one grade, but within a couple of years I will be up against that brick wall again, so I want to do something where the top level is as high as you want to possibly go*  
(aged 25-34)

*I needed to be qualified to get on to the grade that I'm on now, and I can't step up to the next level until I've got to the top of the grade by increments.*

*I've just got to stay at that tier for quite a few years.*  
(aged 25-34)

*We are quite a small section, and I am unfortunately waiting, it's like a dead man's shoes situation.*  
(aged 25-34)

*They almost force you into moving and losing the skills that they've just spent 18 months training me.*  
(aged 25-34)

This made guidance from their managers even more critical and valuable.

*Not all managers are willing to push you and even pinpoint your main abilities, and expand on them. I think a lot of the time they don't have time... they leave it down to supervisors who haven't got as much vision.*  
(aged 35-44)

### **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.

*One of the main reasons I come to work is my manager. She will let you get on with your work, she will give you a challenge, and she will push you that little bit further, and take you out of your comfort zone, which is sometimes a bit daunting, but you're pleased she's made you do that.*  
(aged 25-34)

*We got a manager who's always worked in private industry. She's there on an interim basis and stayed on another year. I just had to grab the chance [to work in her team] and take it ... She is a bit of a maverick and she will challenge the status quo, which is great - but I know a lot of people have got managers that are set in their ways, they've always done things as they've done them.*  
(aged 25-34)

*So I got pushed in a direction that possibly I wouldn't have made myself. I think it's very good to have people like that round you, that just constantly keep you thinking about other opportunities. That you don't have to stay in that job, you can use your skills and apply them elsewhere.*  
(aged 35-44)

Other relationships which assisted women to progress included mentors external to Wakefield MDC (including professional contacts and colleagues working for different organisations)



who shared information and intelligence about vacancies:

*I'm mentored now, and I'm mentored from somebody external to the authority and it really, really supports me. I asked somebody if they would mentor me and what they are doing is actually helping my profile be built externally, which is helpful.* (aged 35-44)

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

Women felt their careers had benefited from personal development training. It had given them skills 'to sell' themselves more effectively, and to know their own worth. This training had primarily been offered by the *Stepping Forward Initiative* and had left a lasting impression on its attendees.

*I've been on a personal development - it was through the women's group Stepping Forward – Springboard. It was a women's group and it was 4 days, spaced over 4 months, and it was all about confidence, self esteem, goal setting, career progression, and it was fantastic.* (aged 25-34)

*I used to go to those half day Stepping Forward conferences. They were like Victoria Wood, and they were absolutely fantastic. [The facilitator] was just like a comedian, but they were really empowering.* (aged 25-34)

Women commented that the opportunity to network through Stepping Forward events had enabled them to gain information about training opportunities within Wakefield MDC, which they otherwise had found difficult to access.

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

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown that, irrespective of family situation or age, many women working within Wakefield MDC 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 to support training opportunities. Most view their own career development as a

personal responsibility, but many 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 Wakefield MDC has put in place to support its employees in achieving a good work-life balance, and few reported significant problems with their managers in implementing these.

Nevertheless, many women noted that there is an organisational culture at Wakefield MDC 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 pay a high price for this in terms of their health and wellbeing.

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

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

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

For many women in our study, Wakefield MDC remains their local 'employer of choice', and we were struck by the commitment and enthusiasm of those who took part in our discussion groups. This suggests that many of the steps the local authority has already taken to modernise its employment practices, particularly in relation to

workforce training and development and to work-life balance, have paid off.

The future challenge will be to retain this committed workforce in the context of a shrinking working age population, 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 Wakefield MDC in rising to this future challenge.

## **Recommendations**

1. Implement Wakefield MDC's work-life balance policies at higher levels, in particular encouraging part-time and flexible working arrangements in senior roles.
2. Improve the analysis and accessibility of the data held by the local authority's human resources department relating to part time employees. Track women's and men's career progress, and make this data available to employees.
3. Review managers' approaches to appraisal and provide training in workforce development and succession management in static areas.
4. Provide a fast track training for younger women employees with potential into management.
5. Continue to develop and expand opportunities for personal development e.g. assertiveness and presentation skills training, via the Stepping Forward Initiative.
6. Review the inclusion of a degree level qualification as an essential criterion in job descriptions, and explore ways of valuing a job applicant's relevant experience.
7. Review women's new skills and experience on the conclusion of a secondment or experience of acting up. Explore ways of rewarding these achievements appropriately.
8. Provide a tailored support package for those undertaking long-term study, taking into account the different patterns of learning which those with caring responsibilities may want to adopt.
9. Create a carer's network to offer self-help support to employees who find themselves with growing caring responsibilities; to provide information and career advice about reduced hours options; and to raise managerial awareness about the issue of caring.

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Wakefield MDC Opportunity Now - Benchmarking submission 2004, Evidence list

Opportunity Now - Benchmarking submission, September 2004

Stepping Forward - Terms of reference and operational framework, September 2004

Stepping Up statistical information, May 2004

Stepping Up - Women on the management ladder - Report 2001, Annual Report 1999

Stepping Up - Corporate issues 9 July 2003 - Feedback on women's issues from Environment Services

Working Choices, managers' pack - Flexible choices for all

Working Choices – all Council staff

Women's Equality Policy

Timeline - a year in the life of Wakefield Council, April 2004

Fast forward - the Wakefield District Community Strategy, March 2003

Castle Awards submission - Category 2 Part-time workers

Women in Public Life Report - Report on the Women in Public Life conference

DMT Stepping Up Report - RESACXDCX

DMT Equality and Diversity Update Report March 2004 - Report and workforce profile of Environment Services

IWD report 2004 - International Women's Day report

Corporate Equality Diversity Action Plan - 2004 - Corporate Equality Plan (draft)

SSH Surveys (Social Services and Health) - information on survey which was sent out and responses

IIPthestandard - Information on Wakefield MDC and Investors in People

Childcare Voucher Report (proposed salary sacrifice childcare voucher scheme)

Take Our Daughters to Work, 2005 Wakefield MDC

Yorkshire Women of Achievement 2004 – including Wakefield MDC Nominees

## 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 Stiell
  4. *Women's career development in the local authority sector in England* led by Dr Cinnamon Bennett
  5. *Addressing women's poverty: local labour market initiatives* led by Karen Escott
  6. *Local challenges in meeting demand for domiciliary care* led from autumn 2005 by Professor Sue Yeandle (and prior to this by Anu Suokas).

### The GELLM Team

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

### The GELLM Partnership

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

## Appendix 2 Research Methods

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

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

### Data analysis

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

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