

RENEWING LOCAL DEMOCRACY

REPORT OF THE WIDENING ACCESS TO COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP PROGRESS GROUP

“Difficulties such as childcare arrangements, financial concerns as well as the male dominated adversarial nature of politics at council level – along with what is very obviously a male culture – are also issues”

Preface

1. This report acknowledges the good work being done by the majority of serving councillors. However, the majority of councillors are male and white, with an average age of 55 years. There is a need to attract a wider cross section of the community to consider standing for election to their council. In carrying out our work, we were encouraged that many serving councillors saw the widening access agenda as a vital part of renewing local democracy and were happy to debate issues which have the potential to encourage more competition for selection and election. There are many people who have the skills and ability needed to be an effective councillor, to bring fresh ideas to the policy development and decision making processes in councils, and to use their own personal experiences to help people in their ward. It is vital that we tap into that wealth of talent to make our council chambers more representative of the communities they serve.

2. The current profile of Scottish councillors does not reflect the diversity of Scottish society. Less than 22% of councillors are women. Only 1% of councillors are under 30 years old while 34% are over 60 years old. Just over 1% are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Our report identifies the main barriers that we consider prevent more people seeing council membership as an option open to them, and suggests ways in which we can overcome them.

3. We acknowledge that we are not the first Group to consider these issues. The Kerley Group in particular examined widening access in 2000 and made a number of recommendations. It is therefore disappointing that little progress has been made since the Kerley report, perhaps because equality and widening access and diversity are seen as marginal issues which only need to be addressed when a problem arises or legislation dictates. We therefore make no apology for re-visiting some of the issues that have been considered before.

4. Widening access to council membership is not an easy task and there are no quick fixes. Changing a culture does not happen overnight. But there are a number of measures which, taken together, will have a positive impact on making councils more representative of the communities they serve. The fundamental changes to the voting system and the changes to the way councillors are paid from 2007 represent an important opportunity to widen access to council membership. We cannot pre-judge how the electorate will vote or how much money councillors will receive but, based on the evidence we have heard, we believe the next election will provide opportunities for more people to consider seriously becoming a councillor.

5. It is important however to recognise that for some people, the prospect of elected office will never appeal and they will never stand for election. But we need to make sure that the right mechanisms and facilities are in place to encourage more people to stand. This is not an agenda that can be taken forward by one government department or one body. It needs real commitment from local authorities and local government organisations, political parties, the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament and the range of organisations serving civic Scotland to make change happen. Although the next elections are more than two

years away, we must take action now rather than set up another working group to re-visit the issue in the future.

6. Scotland's political parties have a key role to play in the widening access and diversity of local councillors. They provide the biggest numbers of local councillors. Their commitment to selecting and supporting candidates that are more reflective of Scottish society as a whole could go a long way to increasing the diversity of councillors.

7. Monitoring is necessary to ensure momentum is maintained on the widening access to local government agenda. We would therefore propose that the Minister reconvenes this group 18 months from now to seek information from a range of stakeholders about progress.

8. This report is presented to the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform at the Scottish Executive but we hope it will be of interest to everyone who wants to see a renewal of local democracy.

Rowena Arshad OBE
November 2004

**“I do not have the
confidence to debate or
be in the public eye. The
formats seem to suit
extroverts and not
introverts or those who
approach things
differently”**

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Executive Summary and action points

Introduction

1 Throughout this report we make a number of observations and recommendations on how the widening access agenda can be taken forward. We consider that the changes that are happening now in local government and the move to a new system of election in 2007 means that action must start now. We have therefore outlined a package of measures which, taken together, can have a real and positive impact, making our council chambers more representative of the people they serve. Our views expressed throughout this report are summarised in the following table. We have also suggested who should take the lead in driving each issue forward and believe that work should start now. Where appropriate we have included timescales by which certain actions should happen.

2 We would also stress that lead bodies must consider how issues of diversity will affect the delivery of the action point, for example in relation to publicity and communications, there is a need to consider how different communities, (such as black and ethnic minority, disability, youth, women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) within an area are captured in the exercise. All action points require equality and diversity related issues to be mainstreamed into their development and implementation.

3 While all recommendations are important to the widening access agenda, there are a number of headline recommendations that are key. These are highlighted. Without positive action in these areas, the profile of Scotland's councils is unlikely to change for the better.

4 We consider it important that consideration and implementation of these recommendations is monitored to ensure that as many as possible are acted upon in time to have an effect at the 2007 elections. We suggest that Ministers may wish to reconvene the Group in 2006 to carry out a short exercise to assess to what extent progress is being made. We also consider that the Local Government and Transport Committee of the Scottish Parliament should take evidence on progress being made to widen access, particularly from political parties.

Action points: Chapter three – the first steps

Action Point	Lead body	Timescale
Role descriptions should be put in place in all local authorities. These should include details of the minimum requirements that can be expected of a councillor. Equalities should be mainstreamed into councillors' role descriptions.	Local authorities	Now
Information on the roles and responsibilities of a councillor should feature prominently in council newsletters, websites and other relevant council publications, including ones that may be read by members of under-represented groups.	Local authorities	Now
Education on local government should be developed and the Scottish Executive Education Department should work with key stakeholders from the education sector on how to develop this, and at which age groups this should be targeted.	Scottish Executive Education Department	Now
Local authorities should put in place arrangements to enable pupils from S3 upwards to shadow councillors as part of working experience placements.	Local authorities working with their schools	Now
Local authorities' newsletters and websites should explain the role of a councillor in relation to other elected members and members of public bodies.	Local authorities	Now
Local authorities should ensure that their newsletters and website include information which draws distinctions between when it is appropriate to contact a councillor and when it is appropriate to contact a council helpline or council staff.	Local authorities	Now

Action points: Chapter four – finding out more and supporting prospective candidates and candidates

Action Point	Lead body	Timescale
Local authorities and the Scottish Executive should undertake work around 15 months before a local government election to publicise the opportunities to stand for election. We believe there is scope for a national 'recruitment' publicity campaign supplemented by information available locally to encourage more people to stand.	Scottish Executive and local authorities in collaboration with key civic partners e.g. SCVO, STUC.	From 2006
Local authorities with the support of the Scottish Executive should arrange pre-nomination seminars around 1 year before an election to offer delegates practical information on becoming a councillor.	Scottish Executive and local authorities.	From 2006
Local authorities should facilitate arrangements for members of the public who express an interest in standing for election to shadow a serving councillor for a short period.	Local authorities	Now
Further consideration should be given to encouraging employers to allow staff to carry out a councillor role on secondment for one term.	Scottish Executive	Now
Local authorities should ensure that information on becoming a councillor features prominently on their websites and in council newsletters.	Local authorities	Now
The Scottish Executive and local authorities should consider whether the nomination procedures and associated paperwork could be made more user-friendly.	Scottish Executive and local authorities	Now
Local authorities should offer mentoring arrangements for those who have taken the decision to stand for election to enable them to adapt to the role more easily if elected.	Local authorities	Now
Candidates should have standard information on becoming a councillor. Local authorities, political parties and CoSLA should work together to develop guidelines or an information pack.	Improvement Service	Now
All local authorities should offer training for candidates to assist them through the election process.	Local authorities	Now

<p>HEADLINE RECOMMENDATION: Political parties must be clear about how they will support candidates where personal matters become an issue of the campaign, or when candidates are faced with discrimination e.g. racism, homophobia.</p>	<p>Political parties</p>	<p>Now</p>
<p>HEADLINE RECOMMENDATION: Political parties should put in place arrangements for monitoring and enforcing selection, and complaints and appeals procedures, and should strive to have an equitable placement of women and men in seats they consider winnable.</p>	<p>Political parties</p>	<p>In advance of 2007 elections</p>
<p>HEADLINE RECOMMENDATION: Political parties should ensure that national initiatives and action to widen access filters through to selection processes at a local level.</p>	<p>Political parties</p>	<p>Now</p>
<p>HEADLINE RECOMMENDATION: Political parties should agree and publish rules of engagement between parties, and with the media, regarding how campaigns will be covered to ensure that policies are debated rather than private lives.</p>	<p>Political parties</p>	<p>In advance of 2007 elections</p>

Action points: Chapter five – Supporting councillors

Action Point	Lead body	Timescale
HEADLINE RECOMMENDATION: Councillors should be adequately paid for the work they do and we would ask the Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee to note that a decent wage, around the level of the Scottish average annual salary, is necessary in order to widen access.	Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee	From early 2005
HEADLINE RECOMMENDATION: Councils have traditionally engaged with equality issues and anti-discrimination legislation as employers and service providers. There is a need for councillors to consider how these issues impact on the practices that operate within council chambers and council processes.	CoSLA in partnership with the Equalities Co-ordinating Group	Now
Local authorities should ensure that newsletters and websites include information which draws distinctions between when it is appropriate to contact a councillor, and when it is appropriate to contact a council helpline or council staff.	Local authorities	Now
Local authorities should revisit the work carried out during the Leadership Advisory panel process in 2000/2001 to see whether further improvements to administrative arrangements and internal processes can be made to reduce the amount of time councillors need to spend in meetings, or travelling to meetings.	Local authorities	Now
The Scottish Executive should consider how employers can be encouraged to allow staff time off to carry out a councillors' role on a voluntary basis.	Scottish Executive	Now
Councils should examine the timing of their meetings and consider arrangements that best suit councillors and staff who are required to attend.	Local authorities	Now
All councillors should take part in an adequate induction process as soon as possible after election.	Local authorities	From 2007
All new councillors should be offered a 'buddy' who can offer counsel and assistance on a confidential basis.	Local authorities	Now

Local authorities should consider what practical issues would need to be overcome in respect of a councillor who needed constant carer support.	Local authorities	Now
Local authorities should hold informal 'exit interviews' with all councillors who choose to leave.	Local authorities	Now

I was made to feel that I didn't really understand how it all worked and that I was 'playing politics.'
This contributed to undermining my confidence."

Chapter one - Introduction

Remit and Membership

1.1 In July 2003, the Scottish Executive established three working groups to examine practical issues related to the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill. These working groups mirrored the key elements of the Bill: widening access to council membership, the Single Transferable Vote system of election, and councillors' remuneration. The groups were given a lifespan of around one year in which to carry out their work and report to the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform.

1.2 The Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group (WAPG) started its work in September 2003. Our remit was:

to take forward work on making council membership attractive to a wide cross-section of the community within the current legislative framework, including the preparation of non-statutory guidance on the definition of politically restricted posts, and make recommendations on the training, development and support given to councillors.

1.3 Membership of the Group was:

Rowena Arshad, OBE, Convener
Jane-Claire Judson, National Union of Students
Susan Love, Federation of Small Businesses
Corrie McChord, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities
Sarah Morrell, Scottish Executive
Fiona Smith, Scottish Youth Parliament
John Wilkes, Equal Opportunities Commission

The Group was supported in its work by:

Gary Cox, Secretary
Michael Cutts, Secretariat
Maria Melrose, Secretariat

Why do we need to widen access?

1.4 There are presently 1,222 local authority councillors in Scotland. Less than 22% are women. Only 1% are under 30 years old. 34% are over 60 years old. Just over 1% are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The average councillor is white and male, with an average age of 55. The McIntosh Commission saw councils where membership broadly reflected the make-up of the community as an important element in enhancing their democratic credibility. There are no Scottish councils where this is the case.

1.5 Many serving councillors work hard to serve their community and our views are not an unfavourable opinion on those individuals or the work they do. But we need to reinvigorate interest in local government and encourage more people,

especially from groups that are woefully under-represented, to consider standing for election as a councillor. We need to make local government an attractive prospect to as many people as possible. At the moment it is a turn-off to a very large number of people with many disengaging from politics, but not from service delivery issues and other local issues that affect them.

1.6 The next few years offer us all an opportunity to tackle the widening access agenda head-on. The Scottish Parliament has recently passed legislation which means the next council elections will be held under the proportional Single Transferable Vote system. It is hoped that this will have the potential to make it easier for a wider range of people to be elected because there will be a much higher degree of proportionality between votes cast and seats won. New remuneration arrangements are also expected. While we do not yet know what these will be, it is important that they contribute to making council membership a viable option for more people than the current arrangements do. The Scottish Executive will also introduce a severance scheme for councillors who choose to stand down at the next election. If the scheme is sufficiently attractive and there is a reasonable take-up, it has the potential to create a higher level of 'turnover' than is traditionally the case at a local government election. Consequently there may be more opportunities for new people to enter local government.

The approach we have taken

1.7 We have sought to consult widely in reaching the views expressed in this report. In the time available we have held meetings in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dumbarton and Inverness, and heard from a large number of bodies, organisations and individuals. We have also advertised our work through websites including Positive Action in Housing and Highland Youth Voice, and by writing to a wide range of bodies with an interest in equalities matters to encourage people to give us their views. We have publicised our work through publications such as the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations newsletter, through the Scottish Trades Union Congress, and through members' attendance at the Equal Opportunities and Local Government and Transport Committees of the Scottish Parliament. The Group is very grateful to all those who contributed at meetings or in writing.

1.8 We have also sought to build on some of the work that has been carried out in recent years, in particular, the Report of the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group (the Kerley Group) which examined widening access issues shortly after the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. At the start of our process we invited councils to complete a short questionnaire on the progress made on widening access issues since the Kerley Group reported. While only 12 out of 32 councils responded we did get some very useful information to help form the views expressed in this report.

1.9 We were encouraged to note that some local authorities had made real progress since the Kerley report, particularly in respect of providing the facilities and equipment better to enable councillors to carry out their role. Some of the Kerley Group's recommendations do, however, seem to have foundered and we revisit some of these issues in our report. It is unfortunate that more progress has not been made since the Kerley report, for example on introducing role descriptions for all

councillors, reviewing remuneration arrangements, and better managing the time-commitment required of councillors. It is therefore not surprising that some of our recommendations are similar to those that have been made before.

1.10 In each chapter we discuss the key issues which the Group has considered and summarise our views and the key points in the shaded boxes throughout the report. The checklist at the beginning of this report summarises the main action points which arise from our work.

“I have often thought about becoming a councillor however am **unaware as to the kind of **commitment required.**”**

Chapter two – Identifying the barriers

The role of councillors

2.1 Modern local authorities are major multi-million pound operations responsible for planning and delivering a wide range of public services. Scotland's councillors have a significant role not only responding to the needs of individual constituents, and representing the views of their ward as a whole, but taking important policy decisions which affect the wider local authority area – decisions that can have major implications for the well-being of the area.

2.2 For most councillors, ward work will follow a broadly similar pattern, comprising 'surgeries' where constituents can seek advice or support from their councillor, and a range of meetings which councillors are expected to attend.

2.3 Ward work can be a time-consuming part of councillors' duties. Most councillors hold regular surgeries which are invariably held in the evenings or at weekends to make them more accessible to constituents. Many councillors also choose to make themselves available 'out of hours,' in some cases 24-7, and we have heard that it is not uncommon for councillors to be called very late at night by constituents seeking action or advice on one issue or another. We have also heard that councillors are required to attend various local groups, such as community councils, school boards, and other trusts and organisations. Again these meetings generally take place in the evenings. In rural and highland and island communities the geographic size of wards can mean that councillors are spending a significant amount of time travelling in order to carry out their role.

2.4 The other main aspect of a councillor's role is their contribution to the policy development and decision making processes of the local authority. This typically involves membership of local authority committees, sub-committees, working groups, and attendance at various other meetings. These primarily take place in the council headquarters, but also in various locations around a council area. Time is also needed to prepare for such meetings. The frequency with which these meetings recur varies from council to council, as does the time of the day they are held.

2.5 The role of a councillor has expanded in recent years, through the advent of Community Planning and other initiatives such as Local Economic Forums. These demand more cross-cutting working between the local authority and other bodies. This means many councillors are increasingly being required to take part in other meetings – for example, meetings with other public bodies, in addition to council meetings and meetings in their ward. While there are common functions carried out by all councillors, the exact job description of a councillor varies from area to area and from councillor to councillor. We note that the Kerley Group recommended that all councillors should have role descriptions and a few councils have put these in place.

2.6 In recompense for their demanding role, councillors currently receive a basic allowance of, on average, £6,700. In addition, councillors with significant additional responsibilities – for example, Leaders, Conveners of Committees, Provosts etc,

receive Special Responsibility Allowances (SRA) on top of the basic allowance. The rates for SRAs vary widely and in many cases are paid to most, and in some cases all, councillors. The Councillors' Remuneration Progress Group has considered how these arrangements should be modernised and improved, but we comment on them from a widening access perspective later in this report.

2.7 We are aware that there has been some debate about the time-commitment required of a councillor, particularly when discussing remuneration issues. Being a councillor is time-consuming but we have heard about ways in which the long-hours culture can be addressed to make the role more appealing. We also discuss these in more detail later in this report.

2.8 It is also important to recognise that the way councillors work will need to change following the introduction of the Single Transferable Vote system of election in 2007. The creation of multi-member wards means councillors will need to work together in an effective but efficient manner to meet the needs of their ward. Our views have regard to potential changes and are not simply based on the current arrangements in which councillors operate.

2.9 As noted at the start of this report there is no easy way to make council membership more attractive to more people. There is no quick fix. Widening access is about changing cultures and attitudes in local government as well as in wider society. It is important that we accelerate the pace of change, and bring about change as quickly as possible. There are some measures which can be implemented by the next election in 2007. There are other changes which can be implemented in the medium term and other aspirations that will take longer to achieve.

2.10 In listening to views expressed to the Group there have been some key themes which came up time and again as the main reasons why people do not consider being a councillor an attractive or viable option. Although we heard different perspectives from councillors and others who gave evidence, the fundamental issues were the same:

- The level of the basic allowance is unattractive.
- There is a low public awareness of the role of a councillor.
- There is a lack of knowledge about process and support available.
- The image of councils and councillors.
- There is a lack of opportunities for confidence building and training for candidates.
- There is confusion around getting time off work to carry out council business.
- There is a long-hours culture.

2.11 In the following chapters we discuss these issues and make suggestions about how they might be tackled. For ease of reference Chapter 3 concentrates on issues relevant to those considering taking the first steps towards council membership. Chapter 4 concerns matters of particular relevance to candidates. Chapter 5 looks at matters of particular relevance to councillors. We should stress

however that the majority of the issues highlighted are part of a package relevant to all.

Chapter three - The first steps

Introduction

3.1 This chapter considers the basic factors which discourage people from standing at an early stage. These are the main barriers which deter more people taking steps towards becoming a councillor.

Status of councils and councillors

3.2 Although councillors and councils plan and provide many key public services we have heard that there is some confusion around their status. Local authorities are distinct corporate bodies, and councillors are responsible and accountable for the decisions they take, but there is a perception that the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament can dictate, override, or influence these decisions. There is also a lack of clarity about the role of a councillor, how councillors make a difference to their local area, and what the public can expect of them. Although councillors are responsible for taking many big decisions which affect their area, we heard that councillors have a relatively 'low profile'. Misunderstandings about the role of councillors and councils do nothing to preserve or enhance the status of local government.

3.3 The establishment and development of the Scottish Parliament was seen as having a particular effect on the status of local government. Some saw the activities of the Parliament overshadowing the work of councils, and those who were interested in pursuing a career in politics set their sights on Holyrood rather than on their local council chamber. Younger people saw their route into politics starting with being a researcher to an MSP rather than becoming involved in local government. When we discussed this further, it became clear that part of the reason for this was a lack of knowledge about the role of local government. Young people who had little or no knowledge of local government were more aware of the role of the Parliament and the work of MSPs as these were discussed in schools, particularly in subjects like Modern Studies.

3.4 We have also heard that members of the Scottish Parliament are sometimes the first port of call for members of the public wishing to raise issues about council services, thus bypassing the local councillor entirely and giving the false impression that MSPs are responsible for frontline service delivery. This does nothing to enhance the status of the local councillor. We believe that any lack of understanding about the roles and responsibilities of different elected representatives is undesirable and is a factor which discourages people from considering standing for election as a councillor.

3.5 There is also some confusion about the council and councillor's role when compared to other elected representatives and public bodies. It is not uncommon for councillors to be approached about service delivery problems in the health service, private utility companies, and various public agencies. Councillors treat these approaches differently. Some take up the correspondence with the relevant body on behalf of their constituent while others simply refer the correspondent to the

appropriate body. In respect of local authority services we have heard that some councillors take up complaints and queries with the relevant council officer, while other councillors channel correspondents through one-stop-shops and other service delivery points if that is more appropriate to their query. We believe that this inconsistent approach does not assist clarity about the role of a councillor. We will not encourage more people to stand for election if the role of a councillor is not clear.

3.6 Such a lack of understanding is not surprising as the majority of the public do not come into contact with their councillor on a regular basis, if at all. Instead, the majority of people contact their local authority through other mechanisms such as one-stop-shops, or they raise issues directly with council staff. Many local authorities make particular efforts to inform the public of the work of the council, improvements in services, and new services being introduced through council newsletters and other publications. We are not aware of these publications being used to a great extent to inform the public of the role of a councillor and what they can expect from their councillor.

3.7 The Kerley Group recommended that each council should prepare and publish role descriptions which reflect what councillors do. Of the twelve councils that responded to our questionnaire, eight had not produced and published role descriptions. Two councils had started but not finalised role descriptions, and two had prepared and published them. This suggests that role descriptions are not common place and not readily available in many councils.

3.8 There are a number of simple steps local authorities could take to explain the role of a councillor. Some already do so on their website and as noted above, a few use role descriptions. We would encourage all local authorities to publish concise information on the role of a councillor on their website, in their newsletters, and in other relevant publications including ones that may be read by members of under-represented groups e.g. minority ethnic press. Information should also be made available in community centres, libraries and in places where people meet e.g. the mosque, synagogue, Gurdwara, places where young people meet, and where women meet. This information should be republished at reasonably frequent intervals.

3.9 While many councillors have a deep commitment to the well-being of their constituents, we would encourage local authorities to endeavour to reduce the amount of time councillors spend dealing with enquiries on matters which are *not* related to the work of the local authority. We believe there is scope for council websites and newsletters to set out clear information on when it is appropriate to contact a council officer, helpline, or other 'service point', when it is appropriate to contact a councillor, when it is appropriate to contact an MSP, and when it is appropriate to contact another service provider. Councillors have said that they increasingly have a 24-7 role and the time needed to carry it out is always increasing. That situation is not made any easier where councillors feel they have to get involved in case work on subjects and services that are not the responsibility of the local authority.

3.10 Of course we would not advocate restricting the choices available to the public and would not say a councillor should not raise with another public body a matter on

behalf of a constituent. Similarly we would not say an individual could not take up a matter about local authority service provision with an MSP if they chose to do so. Nevertheless the fact that councillors are often asked to take up issues which would be more appropriately dealt with by another person or body adds to the confusion about what a councillor's role is. We consider it would be more helpful if councillors acted as signposters when approached about issues which are not the responsibility of the local authority, rather than taking on the case themselves.

Image of councils and councillors

3.11 Moving beyond the status of local government we need to look at the image of local government. A consistent message heard throughout our work, including from serving councillors, is that while people are interested in the range and quality of local services they receive, many are turned off by their perceptions of local government, their perceptions of councillors, their perceptions of party politics, their perception of politicians generally, or combinations of all of these. It would appear that many people who could play a very worthwhile and positive role in local government are discouraged from even considering taking a first step because of the poor image of local politics in many areas and their disenchantment with the party political system.

3.12 Under this broad 'image' heading we have heard serving councillors and others say that there is a widespread public perception that politicians in general, and councillors in particular, are "in it for themselves." This is clearly a view that contributes to making council membership unappealing to a large number of people.

3.13 That image has, to a certain extent, been created by local government itself, where a small number of high profile cases have exposed objectionable activity by individual councillors. It is of course unfair to believe that all councillors are the same, but councillors need to continue to work to the highest standards to promote a positive image. We have heard that press reporting can be unduly negative and good work carried out by councillors and councils can often go unreported. It is naive to think that papers will ever be filled with stories praising local politicians or commending the work of a council, but press coverage can be very selective: problems can be exaggerated and successes can be downplayed or ignored. There is a need for the press to be more responsible in their coverage of council business, and for councils and councillors to adopt the highest standards of public office to reduce the opportunities for negative press coverage.

Ethos of local government

3.14 It is important to separate out the ethos of local government from the image of local government, although the two are inextricably linked. We have heard from several individuals and through written responses that there is a macho culture – or a perception of a macho culture - in some local authorities where local politics can make council business unnecessarily adversarial, with business being conducted in a confrontational way, rather than through a more consensual mature approach, and where sexism can have a negative effect for women. We have heard that there can be a degree of patronage where councillors who fit a certain mould are treated more favourably by those in power and a lack of transparency where the real decisions are

taken by an inner circle of long-serving councillors. This is a perception that exists in some areas and one that is pertinent to the widening access agenda.

3.15 To sum up our findings under the 'image' and 'ethos' headings, we can do no better than quote evidence to the group from a local government officer:

“A major barrier to participation is the image of local government. The perception is that it is the preserve of older men, constituting a wide ranging 'old boys network.' In surmounting this barrier, the role of the media is crucial. Until local politicians are viewed more positively, people will be averse to becoming involved. There are endless examples of stories relating to corruption, petty mindedness and parochialism in both print and television media. This is often because local government as an entity is poor at publicising and celebrating the good work it does.”

Our view:

Enhancing public awareness and knowledge

- There is confusion around the role of a councillor which is perhaps exacerbated by the different approach councillors take to dealing with enquiries which relate to the responsibilities of other public bodies. We believe any confusion about the role of a councillor is detrimental to a drive to widen access. If an individual is under the impression that a councillors' role extends to raising issues with a raft of public bodies then we think that is undesirable. We believe role descriptions for councillors should be put in place in all local authorities immediately. These should set out the roles and responsibilities of a councillor and should feature prominently in council newsletters, websites, and any other relevant council publications, including ones that may be read by members of under-represented groups e.g. minority ethnic press. We do not believe these role descriptions should be drawn up centrally. It is important that they reflect the duties of councillors in a particular area, rather than assuming that one size will fit all. Information should also be made available in community centres, libraries and in places where people meet e.g. the mosque, synagogue, Gurdwara, and places where young people meet, and where women meet. These are simple measures which have potential to encourage more people to think about standing for election. Role descriptions published in this way would not be part of a recruitment drive or an advertising campaign – rather they would perhaps make people reading the publication think “I could do that” and could feature alongside other information on the role of a councillor, compared to the role of other elected members. Simple measures can go a long way towards demystifying local governance and role descriptions and associated information, re-published frequently, are a good starting point.
- We believe there is a strong need to develop education on local government in schools. Young people to whom we have spoken are generally aware of the role of the Parliament and MSPs but know little about the role of a councillor. We believe this to be a major gap which should be filled. Local authorities have a key role in setting local priorities and policies for their area and delivering everyday

services. It is important that young people are more aware of the role of local government and for those who see a career in politics, that they view local government as an option open to them. We believe this could be an aspect of the Education for Citizenship curriculum. We recommend that the Scottish Executive Education Department work with key stakeholders within the education sector on how to develop education on local government and at which age groups it should be targeted. We believe this should be put in place as quickly as possible, without the need for a further working group to debate the principles of whether it is necessary.

- There is also scope for young people to gain practical experience of the role of a councillor so council membership is seen as an option open to them. We would recommend that local authorities put in place arrangements to enable pupils from S3 upwards to shadow councillors as part of work experience placements. We would hope that as many serving councillors as possible would facilitate shadowing arrangements and would present an accurate and balanced description of their role. It is important that young people shadowing councillors are given the opportunity to experience the full range of councillor activities rather than simply being assigned to backroom administrative work for the period of their visit. Young people we spoke with who had the opportunity to work closely with local councillors found their interest in local government matters including standing for local elections had heightened.
- There is a need for all councils to consider the ethos of the council and the atmosphere within which business is conducted. In particular, there is a need to consider how issues of racism, homophobia, sexism, disability and other forms of discrimination might explicitly or implicitly affect the ethos and culture of councils.
- Finally, there is a need for all serving councillors to lead by example and work to the highest standards expected of elected public office.

Chapter four – Finding out more and supporting prospective candidates and candidates

Introduction

4.1 Moving beyond the initial barriers which discourage people from taking the very first steps towards council membership, we need to consider the processes and support available to those who want to know more about standing, and those who have decided to stand.

'Recruitment' and encouraging people to stand.

4.2 We have heard that people become a councillor for a variety of reasons. Some came from a family with a tradition of political activity and public service. Some come through trades unions or community activism. Some were frustrated by a council or serving councillors and decided to challenge them at the polls. Some progressed from groups which worked closely with the local authority such as community councils or voluntary sector groups. Some were members of a local political party and found themselves at the top of a list for nomination as the candidate. Few people who had political aspirations saw local authority membership as a proving ground for progressing to higher elected office.

4.3 The main message which came across in speaking to serving councillors is that while all councillors stood because of a desire to serve their community, there was no one route into council membership.

4.4 It was clear during the meetings we held and from the written evidence submitted to us that many people who are active in local groups or in campaigning for local causes have the sort of knowledge and skills that would stand them in good stead as a councillor. However, many are reluctant to take their activity one step further and consider standing for election because they do not see themselves as a potential councillor.

4.5 This means we must reach out as widely as possible to identify pools of talent and groups and individuals who would make good councillors, and encourage them to stand. The voluntary sector, including community councils, is an obvious place to start. We have heard from a number of councillors that their experience of working with a local authority through a previous role in the voluntary sector led them to make the first steps towards becoming a councillor. We need to ensure that people currently working in the voluntary sector are aware of the skills and experience they could bring to the role of councillor and that they do not see council membership as something that is a daunting prospect, let alone an unachievable challenge.

4.6 There are also a large number of representative groups such as racial equality councils, disability groups, women's groups, lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgender groups and youth councils which comprise people who would be able to perform very effectively as a councillor. Many gave evidence to our group. We were surprised that even though these people showed a strong commitment to public

service, a desire to improve public services, and strong presentational and public speaking skills, some did not see themselves as potential councillors (although some did see themselves as potential MSPs). The main reason for this was a lack of understanding about the role of a councillor, although financial considerations were also raised. It was also clear that some were very committed to particular issues and saw much work that still needed to be done in their own particular field before they could consider representing their community on a much broader range of issues. Others were put off by their perception of council chambers and practices that are not comfortable with diversity and where subtle forms of exclusion operate which mitigates against an ethos of inclusion. For some people, particularly from the LGBT community, there was concern that their lives would be the focus of unwelcome media attention.

4.7 We have also discussed what opportunities there are for people to easily find information about the role of a councillor that would help them make a decision on whether to stand. We have already discussed the need for information about the role of a councillor, but it is also important that information about *how to become* a councillor is readily available. Getting even the most basic information does not seem to be straightforward. We have searched “becoming a councillor” on all 32 local authority websites and that of CoSLA and there is no information easily available. One council website did produce a result but the link to further information was inactive. We have also heard there is a lack of understanding not only about what the role of a councillor entails, but also the time-commitment involved. A number of serving councillors told us they had little idea of the time that would be needed to carry out their role, or that it was greatly underestimated by whoever encouraged them to stand. There was also a perception that people did not know about the level of administrative and secretarial support that would be available to them if elected.

Our view:

We believe there needs to be a concerted effort, not only to provide information about the role of a councillor, but to encourage people to consider standing for election. There are a number of ways in which this could be taken forward. We see each element as part of a bigger ‘recruitment’ campaign, funded and co-ordinated by the Scottish Executive. The key elements of such a campaign may be:

- **Publicity** - We believe local authorities and the Scottish Executive should also undertake more general work around 15 months before a local government election to publicise the opportunities to stand for election. We believe there is scope for a national ‘recruitment’ publicity campaign, supplemented by information available locally to encourage more people to stand, to provide easy access to the information needed to reach a decision, and to provide the relevant forms needed to stand for election. These strategies and approaches should be developed in conjunction with individuals and agencies that have expertise of working with under-represented groups
- **Pre-nomination seminars** - We see a role for seminars in all local government areas before the next elections and subsequent elections, arranged by the local authority. These seminars should be arranged around 15 months before the

expected election date and should offer people practical information on becoming a councillor. This information should include the role of a councillor, the time commitment required, the level of support which would be available, the remuneration package that would be available, and the processes for nomination. There should be no attendance fee for such seminars and they should be held at a time and venue which the local authority considers is likely to maximise attendance. It may be that several mini seminars are held within a local authority covering a range of venues where different groups might meet, e.g. community councils. The diversity of venues and approaches should be selected to ensure that the diverse communities within the authority (e.g. black/minority ethnic groups, youth groups, women groups, LGBT groups, disabled groups, faith and belief groups and so on) are included. The seminars should be widely advertised and the local authority should target representative and voluntary sector groups in their area to encourage attendance by those who are already active in local issues. In addition, local authorities should target these groups by taking information to them, rather than only relying on the groups to come to the seminars.

- Shadowing arrangements - We are aware that some prospective councillors have shadowed serving councillors to find out more about what the role entails but such arrangements seem to be few and far between. We believe this is a practice which should be encouraged. There is clearly a role for political parties in encouraging their members to shadow serving councillors from the same party, but more generally, local authorities should facilitate arrangements whereby other members of the public with an interest in standing for election can shadow a serving councillor for a short period of time. We see no reason why such arrangements should not be encouraged now, rather than waiting until nearer the date of the next election. Although some councillors may see such arrangements as encouraging competition which could be potentially detrimental to their own chances at the ballot box, we would hope that a mature approach which enables the promotion of democracy and choice for the voter would always come first.
- More generally, we believe there is a need for councils to consider what information is currently available and would encourage them to post “becoming a councillor” information more prominently on their websites and in council newsletters. We would also encourage councils and the Scottish Executive to consider whether there is scope to make the nomination procedures and the associated paper work more user-friendly.
- Secondment/sabbatical arrangements – We are aware that some European countries allow public sector employees leave of absence from their employment to allow them to serve a term of elected office. We believe that this is a practice that should be encouraged and public sector employees and employees of large organisations should be allowed a period of absence from their normal employment to undertake one term of elected office. At the end of this period the individual would need to choose between continuing as an elected councillor or returning to their previous employment. We recognise that such arrangements would need to be done on a voluntary basis and that it may be difficult for small and medium sized enterprises to offer this facility. Nevertheless, we believe this is an issue which should be explored further.

Support for candidates

4.8 There are essentially two routes to becoming elected as a councillor. The first is to join a political party and be selected as a candidate for a particular ward. The other is to stand as an independent candidate. At present councillors in the central belt and urban areas mostly have a party political background, whereas councillors in rural and islands areas generally stand and are elected as independents.

4.9 We have heard that there is a perception in some areas that an individual only has a chance of being elected if they stand as a candidate for a political party. This suggests that the majority of people who are not members of political parties, and have no intention of joining one, do not consider it worthwhile taking any steps towards council membership. Ironically, we have heard that in some areas local parties find it very difficult to encourage members to stand for election. A number of councillors we spoke to noted that they had been nominated as candidates because they were the only person willing to take on the role if elected.

4.10 Of course anyone may stand as an independent candidate and many choose to do so. This is particularly a feature of the Highlands and Islands although there are a number of independent councillors serving elsewhere. Arguably, being an independent candidate is more difficult because there is no 'party machine' to lend support, both practical and financial. This means that someone considering standing as an independent candidate must negotiate their way through the process of nominating themselves as a candidate.

4.11 Once someone has decided to stand, the period between nomination and the election can be a daunting and demanding time. This is particularly so for those who have not stood for election before or those who are not used to public speaking or having a public profile. We have heard that formal training processes tend not to kick-in until after an election. After all, why spend time and money training people who might not be elected? We think it is particularly important that candidates are able to access appropriate training and support in the period *before* an election.

4.12 We have repeatedly heard from councillors who were unprepared for what was expected of them, in terms of responsibilities, the time commitment required to fulfil their duties or the amount of 'out of hours' work required. Only one local authority who responded to our questionnaire routinely offered training to individuals who were considering standing at local authority elections.

4.13 Individuals standing for election on behalf of the main political parties tended to rely on those parties as their main source of information. Some candidates were able to attend training courses devised and operated by the political party, other candidates had been party activists for some time and had gained a working knowledge of the system over time, or were taken under the wing of an experienced councillor from that party. They benefit from having a political party to guide them through the election process. However, independent candidates frequently had little or no support. Some candidates had stood because of a particular issue and the election was their first foray into politics in any formal way which meant they had to 'pick it up as they went along'.

4.14 The role of political parties is fundamental to the widening access agenda. For many, the only pragmatic route into local government will be through a political party. We cannot widen access simply by encouraging more independent candidates to stand. Parties have a big task in recruiting members who have the potential to make first class councillors. It should be recognised that often parties' local branches do not have a very large number of willing members from which to select council candidates. Widening access is therefore a challenge for parties, but it is one to which they must rise.

4.15 Parties have told us that they are endeavouring to widen access but we believe there is a reality gap between a party's policies and initiatives at a national level, and what happens at a local level. We are not convinced that national initiatives permeate far enough through the party structure to have a direct effect on selection processes for council candidates. While any work by parties nationally to widen access is welcome, there is a pressing need for parties to establish the extent to which their efforts are having a positive effect and impact at local levels. We also believe there is a need for parties to be more proactive in the periods between local government elections to encourage people to take an interest in standing, rather than leaving it until near the start of the formal selection process.

4.16 We discussed the image and ethos of local government earlier in this report and we believe the issues are similar in relation to political parties. While the majority of people take a keen interest in the major decisions taken by councils, and the public services they receive, many are cynical about party political processes and find politics a turnoff. Some were reluctant to join parties because they saw it as a way to get embroiled in party politics, rather than tackling the issues which concerned them. They feared a loss of independence and identity which would be sacrificed to the 'whipping' within parties. They also took the view that, within parties, those who toed the party line – the 'followers' – were more likely to succeed than those who brought fresh thinking and new ideas.

4.17 There is a need for parties to be welcoming and positive towards potential candidates with experience outwith the political arena, for example, the voluntary sector and community councils. Only when local parties have a reasonable field of members who wish to stand for election can they introduce positive measures such as women only shortlists to help make councillors more representative of the communities they serve.

4.18 There is a need for parties to consider how personal, cultural and institutional forms of discrimination (e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia, sectarianism and so on) affects the ethos and business of recruitment, selection, support and encouragement of candidates into local government.

4.19 We believe that political parties should put in place arrangements for monitoring and enforcing selection, complaints and appeals procedures and should strive to have an equitable placement of women and men in seats they consider 'winnable'. Parties should use the opportunities provided by the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 in carrying out their selection processes and adopt a positive attitude to promoting under-represented groups. We would further recommend that

parties at a local level agree and publish rules of engagement between parties, and with the media to ensure that policies are debated, rather than private lives.

4.20 We recognise the reality of politics means parties will always field the candidate they consider most likely to win the seat. It is however important not to pre-judge the sophistication of the electorate. Elections to the Scottish Parliament have shown that shifts can happen quickly and that voters are sophisticated in the way they cast their vote. Any perceptions that voters will not elect a candidate on the basis of, for example, ethnic origin, are unlikely to be borne out.

Our view:

We believe that there is a real need to support candidates, not just to enable them to make a smoother transition into their councillor's role, but to make the prospect of standing less daunting to those who have not previously experienced standing for elected office.

- During the course of our evidence gathering we came across a small number of informal arrangements where individuals were 'mentored' by existing councillors and given a taste of what the role of councillor entailed. These arrangements tended to be organised by local political parties for their own members and we are not aware that such arrangements are widespread. We believe this good practice should be encouraged and should be offered by all local authorities to anyone who is standing for election. We recognise that parties will wish to continue to mentor their own candidates but believe a similar opportunity should be made available to independent candidates and candidates whose party is not currently represented on a council.
- We believe there is a need for candidates to have standard information on becoming a councillor and that information should be consistent across Scotland. We recommend that local authorities, political parties and COSLA should work together to draw up guidelines or an information pack for candidates which includes user-friendly information on the election process (including rules on election expenses), and information on the councillors' code of conduct.
- We also believe that advice needs to be provided on basic issues such as seeking sponsorship, where to get election publicity material printed at a reasonable price and so on. Such issues may seem obvious but we believe there is a need to make such information available, particularly to support candidates who have not been through the election process before, or do not have the benefit of a party machine behind them.
- Evidence we have heard suggests that some individuals would benefit from training to assist them through the process of standing for election. There is recognition that lack of confidence can deter people from coming forward as candidates. We would recommend that local authorities offer all candidates training which will assist them through the election process, for example, confidence building, training in public speaking or handling the media.

- We have also heard that candidates from under-represented groups, particularly the LGBT community have been reluctant to stand for election because they were unsure about what support they would get from their party if other candidates tried to make their private life an issue of the campaign. They were also concerned about the effect such negative campaigning would have on their party's chances. It is of course unacceptable if campaigning descends to personal exploitation and we would encourage all political parties to make it clear how they would support their candidates should they be faced with discriminatory situations e.g. being faced with homophobia from either within or outwith the party.
- We welcome measures put in place by political parties to encourage a wider cross-section of the community to stand for election, but it is important that these measures filter through to the recruitment and selection processes at a local level. Political parties should use the opportunities provided by the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 and put in place arrangements to monitor how national policy is being implemented at a local level to determine whether it is effective.

Chapter five – Supporting councillors

Introduction

5.1 Once a candidate has been elected, it is important that they are given as much assistance as possible to settle into their new role. Although the issues highlighted in this chapter concern measures for councillors, it is essential that prospective councillors are fully aware of what they can expect, and what they would be entitled to receive, to enable them to take a decision on whether to stand.

Remuneration

5.2 The remuneration councillors receive has been raised with us consistently as a key factor which discourages people from considering council membership as a serious option. Although councillors who hold significant additional responsibilities can, when these allowances are added to their basic allowance, receive what may be considered a reasonable salary, the current basic allowance for councillors does nothing to encourage people to consider standing. An annual basic allowance of £6-7k does not reflect the current duties and responsibilities held by councillors or the time commitment currently given.

5.3 It can be argued that many people do not choose to become a councillor for financial reward. Rather, they have a public service ethos and want to serve their community. We believe that is an admirable position but do not believe that it is completely tenable if we are serious about widening access, particularly when MSPs and members of other public bodies are paid adequately for the work they do. The low basic allowance currently available means that becoming a councillor is effectively ruled out for anyone who does not have another source of income. It is clear that most people could not give up a full-time job to become a councillor in return for £6-7k, and many do not believe they could continue to do their job while holding responsibilities as a councillor because of the time commitment needed to carry out both roles.

5.4 For those in employment, we strongly believe that the introduction of an adequate basic salary is fundamental to widening access. Without an adequate basic salary, we believe it will be extremely difficult to change the make-up of Scotland's councils.

5.5 We note that the Councillors' Remuneration Progress Group has considered a range of options for how councillors should be remunerated in the future, but that levels of remuneration will be considered later by the statutory Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee. It is worth noting, however, that many people to whom we have spoken believe that councillors should receive at least a salary commensurate with the average full time salary for Scotland and many others have said they believe councillors should be paid somewhere in the £20 - 25k range. If such a salary is introduced we believe it should be underpinned by role descriptions for all councillors and a reasonable level of information about what the public are entitled to expect of their councillors.

5.6 We note the Councillors' Remuneration Progress Group has recommended that Special Responsibility Allowances should be abolished, but has recommended an alternative arrangement for remunerating councillors with significant additional responsibilities. We consider it important that the way in which councillors are chosen to carry out these responsibilities is transparent and that equal opportunities should be mainstreamed into the process that determines which councillors should carry out which roles.

5.7 We have heard of two main benefits-related matters which are particularly relevant to the widening access agenda. Firstly, those currently in receipt of social security benefits are concerned about the effect becoming a councillor might have on their benefits. There is a real concern that becoming a councillor and receiving a basic allowance could result in benefits being lost. Given the low level of councillors' basic allowance at present, there is a fear that an individual could be financially worse off if they became a councillor, so it is understandable that these people are wary about standing for election.

5.8 We have also heard that people currently in receipt of benefits would be concerned about their future financial prospects if they were not returned as a councillor after serving one term, or found that they had to resign as a councillor for whatever reason, for example, if their circumstances changed in a way which meant they could not devote sufficient time to perform the role of councillor effectively. We have heard that once someone comes off benefits, it is a very difficult and lengthy process to re-apply. Both these factors are barriers to people making the first step towards council membership, particularly people with disabilities.

Our view:

- We agree that councillors should be adequately paid for the work they do and would ask the Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee to have regard to the need to widen access when carrying out its work and making its recommendations. Any new salary should not be set at a level which would discourage people from viewing council membership as a realistic option for them. We would consider that the level set should be within the £20 – 25K range.
- We acknowledge that there are concerns about the effect councillors' allowances would have on benefits, with the possibility that people may be financially worse off if they become a councillor. We believe this is another argument in favour of an adequate basic salary which, if introduced, would largely negate these concerns. We acknowledge that benefits are generally considered on a case by case basis but we believe someone who is a councillor should be treated in exactly the same way as anyone else receiving a similar salary. In the case of a councillor losing his or her seat at an election, they should be treated in a similar way to anyone else losing paid employment through no (direct) fault of their own.
- We would stress that our recommendations are based on the view that councillors will receive an adequate basic salary in the future. If that does not prove to be the case, urgent attention will need to be given to key widening access issues such as childcare and the allowances to which councillors are currently entitled.

Time Commitment

5.9 We have heard that there is a lack of clarity about the time commitment that would be required if someone was elected as a councillor. There is a perception that being a councillor is a full time job, and can only be carried out as such. This perception makes being a councillor an unattractive option, particularly to those who have other responsibilities, for example, employment, childcare, or other caring responsibilities.

5.10 We recognise that being a councillor is a time-consuming role but we do not believe it needs to be a full time job for *all* councillors. There are many serving councillors who are able to balance their role with other commitments, such as other employment, voluntary service, family commitments etc. Others choose to devote very long hours to council business, for example, by taking on additional responsibilities within the council's decision-making processes. So, while being a councillor can take up a significant proportion of time, much depends on how a councillor *chooses* to work. We need to move away from the impression that a long hours culture or 'face-time' is positive, or that it is necessary to carry out the role of councillor effectively. A councillor working very long hours is not necessarily more effective than one working fewer hours. We also need to discourage situations where a role expands to fill the time available.

5.11 We have heard that the time pressures on councillors are in part due to the number of meetings that require councillors' attendance. While local authorities can control the number and timing of council and committee meetings, councillors are generally expected to attend a number of other meetings, for example community councils, school boards, and other local groups, but have no control regarding the time and location of meetings.

5.12 In rural and island areas, travel time is an important factor which contributes to the number of hours councillors need to devote to their role. Although use of video conferencing is increasing, and legislation was amended in 2003 to allow it to be used for formal meetings, it will never be a completely effective substitute for being present at a committee or council meeting. This means many councillors will continue to attend the council headquarters for the majority of meetings. We recognise that local authorities try, as far as possible, to arrange their meetings in such a way that councillors' time is maximised, for example, by arranging a number of meetings on the same day. Nevertheless, members in rural and island areas may still need to take 3 days out of their diary to attend 1 day of meetings. This is a particular problem for councillors in islands authorities and within these island authorities, the problem is exacerbated for those coming from outer islands. The issue of time and distance will be particularly discouraging for those living in remote areas with caring commitments.

5.13 We also need to ensure that councillors and members of the public do not see 'part-time' as a stigmatising label. The fact that an individual chooses to have other responsibilities does not make them less effective, or less important than colleagues who spend time in the council headquarters every day. Indeed, having other

responsibilities can enhance a councillor's skills and perhaps bring some fresh thinking and new perspectives to their councillor role.

5.14 We are aware that as part of the Leadership Advisory Panel process councils were encouraged to streamline their policy development and decision making processes to reduce the amount of time that councillors needed to spend in the council headquarters. This process resulted in major improvements in openness, transparency, and accountability in most councils, and in the streamlining of council committees and processes. But our impression from speaking to a number of councillors is that these changes have had little impact on the time required to carry out their role, or represented only a temporary streamlining of business.

5.15 Councillors have also told us that many feel as if they are on call 24 hours and it is not uncommon for constituents to call late in the evening requesting advice or action in relation to a particular council service. We do not believe that should be the case, or needs to be the case. Local authorities usually have good helpline facilities or easily available contact numbers, including for out-of-hours emergencies. We do not believe councillors should be a first port of call for issues concerning service delivery and should not feel a need to make themselves available all hours of the day and night.

5.16 We believe that raising awareness among the public would be beneficial so that members of the public also understand that councillors are entitled to have work-life balance and are therefore not 'on call' all the time. There maybe a view among the public that presenteeism is positive. A councillor that spends the entire day in the council offices is easily contactable and readily available. A councillor who spends less time in the council offices may be seen as slacking which may have a negative effect on their chances at the next election. This is a perception that needs to change if we are to widen access to council membership.

Time off employment to carry out council business.

5.17 We have heard that in the past some public sector employers saw having a councillor on their payroll as an advantage and allowed staff to take paid time off to carry out their role as a councillor. A significant proportion of people in Scotland are now employed in small-medium enterprises (SME). Fifty-three percent of the workforce in Scotland are employed in SMEs – businesses with up to 250 employees, while 40% are employed in small businesses with less than 50 employees. Such companies are less likely to be able to afford to allow staff who are councillors paid time off, or meet the costs of ensuring that an individual's work is carried out in their absence. Employees in other sectors would face the same or similar concerns and while public sector employers are required to give staff time off to carry out a councillor role, the time prescribed is negligible. If in future councillors are in receipt of an adequate basic salary, we do not think it is reasonable that they should continue to be reimbursed for loss of earnings while taking time off other employment. We do however feel that it is important that more discussion needs to take place with employers within the SME sector in relation to their being enterprising in their flexibility and support for those wishing to take up office as a councillor.

Our view:

We believe the time-commitment required by councillors, and the perceptions of the time-commitment required are important factors which discourage people from considering councillor membership as an option open to them. We have heard many say that they would not have the time to be a councillor but their view was often based on a perception that they would need to be in the council offices every day, or attend meetings every evening. We believe there is scope to reduce the amount of time councillors need to spend carrying out their role and would make the following observations:

- Firstly, the public needs to be informed about the role of a councillor and when it is appropriate to consult a councillor. We do not think it is reasonable that some councillors feel they need to make themselves available 24-7, or that some constituents call their councillor at unreasonable hours, often in relation to issues which should be handled by council staff. Local authorities should ensure that their newsletters and websites include information which draws distinctions between when it is appropriate to contact a councillor, and when it is appropriate to contact a council helpline or council staff. The public also need to understand that while councillors should be easily contactable, they are also entitled to have work-life balance. To encourage more people to consider standing we need to move away from any perception that once elected, an individual must always be on call.
- We note that many councils made significant improvements to their policy development and decision making processes in 2000/2001 and some of these changes included reducing the number of committees which councillors needed to attend and considering the timetabling of meetings to make attendance more convenient. Other measures such as reducing the amount of paperwork that councillors needed to read were put in place. We welcome these improvements but believe there is a need for local authorities to consider continuously whether councillors' time-commitment could be reduced by making simple changes to their internal processes. One council we spoke to carried out sophisticated diary management work to cluster meetings while maximising councillors' attendance. We think there is scope for all councils to look at practical measures to reduce the time-commitment that councillors need to give to business in the council chambers or committees. It is important to recognise that councillors are increasingly spending time in meetings of other bodies, agencies and authorities. It is important that they too consider how their processes might be streamlined.

- We recognise that travel time is an important consideration, particularly in areas such as the Highlands and Islands. We are satisfied that councils are making appropriate use of video conference for meetings, but also recognise that it is no substitute for being present in a meeting. As noted above, there are practical arrangements councils can put in place to minimise travel time, such as clustering meetings, and we would encourage all councils to consider whether there is any room for improvement. We acknowledge that the introduction of the Single Transferable Vote will mean that councillors will represent larger wards and this may have implications for travel time. Councillors will need to consider how best to work together in their new wards and share the workload equally, but it is essential that new working arrangements are developed with the widening access perspective in mind.
- We would also note that it is unhelpful to take a broad brush view of the issues of whether a councillor is a part-time or a full-time role. As noted above, we believe the councillor role can be carried out by people who hold other responsibilities and may therefore be considered part-time. We do not believe it is helpful to give the impression that all councillors are full-time or the role can only be carried out on a full-time basis. Apart from being inaccurate, it does nothing to encourage people from under-represented groups to stand for election.
- We recognise that allowing individuals time off from employment to carry out a role as a councillor would need a legislative basis which takes it outwith the remit of the Group. We would however encourage the Scottish Executive to consider how employers can be encouraged to allow staff time off to carry out a councillors' role on a voluntary basis, and in the longer term, how legislation might be developed to require it. We also believe that further work can be carried out to establish how similar arrangements operate in, for example, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. We do however believe that secondment/sabbatical opportunities can be explored immediately as a way of encouraging employees to consider entering local government office as a positive move in their career pathway. While we accept the inherent difficulties for SMEs, we note that many employees have the right to ask for flexible working patterns and we strongly believe that serving as a councillor is a legitimate reason for requesting flexible working patterns such as part time working or compressed hours etc. The Scottish Executive should work with Enterprise Bodies, CBI, FSB, Chambers of Commerce and other business networks to encourage employers' bodies to put in place flexible arrangements to facilitate employees' role as councillors.

Practical support

5.18 In addition to a remuneration package and an accurate assessment of the time commitment involved, prospective councillors need to know what practical support will be available to them once they are elected as a councillor. The Kerley Group made a number of practical recommendations about the level of basic office support that should be available to councillors and we note that significant progress had been made by many local authorities. Councillors generally have access to the business tools necessary for them to carry out their role efficiently and effectively. As technology evolves we would encourage councils to keep pace with change, particularly in areas such as video conferencing which has the potential to reduce the need to travel to meetings, thus freeing up time for more productive activities.

5.19 In other respects we believe there is scope for further improvements to be made. We have heard in evidence that councillors still have to spend a significant amount of time in council meetings, or attending meetings at times which are often unsuitable. Although most councils took action in 1999-2000 to streamline their decision making processes, councillors have told us that further streamlining is still possible and we have made recommendations on this under the 'time commitment' section of the report.

5.20 There are currently no statutory requirements for the provision of training for councillors. In the autumn of 2003 we undertook a survey of all 32 Scottish local authorities to establish what training or information councils provided to candidates at local elections or for councillors once elected. New councillors face a steep learning curve in gaining the knowledge they require to be an effective councillor. All councils who responded to our questionnaire provided training for new councillors after elections but the situation across the country varies in both the scope and depth of training. There is no consistent approach to training of councillors who take on extra responsibilities. Some councils offer further training as a matter of course, some will provide further training on request or leave this issue for political parties to deal with.

5.21 We have noted that the Kerley Group commented that the right support can make a considerable difference to councillors with disabilities. Many councils have taken steps to provide wheelchair access and assistance to councillors with visual and hearing impairments. However these are practical rather than attitudinal changes and we believe that there is more work to be done within councils to educate staff and fellow councillors about disability etiquette.

5.22 Our Group heard on many occasions, including comments from written responses, of the need for councils to be reflective of their internal ethos and practices in relation to diversity and difference. To date, Councils have concentrated many of their equality and inclusion efforts on improving employment and service provision. There is perhaps a need to look focus internally at governance and practice issues to aid the widening access agenda.

Our view:

- We believe there are a number of improvements that can be made in the support available for councillors and, if such arrangements are in place, the prospect of becoming a councillor should be less daunting for people who have not previously been involved in local government.
- We recommend that councils examine the timing of their meetings and consider arrangements that best suit councillors and staff who are required to attend. For example, some councils have changed to evening meetings and it means councillors do not need to take time off work to attend. However for those with evening caring commitments, all evening meetings may not suit. We would like to see Councils explore ways in which they can be flexible with meeting times and venues where caring issues are taken as a key consideration.
- We believe it is important that all councillors take part in an adequate induction process as soon as possible after election and that information about the process is made available as part of the 'recruitment' campaign mentioned earlier. As well as information about councillors' role in that council's policy development and decision making processes, the induction process should include equalities, sustainable development, best value, anti-discrimination legislation, human resources and governance matters. Specific training for councillors with additional responsibilities such as finance, planning, and licensing should also be provided. We would recommend that such training should be provided by the Improvement Agency, or by individual local authorities working to Improvement Agency guidelines. As part of a councillors' continuous development we recommend that councillors should have an annual development review. We see this being a constructive process intended to support a councillor and allow them to enhance their performance through developing new skills or building on existing skills. These might be conducted as a collaborative exercise with the Chief Executive or Human Resources Director on a rotating basis.
- In addition to the induction and training offered by councils, councillors representing the main political parties also relied on their more experienced colleagues to guide them through their early days. For independent candidates there is no party machinery or party colleagues to whom they can easily turn. We recognise that even with an intensive induction process, new councillors will still find some aspects of settling into a new environment difficult. We recommend that all new councillors are offered a 'buddy' – a long serving councillor or recently retired councillor who can offer counsel and assistance on a confidential basis as required.
- We note the Kerley Group's views in relation to support for councillors with disabilities but would ask local authorities to consider the practical issues which would need to be overcome in respect of a councillor who needed constant carer support so any potential councillor could be reassured that their needs would be easily accommodated. We recommend that Councils move beyond practical measures to ensure awareness raising programmes on disability issues are offered to all staff.

Why do people leave?

5.23 We are aware that some councillors have left local government after relatively short periods of time, in some cases before serving a full term. Although there may be personal reasons why some councillors choose to leave, we think it is important that a local authority seeks to establish if there were any other factors which lead to the decision to go – for example, the working practices within the council, the responsibilities held, the level of support given, the ethos of Council etc.

Our view:

- We would encourage all local authorities to hold informal 'exit interviews' with all councillors who choose to leave to see whether there is anything the local authority could be doing better to support councillors. These interviews might be conducted by the Chief Executive or by a nominated person within the Council senior management group that the councillor requests.

“I’ve always worked, and I was unsure of areas such as how much **time off I may need to ask for”**

Chapter six – political restrictions on council employees

6.1 Part of our remit was to take forward work on preparation of non-statutory guidance on the definition of politically-restricted posts; that is staff posts within local authorities where the incumbent is prevented from standing for election as a councillor and engaging in a range of political activities.

6.2 Previous legislation set out the categories of local authority employees who were designated as holding politically restricted posts.

The categories were:

1. Those who hold positions specified in legislation, for example, council monitoring officers or those who speak to the press.
2. Those who hold posts above a salary threshold.
3. Those who hold posts not caught by the categories above but whose posts are politically restricted because of the content of that post.

6.3 Rules governing the definition of politically restricted posts were set out in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Council employees earning less than the prescribed salary threshold were covered by section 2(3) of the Act which defines a post as politically restricted if the officer regularly gives advice to the authority or any committee or sub-committee or any joint committees and/or if the officer is involved in speaking to journalists or broadcasters on behalf of the authority.

6.4 The Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 removed the second of these categories, posts which were determined by a salary threshold (which was set at £32,127), as it has proved to be an arbitrary measure which unnecessarily barred some employees from standing for election.

6.5 When the provisions of the 2004 Act come into force, the salary threshold will be abolished and a large number of posts will no longer automatically be deemed to be politically restricted. Local authorities will therefore need to determine whether any post previously caught by the salary threshold should be considered as politically restricted in line with the legislation that will remain in force.

6.6 As part of the questionnaire issued to all local authorities on behalf of the group, councils were asked to provide details of how they currently determine that a post (below the current salary threshold) should be classed as 'politically restricted'. It is clear from the replies received that interpretation by local authorities is relatively uniform and that individual councils are following the description of posts set out in legislation.

Our view:

- Evidence given to the Group consistently showed that the issue of politically restricted posts within local authorities is not something that causes any real difficulties. We consider that each case very much depends on the approach taken by an individual's manager. Managers need to be mindful that employees have the right to stand and we do not believe that doing so is likely to cause insurmountable difficulties in the majority of cases. This combined with the apparent lack of contention within councils in adjudicating on this matter has led the Group to form the opinion that there is no requirement to provide central guidance on how councils may wish to determine which posts should be considered as politically restricted. We believe the correct approach is for local authorities to treat each case individually as it arises and do not believe the number of serving council officers that are likely to want to make the move towards councillorship means that central guidance is necessary.

“I would be reluctant to have to enter an ‘old boys network’ where everyone knows everyone else, where there is a shared history and in-jokes, and where someone who doesn’t fit the mould feels like an outsider”

Annex – List of bodies and individuals we took written or oral evidence from

The Group took oral evidence from representatives of the following bodies and organisations:

- Aberdeen Action on Disability
- Aberdeen Youth Action Committee
- Aberdeenshire Council
- Engender
- Grampian Racial Equality Council
- Highland Council
- Highland Youth Voice
- Orkney Islands Council
- PHACE Scotland Grampian Office and North East LGBT Forum
- Scottish Civic Forum
- Scottish Conservative Party
- Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations
- Scottish Green Party
- Scottish Labour Party
- Scottish Liberal Democrats
- Scottish National Party
- Scottish Trades Unions Congress
- Shetland Islands Council
- Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators
- UNISON
- West Dunbartonshire Council
- West of Scotland Racial Equality Council

The Group received written evidence from the following organisations and individuals:

Organisations

- Aberdeen Volunteer Centre
- Black Community Development Project
- Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland
- Body Positive Strathclyde
- Central Scotland Racial Equality Council Ltd
- City of Edinburgh Council
- Commission for Racial Equality
- Disability Agenda
- Engender
- Equalities Co-ordinating Group (representing the three Equality Commissions, Equality Network, Age Concern, the Scottish Inter Faith Council and the Scottish Human Rights Centre)
- GARA
- Perth and Kinross Council of Voluntary Services
- Scottish Association of Mental Health

- Scottish Inter Faith Council
- Victim Support

Individuals

The Group also received responses from 14 individuals.

Glossary

Equalities Co-ordinating Group - A Group comprising representatives from Equal Opportunities Commission, Commission for Racial Equality, Disability Scotland, Disability Rights Commission, Fair Play, Equality Network, Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee.

Improvement Service - An organisation to provide local authorities with positive assistance to support continuous improvement in service delivery in a manner that responds to the needs of customers, the delivery of excellent services and the promotion of Best Value.

The Kerley Group – formally known as the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group, this Group was established by the Scottish Executive in 1999 consider widening access, councillors' remuneration, the electoral system, and the number of councillors. The Group reported in June 2000.

McIntosh Commission/McIntosh Report – formally known as the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament, this Commission considered how to build the most effective relations between local government and the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Executive, and how councils can best make themselves responsive and democratically accountable to the communities they serve.