



## Routes to Power

Summary of discussion with ethnic minority women councillors



ETHNOS

RESEARCH AND  
CONSULTANCY



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## About Routes to Power

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These interim findings are the first part of Fawcett's wider qualitative research project called Routes to Power which is tracking ethnic minority women's routes into, through, up and out of decision-making positions.

The research is funded by the Government's Equalities Office, which is being led by the Minister for Women, Harriet Harman QC MP. The final report will be published later in the year.

Routes to Power is being conducted by the Fawcett Society's Seeing Double project on ethnic minority women with the help of ETHNOS Research and Consultancy.

The findings are based on a small qualitative study of six ethnic minority women councillors from different ethnic minority communities (Black Caribbean, Brazilian, Indian, Pakistani and Turkish), as well as different political parties (Conservative, Green, Labour, and Liberal Democrat) conducted in July 2007. The study complements larger-scale research conducted by the Government's Commission on Local Councillor that reveals similar trends. These particular findings aim to provide more detailed perspectives on the experiences of some current ethnic minority women councillors.

## 1.0. Aim of the research

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The overall aim of the Routes to Power research project is to explore why ethnic minority women are so under-represented in positions of power in the public, private and voluntary sectors. The research seeks to examine the experiences of ethnic minority women who have succeeded in reaching positions of power to find out from them about the motivation behind their achievements, the professional trajectories they followed, the barriers and challenges they met along the way, the strategies they employed to overcome and handle these, and the steps they believe are needed to increase ethnic minority women's access to positions of power.

One particular area of ethnic minority women's under-representation in public life is local government: out of approximately 20 000 local councillors in England, only 168 are ethnic minority women – just 0.9 per cent.<sup>1</sup> This report focuses on the experiences of six of these women.

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<sup>1</sup> National Census of Local Authority Councillors in England 2006.

## **2.0. Method**

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The research findings discussed in this report are entirely qualitative. Six ethnic minority women councillors took part in the research: three attended a mini focus group, one provided her views through a detailed telephone interview, and two were interviewed via an online questionnaire. The councillors were from various ethnic minority communities (Black Caribbean, Brazilian, Indian, Pakistani and Turkish) as well as different political parties (Conservative, Green, Labour and Liberal Democrat). Because of the need to protect the confidentiality of the research participants, the quotes used in the report are not attributed.

Given the nature and size of the sample, this brief report makes no attempt at generalising from the experiences of the six women who took part in the research to the experiences of other ethnic minority women councillors. Its sole intention is to capture some of the richness of these women's experiences and to shed light on the factors that have shaped their careers. This, it is hoped, is a first step towards generating a better understanding of some of the many factors that account for the under-representation of ethnic minority women on local councils.

## 3.0. Findings

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### 3.1. Professional trajectories

The councillors in the study had different professional trajectories which included work in the public sector (e.g. health, environment, local government), in the private sector (e.g. banking, self-employment), in the voluntary sector (e.g. community and voluntary work, school governance), and some involvement in student politics. Four had given up these professional commitments to devote themselves fully to their work as local councillors, but one continued to work full time and another to work part time. All but one were mothers.

### 3.2. Motivation to become councillors

- **Interest in politics**

The councillors generally described themselves as always having been “political”: wanting to “put the world right” and to make a contribution to their local community. They derived much happiness and pride from helping others, from “making a difference”. Typically:

“I was always political. Not in the sense of Westminster only, cause in the Church I was political. In my job I was political. And as a youngster growing up I was political. I was always seeking to put the world right. And dare you say anything that was wrong, I would confront you. And that’s from a young age. So [I] didn’t become a politician, I was always political.”

“I have always been interested in politics, and especially in education, healthcare, public housing and the local environment, as well as wider issues like climate change.”

“I wanted to make a difference in the area in which I lived.”

“If you’re a good councillor, you go and talk to people, you can make an impact on small things, you can make changes to the quality of life of some people. When you’re in power you can influence policy and strategic things... Now I am the Leader of the Opposition and I can challenge them on local issues, I can do things for people on the ward.”

- **Desire to represent ethnic minority women’s interests**

Concerns over race and gender equality were also important drivers for these councillors, although some participants resisted explicitly framing the issues in this way.<sup>2</sup> They wanted to “narrow the huge inequality gaps in education, health and employment”, to “increase the

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<sup>2</sup> One respondent argued that ethnicity as a construct should not be used, that it further marginalises people and that people’s achievements fundamentally depend on their own skills and determination, rather than on structural factors. There is a strong self-efficacy model underpinning these discourses, where success is the result of individual achievement and it is possible to overcome any barriers through ambition and perseverance. The respondent disputed the very premise that ethnic minority women experience a “double disadvantage”, and preferred to talk in terms of differences rather than disadvantage, of choices rather than constraints, of women having to make “private adjustments”.

voice of ethnic minority women” and to ensure that the experiences and needs of ethnic minority women are recognised and catered for. They saw themselves as spokespeople for their community and were aware of being perceived as trail blazers and role models by many other women. Often they had official duties linked to equal opportunities in local government.

“All women, but particularly Turkish women, have been very much excluded from organisations. I felt that because I knew these people and I’d worked with them, I was in a position to go and lobby and to become more involved.”

“I wanted to go further in politics because I want people to be described for whom they are and not by the colour of their skin. But I don’t want to do things only for black people. I want to remove barriers, whatever barriers, for everybody so that you are judged by your own merit and nothing else.”

“As a young Asian woman elected in my position in my local community, it is critical. Most people know who I am. Other ethnic minority colleagues are not as articulate, so I feel that the community looks to me to battle things for them, to do anything to protect them.”

“I always try and ensure I play as full and as public a part as other councillors in my ward and elsewhere. I hope through this to make other women in the ward feel empowered. I do raise issues that affect women. I think it is empowering to others to have people of their own community and gender.”

- **Recognition of the need for diverse institutions**

All the councillors in the study believed that pluralism in society needs to be reflected in the institutions of local, regional and national government in order for democratic institutions to be relevant and effective. They discussed how, as ethnic minority women, they were able to serve the entire local community they represented and at the same time also add “a little extra”, a “bonus” by bringing gender perspectives and the experiences of ethnic minority groups to their work.

“We serve everybody. That’s what we are elected to do. We represent the entire community. But we also have this additional knowledge, this little extra, that we can bring because we know the communities inside out.”

“You need people from different backgrounds to represent the community and to speak up for them because not always the main parties have the ability to understand all the issues that go on in that particular community. So I said to myself: ‘If I am there, I will be able to make people understand what the problems are.’”

“Democracy cannot work when you don’t have representation of all the people. This is why Parliament is so un-representative. The pluralism in our society has to be reflected in both local and national democracy, in order to be relevant. I was very clear about that. I wanted to make democracy more relevant.”

“I do not shy away from making points connected with the experience of minority groups. It is important in terms of providing a culturally sensitive service.”

- **Encouragement from others**

The councillors varied a great deal in terms of their specific routes into their roles.

Despite always having been concerned with matters of social justice, many of the women in the group needed to be actively encouraged by others – either at home or in the public domain – before taking up the councillor role. They needed to be made aware of the role, to be told that they would be good at it, that they could make a difference, that their distinct experiences and outlooks would be valuable. For some, this support came from a partner, for others a parent, and for yet others, from senior members of their political party.

“I was the only ethnic minority representative on the governing body of a school where they had a very large number of Turkish children and I got along. Someone approached me one day and said: ‘Look, you’re really good and you’ve worked for the council. Have you ever thought of being a councillor?’ I said: ‘No. I don’t want to be a councillor. They are all these men sitting around in meetings all night long. I don’t want to get involved in all that.’ They said: ‘No, you should consider it. We need people like you.’ And that’s how it started. I went to a few of their meetings and I got involved and that’s how it started.”

“I was very fortunate in that my husband and my children have encouraged me all the way. My husband is the one who encouraged me to become active in politics.”

- **Dissatisfaction with existing councillors or state of services**

In some cases, it was dissatisfaction with existing councillors or with the state of local services which prompted research participants to become involved in local politics.

“I was a council officer then and I used to see these councillors sitting at meetings and once I had prepared a very detailed report for the councillors and there was one man and he hadn’t read the report I’d written, or he hadn’t understood it, and he was asking me stupid questions. And I just thought: ‘I can do what he’s doing and I can do it better.’”

“One thing that really triggered me was when I moved into [X] area and I wanted my son to go to a particular school and he didn’t get admitted because of sheer ignorance on the part of the Admission Department in the Council. I contacted all my Labour councillors in my ward and none of them got back to me and I said to myself: ‘They are incompetent councillors. Fine. I will take this on board. I will become a councillor and see if I can get things done.’”

### 3.3. Barriers and challenges

The councillors in the study identified a range of barriers they believed prevents citizens in general, and ethnic minority women in particular, from becoming local councillors.

- **Dilettante culture and lack of proper remuneration**

Councillors discussed the need for a radical overhaul of the ways in which local councillors work and are remunerated. They felt that there remained a dilettante culture and that it was important to professionalise the role of local councillors so that their working arrangements, and the level of financial, logistical and administrative support they enjoy, become comparable to that of MPs.

The lack of professionalism they described was attributed to the historical legacy surrounding the role of local councillor, which used to almost exclusively be played by middle-class, white men who had some spare time and money. A consequence of this legacy is the continuing view that councillors should not be paid, and should only receive token allowances. In this way a cycle is created where those most able to take up opportunities to be local councillors are those with more time and money.

The research participants quoted older white male colleagues as saying that introducing proper pay would “attract the wrong type of councillors” and “people who are in it for the money”. The participants themselves strongly disagreed with this view and felt that community service did not need to be provided on a voluntary basis. On the contrary, they believed that proper remuneration would help attract a broader range of councillors, especially from social groups which are on average less likely to be financially independent, such as ethnic minority women. Councillors also argued for greater harmonisation of payment or allowances across boroughs. They felt that current discrepancies were not justified.

“The government has no respect for local councillors, it is easier to be an MP and yet councillors have to juggle with other things. We’ll never see proper wages for councillors, unfortunately.”

- **Working culture**

The request for proper pay seemed to be associated with an increasing workload. Some of the councillors said that their workload had increased quite dramatically over time. Most had given up their paid job in order to devote themselves to their councillor work, as it proved impossible to juggle both. One may expect that few people have the financial means to do that.

The problem of increased workloads and multi-tasking was said to be more acute for those with caring responsibilities, especially those with young children or elderly parents.

“Even if the Council does provide some childcare support, the problem is the time taken up by this, especially if you have a full time job.”

“I think there are very much barriers for women, in terms of being carers, being the main person looking after families. When I first became a councillor, I used to have a full-time job, I had small children and I used to say: “ ‘I really need a wife!’ [...] If you have not got a partner that’s supportive, you can’t do it because you’re going to have to rely on your partner to sort out the kids, do some shopping, you know?”

“Do I progress politically or at work? It’s not easy to do both. It may be easier for men. I would never see my husband if I worked full-time. With male politicians, their wives don’t complain as much. They don’t have to deal as much with having childcare arrangements, with thinking, is my child ok? It’s a huge barrier, there’s a limit to how much energy we can have for this.”

“The only way I can do this is because my mother looks after my child.”

Some of the research participants expressed frustration about how difficult they were finding it to juggle all their roles, revealing that they sometimes asked themselves why they were carrying on as councillors. These councillors felt that they had an important role to play, made a positive contribution, enjoyed “helping others” and the “kick” they got out of the job, but also thought it required undue dedication and carried few rewards.

Research participants also discussed how extended or unspecified office hours, the pressure to be available at all times even in the evenings and on weekends, and the reliance on personal contact information such as private mobile numbers and home addresses also meant that they needed a level of independence, flexibility and freedom from other commitments to be able to fulfil the role.

“Who wants to be a councillor? The time you spend in the evenings and even during the day going to meetings. Does a young mother have this time to go and do it? Do we get paid for it? Who wants to be a councillor? I don’t think there’s any attraction to it, to be honest.”

- **‘Community’ expectations around the role of women**

According to some research participants, the difficulties in juggling domestic and professional commitments are more acute for some ethnic minority women because their families and communities still value a traditional sexual division of labour. In this view, ethnic minority women who act as councillors “disturb the order of things”, raising resistance based on the fear that husbands and children will suffer because women won’t be able to play their caring role as fully as they are expected to. In fact, the greatest overt discrimination councillors described in the focus group discussion was, in their words, from within their own ethnic minority communities.

“How many times did I get asked: ‘Why isn’t your husband doing this? How does your husband feel about it?’ Of course, if I was a man, they would never be asking about this. It’s just not seen as a role for women.”

“In the Indian community, it is looked upon as something that men do. Women are not supposed to do that because it takes them away from their other domestic duties, cooking and cleaning. This is slightly changing now, but there is still a stigma.”

“People from our own community can also be very nasty and do anything to pull you down. I think it’s an Asian issue: active older men in their 50’s and 60’s feel threatened by a young Asian woman and start saying: ‘She should be at home with her baby, she doesn’t really understand this, what is she doing here?’”

“I see many Asian men in local government, but not many women, so maybe there is also a problem of obtaining broad community support, a community barrier?”

Research participants also discussed double-standards in community discourses, describing how they had met people who were relatively supportive of women becoming councillors and “representing the community” in principle, but who were nevertheless critical about women from their own families taking on such roles.

- **Poor support and discrimination from political parties**

Councillors commented on the lack of support, and even the discrimination, they experienced from political parties. They felt that commitment to diversity remained weak and that systems needed to be explored to foster a change in the culture of local government politics.

“I expect the biggest hurdle is getting support from local parties.”

“When I got promoted, there was resentment from my colleagues. ‘She’s so young, why should she get promoted before me? Why should a woman get promoted?’ Some of them would rather die before they let a woman before them.”

“We need more support. We need help to be able to combine this job with others. We need support with case work and political research assistants.”

“Political parties need to make it easier for ethnic minority women. There is still a lot of resistance to ethnic minority women being involved in politics.”

- **Lack of awareness and knowledge about local government**

One of the consequences of the traditional exclusion of women from the public sphere in some communities is that there is an acute lack of awareness about political issues at local government level.

“Lack of awareness is a big thing as well in the communities. They don’t know what being a councillor is. They don’t know what councillors do. They don’t know how to go about becoming a councillor.”

“I know a black woman, mixed race actually. She came to me, she said: ‘I’d love to do it but I just don’t know where to start.’”

- **Current rules on allowances**

Another issue raised in the group was the fact that people who are in receipt of benefits lose some of their entitlements when they receive allowances for their councillor roles. Previous Fawcett research has revealed that women are more dependent on benefits than men, with state support making up at least 75% of the incomes of 30% of women, compared to 15% of men.<sup>3</sup> Current rules on councillor allowances were therefore thought to be unfair, disproportionately affecting women.

Participants also felt that allowances were designed to be treated as income by the benefits system while councillors themselves use them to cover expenses. While councillors not on benefits would be able to use the allowance to supplement any existing, external income and to cover any out of pocket expenses associated with being a councillor, those on benefits were in effect losing some of their existing external income while still having to cover out of pocket expenses (such as child care) from the allowance. Participants felt that the ad hoc system of councillor remuneration, which varies widely between boroughs, hurts those who are less well off especially ethnic minority women.

“One of the big things that militates against women, is women on benefits. I’ve known a lot of women who are on benefits and when they get that allowance [for being a councillor], that then puts a burden on their benefits and then they’re out of pocket. There’s one woman who’s got five children and her husband has left her. The fact that she gets an allowance makes it more difficult for her. She’s far worse off being a councillor because of the allowance. She’s not going to resign. She was elected. She’s a very good community councillor. She’s been a school governor for years. She runs a sports group for children. She’s brilliant. But she’s really struggling because she is losing out on benefits because she is getting her allowance. She was so upset and angry about it.”

- **Lack of skills and training**

Finally, the research participants argued that there was insufficient training and induction for new councillors, which made it even more daunting for potential candidates and prevented new councillors from making their full contributions. The range of skills and the amount of technical or procedural knowledge required for the post – political skills, policy experience, ability to manage case work, media skills, chairing of meetings, knowledge of committee work, etc – are unlikely to be found in any one person. A systematic process of induction, which includes mentoring, was therefore thought to be necessary to widen people’s portfolio of skills, enhance their understanding of council work, and facilitate their ability to make positive contributions earlier on.

“There’s very little support. You’re called upon to go and do canvassing so you learn that along the way. There is more training now but it’s still not that great. You’re not really prepared at all.”

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Bellamy, Fran Bennett and Jane Millar, Who Benefits? A gender analysis of the UK benefits and tax credit system, The Fawcett Society 2006.

“I thought it was very difficult when I had many new councillors who had no contact with local government. Suddenly they found themselves sitting in a council chamber and they didn’t know where to start. They didn’t know why people came for casework. They were totally lost.”

The research participants also felt that many ethnic minority women lacked confidence in public speaking, and therefore did not make their full contribution in the chamber. They argued that greater support to empower ethnic minority women, and new councillors in general, should be forthcoming.

### **3.4. Encouraging ethnic minority women to access local government**

Based on the barriers and challenges identified above, the research participants suggested a number of interventions to encourage and facilitate access to the position of local councillor amongst ethnic minority women. Councillors were clear that there was a wide range of barriers and that there was a need for structural changes to support more ethnic minority women becoming involved in politics.

- **Professionalisation and pay**

Councillors in the focus group believed that, given the amount of time and commitment required to be a councillor, and given the greater economic disadvantage experienced by ethnic minority women, creating a more professional working culture and offering proper, standardised, remuneration (and generally considering councillors’ work a formal job) would be important to address the current under-representation of ethnic minority women. Professionalisation could also help formalise the role as an ‘office’, with clearer working hours and non-personal contact points, so that councillors are better able to maintain work-life balance.

“The best solution would be to have proper pay so that more people, different people can concentrate on just doing their councillor stuff to a higher standard. [...]Councillors cannot possibly carry on with their role as cabinet without having money to do it. Councillors should be paid like Members of Parliament, elected like them, and that should be their job. No money-pinching anymore.”

“I would love to see the whole business of local government being run in equation with national government so that people get the training, get the expertise, get the support, get everything that helps them to be a good politician whether it be at local or national government level.”

“A lot more ethnic minority women would do it if they were salaried.”

“If you want to attract more women who haven’t got a job outside the home, it would actually give them that little bit of independence in order to do that if they received a salary. It would give them that financial cushion if you like.”

- **Role models and champions**

Councillors in the focus group suggested that an important strategy to widen participation is to promote ethnic minority women role models. The presence of ethnic minority women on local councils sends a powerful message to other ethnic minority women that “they can do it too”. Champions were also seen as a valuable tool.

“You need some role models, positive role models to be in the vanguard, to show that it is possible.”

“Existing women should encourage others that they come across to join political parties and get more involved.

“You can set up as many organisations as you want but you need role models to go and do this [promotion of the role of local councillors amongst ethnic minority women] for you. Unless you have role models from within these communities, you’re not going to make it happen. It’s the people from the communities who are looked upon as role models and who can encourage others to do it, nobody else.”

- **Outreach and community education**

The councillors felt that there is a clear need to build capacity within ethnic minority communities to promote understanding about the relevancy of local government, and to increase understanding of the role and how to become a councillor.

“It’s also about explaining about what councillors do. So many people do not understand what a councillor is. We need to go out there and explain it to them. Bring our business to them.”

Research participants were very clear that work needs to be done to ensure that prevailing ideas about women’s roles amongst some ethnic minority groups that act as barriers to women’s involvement in public life must be addressed. They felt that it was important to help make it more socially acceptable for ethnic minority women to be involved in local government.

“We need to work at community level. You really need to educate the elderly and retired people, for them to understand how important it is for their daughters and their daughters-in-law to take part in things. We need to overcome the stigma in our own society first. You really need to educate the elders, not just the women themselves. Many [women] are ready for it but they are blocked by their relatives because they’re afraid that their women will be mixing with all these men, that their heads are going to be turned by all this attention.”

“The men in the community should also go out there and talk to our community to address the prejudices of older people.

*Facilitator: Maybe we could mobilise the partners of ethnic minority women councillors as champions?*

Yes, absolutely. They need to overcome the barriers, the stigma.”

- **Targeted recruitment schemes**

Some councillors argued that political parties should do much more to secure ethnic minority women candidates and councillors. They thought that such efforts should be targeted at areas with a high ethnic minority concentration and that empowering messages should be sent out to encourage ethnic minority women to come forward.

“They should run specific schemes to recruit ethnic minority women. The political parties should be saying: “We want you. We are proud of our ethnic minority women”, so they can improve recruitment. They need to take their messages to them, directly where they are, in their community.”

- **Promotion of diversity within political parties**

Most councillors felt that political parties still lacked a genuine commitment to encouraging diversity amongst local councillors and to providing the support necessary to empower ethnic minority women to get involved in local politics.

“There needs to be a greater will within political parties to encourage BME people to join in so that they can build up the confidence and skills to come forward.”

However, some councillors were also very clear about the fact that there should be stringent requirements around the skills and abilities required to be a councillor. One commented on the fact that some councillors in her area did not read or write English. She felt strongly that, while this may enable them to voice the experience of a significant and often marginalised section of the Asian community, the role of local councillor does require the ability to read and write in English, because council documents are often of technical and complex.

- **Need for formal induction and flexible support**

There was a general feeling that newer councillors were often unsure or confused about their roles and what was expected of them. Participants were clear that the availability of formal induction and other types of support would make a critical difference to their ability to perform.

“This is not stuff that can be taught in training, it cannot just be explained to you. Even if you have a scheme like shadowing an MP, it is not good because the daily activities of councillors vary so much. You need a very flexible support system.”

“And I’ve been asked as one of the more experienced councillors, would I coach and help to train some of the women on speaking? Because they want to but they’re just terrified to get up. Suddenly they found themselves sitting in a council chamber and they didn’t know where to start, why people came for casework or what to do with their casework.”

- **Coaching and mentoring of new councillors**

There was a broad consensus on the need for coaching and mentoring of new councillors, especially women from ethnic minority backgrounds.

“There should be some meetings within your group and they should be telling you, explaining, coaching you.”

“Ethnic minority women need to be given support because for many there is a big confidence problem. I’m very keen on the idea of mentors, to help them review their work, have a mentor saying to you: “You are good”. When they are being nasty to you, you need to be told: “Ignore it! It’s politics. Don’t let anyone see it has had an effect on you”. I’ve had other Asian councillors spread rumours about me, saying I was having an affair. I’ve had a Tory councillor shout at me, not allowing me to speak. My chief had to tell them to stop bullying me. So you need people to tell others when enough is enough because otherwise you think: ‘Maybe he is right in shouting at me?’ You need the support to know he was wrong. You need a mentor, someone to tell you that.”

The mere presence of ethnic minority women on the council also makes it less daunting and creates a spontaneous ease amongst newly elected ethnic minority women councillors because they feel that they can turn to other ethnic minority women councillors for support and guidance. In effect, other ethnic minority women act as informal coaches or mentors, which seems badly needed especially amongst those who are not used to the working culture of councils.

“She was the only [black woman] there. She was only one among 63 white people. So for us, it was something to look upon, an inspiration. When you have problems, you actually want to go to her and ask her and she would be there to guide you and tell you what to do and everything. You really need somebody there. Someone where you can actually go and ask even silly questions.”

- **More flexible, tolerant and diverse working culture**

According to councillors in the focus group, the current working culture of local councils was often seen as rigid, intolerant, adversarial and “driven by egos and personalities”. They felt that this needed to change. The presence of ethnic minority women councillors was seen as having the potential to change the working culture of local councils, with greater recognition of the need for diverse, flexible, tolerant working practices (e.g. timetabling of meetings, provisions for childcare, better use of technology to enable remote working). But participants also stressed the need for councils to change their cultures and practices in their own right to facilitate ethnic minority women’s participation.

“If we want a more plural, more representative council, then we’re going to have to make changes to the way we run our business. We’re going to need to have more flexible working hours.”

### **3.5. Future ambitions**

Councillors generally had a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve. All intended to remain active in the political domain and to take on greater challenges. One was challenging Ken Livingstone for the Mayorship of London, two planned to become a Member of Parliament, one to become a GLA Assembly Member, and one wanted to become the Leader of her Council.

All felt that their current work as local councillors prepared them extremely well for their future careers, as they had had the opportunity to hone their political skills, to develop their understanding of the workings of government, and to become closer still to the communities they represented. Importantly, all the participants were actively planning their careers, rather than allowing them to develop organically. They treated their experiences as local councillors as a significant step towards deeper engagements in powerful, agenda-setting positions in public life.