

**Mainstreaming in Organisations:  
Strategies for delivering women's equality in  
UK Local Government**

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## **Abstract**

In the early 1980s, feminist councillors and the women's movement pushed for the establishment of structured provision in UK local government to address the issue of women's equality. Women's initiatives were set up by a small number of Labour controlled councils. At the height of their activities in 1987 there were 45 Women's Committees, by 1995 only 9 remained (Halford 1988). A central question of this thesis was to examine why the delivery of equal opportunities for women was changing and what form the new initiatives were taking.

The wider significance of studying the political activity of women's initiatives relates to the development of a new approach to women's equality delivery. Previous approaches can be classified as a legislative approach, based on the principle of equal treatment, and a positive action approach, which foregrounds women's material and social oppression. The new approach promoted, most notably, by the European Union argues for the need to 'mainstream' the work of equality practitioners so that every member of an organisation routinely and systematically adopts a 'gender perspective' in their work. A focus on gendered differences, rather than on women, aims to provide a more inclusive agenda which will appeal to a wider number of policy-makers, businesses and citizens. The second main thrust of this thesis was to explore the development of a mainstreaming approach to equality delivery in the UK. It contrasts UK practice to that advocated by the European initiative, and also begins to theorise the concept of mainstreaming in terms of feminist, organisational and sociological theory. Using a new concept of the 'equality stool' to describe the historical development of equality practice, the thesis attempts to explain why practitioners in the UK local government have been averse to a mainstreaming approach.

The thesis used qualitative methodology and a case study design to examine, in depth, the experience of women practitioners in three local authorities, over the last 20 years. It reports on practitioners' attitudes and opinions and makes the links between their views of the world, and the actions and events which they have described.

The thesis has three main findings. First, that past practice holds important insights for the development of a mainstreaming approach in the UK and European member states. Second, that mainstreaming in the UK has been developed for different reasons and from different perspectives than those of the European initiative. Third, that women's equality practice can be seen as a strategy of embodiment, which demands that individuals transform themselves into gender aware actors. Women practitioners' underlying purpose has been to challenge the gendered conception of women's roles at work and in society.

The findings are used to construct a table of prerequisites (organised according to Connell's 1987 gender order) which UK practitioners have identified as important for a mainstreaming approach to be successful. These prerequisites suggest that the development of a structured women's equality initiative may be a crucial first step before a mainstreaming strategy can be pursued.

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## Introduction

This thesis examines the delivery of women's equality policies through the bureaucracies of British local government. It focuses on the practice of women's initiatives. These were institutional structures, which had a remit and resources to tackle women's inequality in local authority workforces and the constituency at large. They had been set up through the efforts of feminist councillors and the women's movement in a small number of Labour controlled authorities in the early 1980s. When the research started the number of women's initiatives was dwindling. At the height of town hall feminism in 1987 there were 45 initiatives, by 1995 only 9 remained as discrete women's structures (Halford 1988). There had been a trend towards merging women's equality agendas with other agendas around discrimination such as race, disability and poverty. Some initiatives had been closed in favour of a corporate commitment to equality, which made equality a business objective for every member of the authority. A central research question of this thesis was therefore to examine why the delivery of equal opportunities for women was changing and what form the new initiatives were taking.

The wider significance of studying the activities of women's initiatives related to the development of a new approach to equal opportunities delivery, which was beginning to be discussed by European policy makers in 1995. In recognition that almost 40 years after the signing of the founding Treaty of Rome yawning gaps in pay, in employment opportunities and in access to decision making bodies still existed between the sexes the European Commission was arguing that:

The full and complete involvement of women and men on an equal footing in political, economic, social and cultural affairs ... is a crucial challenge for the future (EC undated).

It identified that resolution of inequality would 'require the mobilisation of all general policies and measures' in the pursuit of the principle of "mainstreaming" (EC undated). 'Mainstreaming gender equality' aimed to go beyond existing approaches to equal opportunities delivery and to avoid their mistakes. By 1995, the language had been adopted by practitioners in the UK and in some cases was being applied to the practice of women's initiatives. However it appeared to be a very fuzzy concept. Women's equality practitioners were sceptical that the concept was transformative. They saw it as a cynical attempt to remove a specialist focus on women's oppression. In aiming to examine the change to women's initiatives, the thesis became focused on this emerging mainstreaming agenda. It has explored the theoretical basis for mainstreaming produced by the European Union, and has examined the context and the form of its implementation in English local government.

There were a number of difficulties piecing together the attitudes, principles and actions of practitioners that had brought about the shift in practice. First, there were significant gaps in knowledge about the delivery of women's equality policies. Literature addressing the early period of feminist activity in the state was written in the most part by participants. These accounts were parochial and aimed to defend and justify the need for women's initiatives to an audience in the local government sector and also in the women's movement. There was no synthesis explaining all the aspects of feminist practice. Second, contemporary changes had gone unrecorded. There were very few independent commentaries on the mainstreaming approach of the European Union and only very few updated accounts of women's practice in the UK in the 1990s.

The research objectives of the thesis were therefore twofold. To provide new empirical evidence to describe past and present practice to deliver women's equality and to theorise the changes with reference to the emerging mainstreaming approach. The core research questions can be summarised as follows:

- How are women's equality practitioners currently operating in local government bureaucracies, in comparison to their earlier strategies and practice?



- How do practitioners explain the shift from a women-centred approach to a generic approach to equal opportunities?
- What is the perceived usefulness of the concept of 'mainstreaming equality' as a practical strategy?
- How have practitioners conceptualised mainstreaming? Does it suggest a new way of understanding and implementing equal opportunities for women?

Three bodies of academic literature - sociological, feminist and organisational theory - which have addressed women's position and participation in the public sphere, have provided the theoretical framework for the thesis. Sociological literature has addressed the socio-economic circumstances of women, focusing on how their domestic responsibilities shape their experience of paid employment. Numerous studies have documented women's structural and occupational segregation and the ways in which this has been influenced by stereotyped views of women's role in society as mothers and carers. On a micro level, studies of the workplace have revealed how subjective perceptions, expectations about behaviour, dress, personal capabilities and aspirations have a gendered subtext. These have been shown to contribute to gendered cultures that hold women back from promotion to positions of authority as effectively as material disadvantages. Women's initiatives developed strategies to change both structural and subjective barriers to women's equality. They were most successful building up acceptance for women's rights on an organisational level since changing women's material disadvantage and domestic responsibility required funding and political will that was never at their disposal.

Personnel managers and organisational theorists have written extensively on how to facilitate change in organisational workplaces. Feminists have accused organisational theory of bolstering gender blind arrangements by uncritically endorsing current management practice. Although much of this literature aims to improve business efficiency rather than social justice, it closely describes the contemporary policy making process and identifies difficulties in its implementation. This literature provided the context in which to examine the implementation of equal opportunities policies, which was a central focus of the work of women's initiatives.



Feminist theorists have responded ambivalently to the attempt of feminist councillors to engage with and to subvert the formal relations of power from within state institutions. Radical feminists have chosen to separate their activities and frames of reference from everyday social arrangements because they are perceived to be designed by men to serve men's interests. Socialist-feminists, influenced by this view point, have therefore debated the pros and cons of remaining on the outside. Discussion about the risk of co-option by a male dominated political elite has centred on the need to create alternative forms of organisation within formal state structures. Many women's officers have tried to achieve this. In practical terms it is a difficult position to maintain since it relies on a constant process of negotiation of the interface between the unit and the bureaucracy (Edwards 1995<sup>b</sup>). Feminist theory has reported the barriers of marginalisation and victimisation faced by women's separatist politics. It has also explored women's relationship with other women, examining mechanisms for support and also the problems caused by recognising women's difference.

The need to address the differences between women has posed a dilemma for feminist politics. Acknowledging the huge diversity of women's aspirations and abilities undermines the existence of a common experience of oppression under an all-powerful patriarchy. This in turn weakens the possibilities for unified political action. Developments in postmodern theory have suggested ways to resolve this dilemma. Feminist theorists have focused on the dualism of gender itself and argued that the concepts of man and woman, and the sexual natures attached to these genders, have no material reality. They are social constructs that throw artificial boundaries around an individual's thoughts and actions. Women can therefore unite around an argument to rid social arrangements of these constructs and by doing so radically alter the priorities and material arrangements of everyday life so that tasks are more equally shared between individuals. This body of literature has informed the discussion of the gender perspective as part of the European mainstreaming approach.

The research questions which this thesis explored, called for the use of a qualitative methodology to provide detail in depth and breadth and to allow the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of women's practitioners to emerge. The thesis does not aim to provide a factual account of women's equality practice, but to explore how practitioners' attitudes have shaped their actions and events. A case study approach was chosen as the most



appropriate design to provide a holistic picture of past and present practice. The multiple forms of evidence collected using this approach provided more opportunities to substantiate practitioners' observations with other forms of supporting evidence, although in some cases this was not possible. The nature and form of women's initiatives, based in individual organisations each with their own set of arrangements, cultures and hierarchies, made them an ideal unit for case study analysis. Three case studies were carried out in authorities in England, which had established women's initiatives in the 1980s and were undergoing change to a different style of delivery when the fieldwork was carried out. A fourth mini case study was undertaken to examine the archived record of the first women's initiative to be set up in British local government. This examination provided more primary data to describe the early practice<sup>1</sup>.

The findings of the thesis are both empirical and theoretical. They represent a contribution to new knowledge in the area of women's equality practice in the British local state. The thesis synthesises the existing accounts with new empirical data to provide a very detailed and holistic description of past and contemporary practice. This description reveals that the changes made to the form of the delivery of equal opportunities for women cannot be adequately explained as the result of patriarchal power. It appears that as feminists began to engage in significant programmes of activity, they pragmatically adjusted their principles in order to secure concrete outcomes. Part of this adjustment included the development of an 'unofficial' version of mainstreaming in the early 1990s, which contrasts with the approach promoted by the European Union in 1995. Both approaches had arisen from the experience of the women's movement but significantly the European definition put its emphasis on the development of a gender perspective in all bureaucratic activity. The thesis reconceptualises the historical development of equal opportunities to suggest why UK practitioners were averse to using this gender perspective. The three case study reports represent an important contribution. They supply new examples of empirical practice, which contain useful insights for the development of future practice. Analysis of these experiences has shown that the underlying objective of women's officers in local authorities has been to encourage their bureaucratic colleagues to adopt an embodied understanding of their practice, so that they are aware of their whole lived experience and how this impacts on their decisions and

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<sup>1</sup> A research award from the Paul Nunn Memorial Trust enabled me to undertake this study.



actions at work. This embodied position can be described as a gender aware position - the adoption of a gender perspective.

The thesis is divided into 8 further chapters. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of the development of women's initiatives in British local government during the 1980s. This period was characterised by relative stability and growth in their activities. The archive material of the first women's initiative set up by the Greater London Council is included here. Chapter 3 brings this account up to date. It reviews the small number of reports written in the 1990s which describe the re-structuring, and down grading of the majority of initiatives. The shift to a generic style of delivery is explored along with the 'unofficial' version of mainstreaming. This contemporary practice is put in the context of developments in feminist theory, which were calling for a different conceptualisation of men's power as fragmented, circumstantial and contradictory rather than as universally oppressive. This analysis implicitly supported a different style of practice. The chapter goes on to explore the definition of mainstreaming put forward by the European Union, describing the gender perspective and identifying why the approach has been called transformatory. Using a new notion of an 'equality stool' to reconceptualise the historical development of equal opportunities practice, the chapter concludes by suggesting why British practitioners insist on retaining a focus on women and the use of positive action.

The methodological approach and methods which have been adopted to explore the research questions are described in Chapter 4. It gives an account of the choice of a case study research design and the process of data collection, which was necessarily a 'dirty' business (Punch 1986). The chapter explores the ethical dilemmas arising during the fieldwork process, and deals with issues such as the role of the researcher. It concludes by reviewing the nature of the data which could be collected, and discusses the difficulties of validation and partial and biased disclosure. The following three chapters describe the experience of each of the case studies in turn. They follow a similar format, based on the case study template that was designed to guide the collection of data (see Appendix 1). The different types of participants and documentary evidence which has been collected in each case have meant that case study reports have emphasised the importance of different aspects of the template. The case study chapters are mainly descriptive. The analysis included in them is directed at exploring the nature of the processes at work.



The full analysis and theoretical understanding of the empirical data from all three cases is combined in Chapter 8. Connell's (1987) concept of a 'gender order' is the guiding framework for the analysis of the shift in past and present practice. This is supplemented by the work of Acker (1992) and Colgan and Ledwith (1996) in order to gain a greater understanding of the structure of 'cathexis', which deals with the personal interaction between actors operating in the gender order. Finally, Chapter 9 summarises the central issues and findings of the thesis and suggests a set of conditions identified by the case study experience, which need to be in place before mainstreaming a gender perspective in UK local government can be successfully delivered.

## Historical Accounts of Women's Equality Practice

This chapter gives a historical account of women's initiatives in local government from their first appearance in 1982 up until the end of the 1980s. This was a period of relative stability and growth in their activities, and of the sector as a whole. The account describes the structure and frequency of initiatives, their local political circumstances, and their policy agenda. The feminist agenda was very different from traditional local government agendas. It extended the traditional range of policy issues and challenged the form of organisational arrangements. Each aspect is examined in turn. The account is based on the existing literature<sup>1</sup> and also on archival material produced by the first Women's Committee. This archival material has not been interrogated before. It provides a detailed picture of how women's initiatives operated at a practical level and deepens our understanding of the organisational structures they pioneered. The aim of the first section is to provide a picture of what early women's initiatives looked like.

### Structure and frequency of women's initiatives

Women's initiatives are a form of public service provision which has primarily been developed at the level of local government. They aim to actively promote the interests and welfare of women. Women's initiatives are different from equal opportunities policies that aim to ensure organisational compliance with the Sex Discrimination Act

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<sup>1</sup> There are a finite number of accounts of women's political practice in UK local government, they are as follows: Button 1984, Brownill & Halford 1990, Halford & Duncan 1991, Edwards 1988 1989 1990 1995<sup>a</sup> 1995<sup>b</sup>, Flannery & Roleofs 1983, Gelb 1986 1989, Goss 1984 1989, Halford 1988 1992, Harriss 1989, Little 1994, Lovenduski & Randell 1993, Parkin 1992, Perrigo 1986, Randall 1992, Riley 1990, Wilson with Weir 1987. To avoid repetition I refer to these authors throughout the thesis interchangeably as 'the literature' or 'practitioners'. Where only one author has expressed a certain view, I have cited them separately by name.



(1975). First, their policy agenda goes beyond minimum legal requirements; it promotes greater social equality. Second, their delivery of this agenda has been via new political and organisational structures. As there is no statutory duty on national or local government to tackle the issue of women's inequality, and hence no extra funding available, this provision has been undertaken by a minority of local councils.

Councils that established structured provision tacitly accepted that women occupy a subordinate economic and social position in society, which it is the state's responsibility to redress<sup>2</sup>. This undertaking has been made by left wing parties at a local level, in the absence of national party backing. Fewer than 25% of all local Labour Parties and one recorded example of a Social Democrat Party have sponsored the establishment of a women's initiative (Halford & Duncan 1991). Even within these Councils, the membership has not been uniformly in support of the provision. Setting up women's initiatives has been a contentious political commitment. The strategy has always been hotly debated.

The arguments for structured provision originated from a determined handful of socialist feminists working within local Labour Parties (Goss 1989). In the climate of political radicalism of the 1960s feminists had addressed their demands to the state by campaigning as members of the Women's Liberation Movement. The women who set up the first women's initiatives were doing something different. They had moved their energies from grass-root activities to stand as elected members. Socialist-feminists in the Greater London Council (GLC) led the way. They pioneered the use of political committees to formalise the Council's commitment to sex equality (Goss 1984). This Women's Committee had a revenue budget from which it financed an administrative support unit and out-reach community workers, as well as a capital budget from which to develop services for women. The only difference between it and other service committees was its lack of statutory guidelines, outlining exactly what services it should provide. In all other ways it conformed to the committee format, with lines of accountability to the

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<sup>2</sup> Women's initiatives represent an explicit intervention by the state into local gender relations.



central policy and resources committee and full power of veto over the operations of other service committees.

The anomaly of having no statutory guidelines prompted the GLC Women's Committee to formulate its service and policy agenda through a London-wide consultation exercise with women. It argued for women representatives to be co-opted as committee members in order that this input could be on going<sup>3</sup>. The lack of statutory guidelines has been described by practitioners as an opportunity, but also as an obstacle. The policy vacuum left women with a clean slate on which to experiment with whatever structures and issues they liked. However, with no precedent or authority, the accountability and legitimacy of the initiatives was constantly in question.

The GLC Women's Committee and Women's Support Unit acted as a model for radical Labour Councils across the capital and subsequently nation-wide. With one or two exceptions most councils were unable or reluctant to resource their provision to the same extent as the GLC. Also many initiatives did not receive the same level of political support. The structural form of Women's Committees has been very diverse between councils, as a result of local negotiations between socialist-feminists and party members. The range of different structural forms include women's full standing committees, like that of the GLC, and women's sub committees attached to Personnel Committees or to central policy making committees and advisory working parties that were non-committee initiatives (WLAN 1995). Some councils have only been prepared to go as far as financing officers in the authority administration with no political structure at all. The form of administrative support has been equally varied, consisting of units with department status, small policy teams within the hierarchies of other service departments and Chief Executive Departments and individual women's equality officers. This diversity has affected the way this research has been developed and my decision to refer to 'women's initiatives' rather than Women's Committees or Women's Support Units specifically.

The agenda of most women's initiatives has addressed two goals: to improve the situation of women as constituents, and to do the same for women employees of the councils. Hence they have grant-aided a large number of voluntary sector women's groups to provide new services and employment opportunities for women constituents. They have attempted to address the implicit gender implications of the council's internal policies and practices, to find ways of putting 'their house in order'. In terms of dividing up the work tasks, women councillors appear to have played a crucial role in setting up the initiatives and publicising and defending their achievements to the Council chamber (Brownill & Halford 1990). The role of the Women's Committee as a whole has been to formulate the content of the agenda, although many councillors also have chosen to get personally involved in the public parts of its implementation. The women's officers as part of Women's Support Units have carried the political decisions into practice on a daily basis. They have introduced changes to the organisational arrangements and attitudes of the bureaucracy to ensure its services and terms of employment meet the demands from service users and employees.

The example of the GLC Women's Committee inspired other party women to demand similar provision from their councils. In less than a year after the inception of the GLC's Women's Committee, six London boroughs had followed suit. By 1986 the knock on effect had extended beyond London producing a total of 33 Women's Committees or working parties, 23 outside the capital (Goss 1989:145)<sup>4</sup>. Halford's survey conducted in 1986 and 1988 has established that all these Councils shared two important features in common (Halford & Duncan 1991). First, their local Labour party had a radicalised membership, who were receptive to arguments to extend local democracy and hence to arguments for women's rights. The political leaderships of these councils rallied behind

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<sup>3</sup> Co-option represented a new and untried form of participative democracy.

<sup>4</sup> The link between these committees was formalised in 1986 when they became affiliated members to the newly formed National Association of Local Government Women's Committees (NALGWC). This association was a charitable organisation, financed by membership fees. It was based in Manchester to reflect the national nature of the committee movement (Taylor 1996). In 1994, in response to falling membership, it changed its name to the Women's Local Authority Network (WLAN) in an attempt to broaden its base to include single committed officers and councillors in councils which could not afford the affiliation fee. The continuing restrictions in the late 1990s on



the oppositional stance that the GLC had taken towards the incoming Conservative government in 1979. Second, these Councils governed localities with particular sets of economic and social conditions. They tended to be urban metropolitan councils, with a diverse labour market. This type of labour market offered opportunities to many young single women, who formed the core of vibrant women's movements. These characteristics are discussed at greater length later in this chapter. The tables below demonstrate quite clearly how the fortunes of women's initiatives have been determined by these two conditions. They are snapshots of the structure and frequency of women's initiatives in 1986 to 1988, 1991 and 1996.

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public spending and the reorganisation of Scottish local government further reduced the network's paying members. It was forced to close in September 1997.



Region	Women's Committee	Women's Sub-cmte.	Other committee	Other Sub-cmte.	Non-cmte initiative	Status unclear
Scotland	Aberdeen C Central RC Clackmannan Edinburgh C Kyle & Carrick Lothian RC Stirling		Cumbernauld & Kilsyth Dundee C Dunfermline Tayside RC	Fife RC	E. Kilbride Glasgow C Grampian RC Strathclyde RC	W. Lothian
North East		Newcastle M		Cleveland		
Yorkshire & The Humber		Leeds M Sheffield C			Bradford M** Calderdale M Wakefield M York C	
North West		Manchester M		Tameside M	Bury M Rochdale M	
Wales						S. Glamorgan CC
East Midlands	Nottingham *			Derbyshire CC Leicester		Peterborough Nottinghamshire CC
West Midlands		Wolverhampton M	Birmingham M Redditch		Walsall	
East Anglia				Norwich		
London	Camden Ealing Greenwich Hackney Haringey Hammersmith & Fulham Islington Lambeth Southwark Waltham Forest	Brent Kingston* ^ Newham	Hounslow			
South East	Brighton Harlow	Southampton C			Basildon Reading	Oxford
South West	Bristol C	Thamesdown				
<b>TOTAL N=64</b>	<b>22 (34%)</b>	<b>9 (14%)</b>	<b>8 (13%)</b>	<b>7 (11%)</b>	<b>13 (21%)</b>	<b>5 (8%)</b>

\* abolished between 1986 and 1988

\*\* abolished after 1988

^ controlled by the Social Democrats

(M) Metropolitan District Council, (RC) Scottish Regional Council, (C ) City Council, authorities without notation outside of London are District Councils, those in London are London Boroughs.

**Table 1: The frequency and structure of women's initiatives 1986 to 1988, from Halford and Duncan (1991)**



Region	Women's Committee	Women's Sub-cmte.	Generic equality committee	Generic equality sub-cmte.	Non-cmte initiative
<b>Scotland</b>	Aberdeen C Central RC Edinburgh Kyle & Carrick Lothian RC Stirling W. Lothian		Dundee Dunfermline Fife RC Tayside RC	E Kilbride	Clackmannan DC Hamilton Strathclyde RC
<b>North</b>		Kirklees M Newcastle N. Tyneside	Preston BC	Cleveland CC S. Tyneside	Middlesborough Northamptonshire CC
<b>Yorkshire &amp; The Humber</b>		Leeds		Sheffield Wakefield	Calderdale York
<b>North West</b>		Manchester		Pendle BC Stockport BC Tameside	Rochdale M
<b>Wales</b>		S. Glamorgan			
<b>East Midlands</b>		Derbyshire		Leicester C	Nottinghamshire CC Peterborough C Welwyn Hatfield DC
<b>West Midlands</b>		Wolverhampton		Birmingham	
<b>East Anglia</b>				Norwich	
<b>London</b>	Hackney Greenwich Islington Lewisham Southwark Waltham Forest	Newham	Camden Haringey Hounslow Lambeth	Hammersmith & Fulham	
<b>South East</b>	Brighton Harlow	Oxford Southampton			Basildon
<b>South West</b>				Bristol Gloucestershire CC	Thamesdown
<b>TOTAL N= 62</b>	16 (26%)	11 (18%)	9 (14%)	13 (21%)	13 (21%)

Initiatives not recorded by Halford & Duncan (1991)

Initiatives which have changed to being more specialist / higher status since Halford & Duncan (1991)

Initiatives which have changed to being less specialist / lower status since Halford & Duncan (1991)

**Table 2: Frequency and structure of women's initiatives in 1991, from NALGWC Directory 1991/1992**



Region	Women's Committee	Women's Sub-cmte.	Generic equality committee	Generic equality sub-cmte.	Non-cmte initiative
Scotland	Aberdeen Edinburgh Stirling* W. Lothian* Falkirk~		Dundee Fife RC* Glasgow C	E Lothian	Clackmannan DC
North		Kirklees M N. Tyneside	Preston BC	Lancashire CC Middlesbrough Northamptonshire CC S. Tyneside	Newcastle Redcar & Cleveland
Yorkshire & The Humber		Leeds		Sheffield	Calderdale* York
North West				Tameside Liverpool C Manchester Salford C Stockport BC	Rochdale M
Wales				Vale of Glamorgan^	
East Midlands		Watford BC		Chesterfield BC Derby C Derbyshire CC	
West Midlands			Birmingham		Wolverhampton
East Anglia				Norwich* Suffolk CC	
London	Hackney Islington Greenwich	Newham	Camden Hounslow Lewisham Waltham Forest	Croydon Lambeth	
South East	Harlow*	Oxford			Basildon* Oxfordshire CC
South West		Bristol		Gloucestershire CC Thamesdown	
<b>TOTAL N=56</b>	9 (16%)	7 (12.5%)	10 (18%)	21 (37.5%)	9 (16%)

~ Established in April 1996 following local government reorganisation in Scotland

\* abolished in 1997

^ Under local government reorganisation in Wales, the Vale of Glamorgan became a unitary authority

Initiatives not recorded by NALGWC 1991

Initiatives which have changed to being more specialist / higher status since NALGWC 1991

Initiatives which have changed to being less specialist / lower status since NALGWC 1991

**Table 3: Frequency and structure of women's initiatives 1996, from WLAN Directory 1996/7.**



1986 and 1988 (Halford & Duncan 1991)

Region	Women's Committee	Women's Sub-cmte.	Other committee	Other Sub-cmte.	Non-cmte initiative	Status unclear
<b>TOTAL N=64</b>	22 (34%)	9 (14%)	8 (13%)	7 (11%)	13 (21%)	5 (8%)

1991 NALGWC

<b>TOTAL N= 62</b>	16 (26%)	11 (18%)	9 (14%)	13 (21%)	13 (21%)
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1996 WLAN

<b>TOTAL N=56</b>	9 (16%)	7 (12.5%)	10 (18%)	21 (37.5%)	9 (16%)
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The tables show that the biggest commitment in terms of structural provision was made by the London, Scottish and large metropolitan councils. These were the vanguard of the new urban left. These councils were most severely penalised by central government spending restrictions in the late 1980s. Their radical policies also came to be condemned by the national Labour executive in search of election victory in 1992. It is not surprising to observe a great deal of change in these councils' women's initiatives; they have fluctuated between many structural forms but overall have been downgraded. The effect of the government's restriction on local public spending levels was delayed in Scotland by the preparations for local government reorganisation that came on the statute books in 1996. Their initiatives were not affected until the mid 1990s. The tables indicate that overall there has been a trend away from named structural provision to address women's rights, to provision that covers all forms of inequality. This trend is underpinned by a analysis of the problems of women's initiatives and a shift in feminist ideas. These issues are discussed at length in the next chapter. The tables give a convincing demonstration of the influence that the socialist-feminist agenda has had in raising the profile of equal opportunities provision in local government. Many councils which have not obviously been connected with the radicalised left have set up generic equality provision (such as in the Midlands and South East, Table 3). Women's initiatives have rarely been credited for putting social justice firmly on the political agenda of state administrations. The chapter



goes on to look in detail at what practitioners have said about how they came to engage with state politics and of their experience of running women's initiatives.

### **Historical background to the development of women's initiatives**

The body of literature that describes the political practice of women's initiatives is almost exclusively written by participants<sup>5</sup>. It focuses on recording what prompted them to get involved in setting up formal structures, what their objectives were and what they feel has been achieved. The literature reflects the value that the women's movement has placed on women giving voice to their own experiences. Its many colourful anecdotes stand in stark contrast to mainstream accounts of political history, where not only the personal experience, but also more particularly women's experiences are absent. The following section reviews these practitioner reports. It aims to give a more detailed description of the phenomenon of women's initiatives. Throughout I have tried to highlight the themes that have structured my own research and also the gaps and inconsistencies that my case studies were designed to answer. The review of the literature is divided into four areas. It describes the context, practice, policy agenda and achievements of women's initiatives, drawing on literature concerned with the twenty-year period 1970 to 1990.

Practitioners have suggested that the establishment of new kinds of women's structures in local government in the 1980s was the conclusion of a process that had begun twenty years earlier. Women moved from political groups on the left to the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) in the late 1960s before returning to formal politics and particularly the Labour Party in the early 1980s. Weedon suggests that the WLM formed because women moved into single sex groupings to critique the sexist treatment they had experienced (to their surprise) as members of libertarian groups (1987:9). Many accounts suggest that the WLM was inclusive of socialist values and hence many women maintained dual affiliations to both movements (Harriss 1989:35, Wilson 1986:5). Wilson argues that the socialist foundations of the

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<sup>5</sup> For example Goss worked for Lewisham LB, Harriss was involved in the women's movement in Leeds, Parkin worked for Ealing LB.

WLM meant that even women for whom the WLM was their first political experience were initiated into socialist politics.

The literature convincingly establishes the predisposition of WLM participants to co-operate with left wing parties. What were the catalysts that prompted them to do so in a formalised way at the beginning of 1980s? Practitioners explain the realignment in very practical terms. They desired to do something to improve the material situation of women, but felt unable to do so in the stymied structures of the women's movement. The literature is very candid about the lack of direction that feminist debates were suffering from. They recount how the movement's slogan 'the personal is political' had inspired countless women to record similar experiences of adversity. This gave rise to the heady belief in sisterhood. It prompted theorists to conceptualise patriarchal power and a single feminist agenda that united all women across all classes, races and times (Wilson 1986:5). The momentum which the idea of common oppression initially generated, in time concealed underlying gaps, silences and unorthodoxies (Wilson 1986:4). Women did not want to speak about the parts of their lives that undermined the compelling assumption of shared experience.

The feminist literature identifies black women as the first distinct group to proclaim their difference (Wilson 1978, hooks 1981, Mira 1997). Encouraged by the increasing strength of the black civil rights lobby, they challenged the WLM's ethnocentricity. This opened the door in the late 1970s for a discussion of women's difference. This discussion recognised that age, class, disability, sexuality and race positioned some women as doubly or multiply disadvantaged. Compound discrimination highlighted the unequal and exploitative relationships between women themselves. Harriss (1989) observed the slogan the 'personal is political' took on a threatening meaning<sup>6</sup>. The WLM became obsessed with self-labelling. In media articles, academic journals and public discussions members marked their place

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<sup>6</sup> She considers that the emphasis on personal experience led to a false conception of how women's difference was constructed: Difference was reduced to the relationship between individual women, rather than understood as the result of a structural system. Patriarchy was left largely unchallenged while women remained disunited (Harriss 1989:37).



on the hierarchy of women's oppression in order to justify a point of view by reference to their own identity (Harriss 1989:37). Harriss describes how she witnessed local self-organised women's groups breaking into smaller units to address their particular identities (Harriss 1989:37). The disagreement between radical and socialist feminist standpoints over relationships with men exacerbated the process of fragmentation that was underway in the movement<sup>7</sup>.

In this context a group of socialist-feminists looked for a new direction from which the structural and material inequality of women's different positions could be practically redressed (Harriss 1989:34)<sup>8</sup>. The accounts describe how the burgeoning activity of the left<sup>9</sup> in the early 1980s became more and more appealing (Button 1984:4). Political contexts and feminist circumstances had coincided to produce a situation in which change and action was possible. Other recent studies (for example Yeandle, Booth & Bennett 1999) support the importance of the combination of certain conditions and resources for facilitating change.

At the same time that women were seeking new opportunities, the left was undergoing changes which made party membership more attractive. Several sources mention the Chesterfield Group led by Tony Benn as an example of the new forces at work on the fringe of the Labour party (Flannery & Roelofs 1983, Parkin 1996). Bennism argued for working class democracy (similar to Chartism). Flannery and Roelofs (1983) explain that the agenda of the new forces for social justice and inclusive participation convinced many women to consider the opportunities for raising feminist principles within the capitalist state<sup>10</sup>. Harriss wrote:

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<sup>7</sup> Women spoke of the 'paralysing split' of living in non-sexist ways as part of the WLM, whilst being committed to socialism in some other part of their lives (Wilson 1987:63-64). In the women's press such as Spare Rib, they expressed the discomfort they felt as heterosexual women. They experienced feminism as only a partial movement because it failed to include and inspire men in its project.

<sup>8</sup> The WLM's collective organisation provided no brake to this disintegration because there were no institutional or national mechanisms for resolving conflict.

<sup>9</sup> The left included the Communist Party, Trotskyist or neo-Trotskyist groups, libertarian Marxism.

All these changes struck a powerful note of resonance with many feminists - indeed it was in part the influence of feminism that had inspired the changes. Notions concerning the specificity of different oppressions, of starting from people's experiences, of self-organisation and a widening of democratic control, all seemed to have been reproduced at the level of the state. (Harris 1989:41) (also see Goss 1989:144).

Halford's survey observed a close association between the ascendancy of the new forces or 'new urban left' as she calls them, and the establishment of women's initiatives (Halford 1988:253)<sup>11</sup>. The literature suggests that the relationship was symbiotic. New urban left councillors stood on a platform for participative democracy and recognition of pluralistic communities, which was inclusive of feminist concerns. The Conservative election victory in 1979 acted as a further catalyst (Perrigo 101:1986). It gave the new urban left an edge in the local elections in 1980, their members gained significant majorities over traditional members (Wilson 1987:129). These men, and a few women councillors, looked for local support and allies for a radical agenda to oppose Conservative policy and to defend public services from the local arena.

Practitioners are clear in their description of the importance of the local labour political context. Their accounts do not discuss at any length the local feminist political context. Being part of it, it seems they have taken it for granted.

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<sup>10</sup> This occurred in the South, where Bennism had a stronger hold because local Labour parties were not dominated by traditional Labourism, in contrast to the heavily industrialised, unionised constituencies of the North.

<sup>11</sup> Halford's survey of women's initiatives demonstrates that the relative mix of new and traditional members was more important for the establishment of a women's initiative than an overall stable Labour majority in the council (1988:253). The number of new urban left members was in part determined by the nature of the political and economic profile of the locality. Perrigo contrasts the experience of the northern Labour parties against those in the south, particularly in London. Labour north was less affected by the catastrophic electoral defeats of 1960s and 1970s and consequently did not recognise that its politics were authoritarian, paternalistic and elitist and in need of revision (Perrigo 1986:105). The nature of party membership affected the standing of the new urban left. In Sheffield for example, the predominance of the steel industry in the local labour market produced a membership that was heavily unionised and dogged by entrenched traditionalism. In contrast, the diverse employment opportunities in Leeds produced a membership that was more inclined to be open-minded. While trends can be mapped, the peculiarity of local processes is central. Sheffield is a relevant example since despite its membership's reticence, Labour councillors took Sheffield in a direction which was notably more left-wing than the neighbouring Yorkshire councils.



Commentators, who have attempted to describe the experience for an academic audience, have emphasised the importance of a vibrant local women's movement to act as a stimulus for setting up an initiative. Halford demonstrated this in terms of the nature of the local labour market. Her survey showed that initiatives were more likely to be set up in towns that supported a large number of single young women, who had the time and resources to engage in political activity. These ambitious committed women, often in middle class professions, operating in the system, were most often the catalysts for the establishment of Women's Committees (Halford 1988:254).

The decision to stand as local Labour party candidates in order to change the system from within government was taken by only a small number of feminists. Goss describes how all women's initiatives were 'broadly set up by the determined efforts of a handful of women councillors' (Goss 1989:145). As described above, the local political circumstances offered opportunities to move feminist activity on from a fragmenting women's movement. The weight of feminist theorising about the nature of the state, however, appears to have acted as a significant brake, stopping women from 'taking the plunge'.

The writings of the WLM identify the State, its actors and institutions as key sites of women's oppression. Feminists argued that the state is not a neutral arbitrator that mediates disinterestedly between different social groups, it actively administers unequal relationships to benefit capitalism and patriarchy (Burstyn 1983:46). Feminist critiques about state welfare provision illustrated this distrust. Many commentators and researchers had stressed that state welfare was delivered in ways that constrained women to a subordinate family centred role. For example, Ungerson (1985) revealed the 'familialism' built into housing and benefit policies, Simms (1981) described the ways in which the medical profession pathologised women's health complaints ignoring their social and material origin. An article in Spare Rib summed up this feeling that the state had the power to corrupt the women's movement.

At best Women's Committees have been seen as the potential for a feminist revolution in local government and access to their funds; at worst they've been seen as irrelevant or a hypocritical attempt to co-opt us and divert our energies (Spare Rib 1982).

Feminists who remained suspicious of the state argued for the importance of an autonomous women's movement (stronger in its isolation). Wilson felt that joining the Labour Party was a potentially frustrating and debilitating project (Wilson 1987:65). Flannery and Roelofs agreed that the possibility that the women's movement might become 'a Labour Party ginger group' was not without foundation (1983:70)<sup>12</sup>. A half way compromise was suggested by a conference entitled 'Beyond the Fragments' in 1980 and the book of the same name, which notably discussed the different options available to socialist feminists. Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright (1979) recommended that the women's movement should graft its activities onto those groups outside the labour left<sup>13</sup>, who were working at its boundaries to democratise its structures (Harriss 1989:40).

Women who accepted office were of a very different mindset. They recognised the potential of co-option. They believed however, that in the face of local government changes there was a real opportunity to reorder state services in the style of the women's voluntary sector, which allowed women maximum control over the form of their delivery<sup>14</sup>. This opportunity could only be seized by 'engaging in pre-figurative struggles from inside state bureaucracy' (Harriss 1989:42).

The Women's Committee represented a move...from autonomy to a new relationship with established state power ... It was not just a question of going for local authority funds ... but of carving out a new place for women

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<sup>12</sup> The literature suggests that it was a difficult decision for many women who could see merits and disadvantages of both courses of action. They had to make a personal choice since there was no lead given by the WLM (Goss 1989:145). Wilson remarked that 'such is the state of the left that neither the autonomous movement nor any of the groups is weak enough finally to be dismissed; yet none is strong enough to impose its solutions as wholly credible. To be in or outside a left group can seem equally wrong' (Wilson 1987:63-64) (endorsed by Segal 1989:6).

<sup>13</sup> These groups included the Communist Party, Trotskyist or neo-trotskyist groups

<sup>14</sup> Control of the way in which services were delivered was seen to be as important as the outcome of the services themselves.



in the local state (Coote & Campbell 1987:108) (supported by Goss 1984:111).

As Coote and Campbell's quote indicates some of these women wanted to use feminism to change the nature of socialism, others wanted to make concrete gains in terms of resources which would unite the fragments of women's activity and give it a focus. They both believed that remaining on the outside of the state wasted the moment of change.

The first women's initiatives typify the ambivalence in the movement in the early 1980s. The literature identifies the Lewisham Sex Equality Working Party as the first recorded experiment by a Labour council to advance women a share in the new democracy. Women's groups in Lewisham organised around the local women's centre to demand that the council act on women's rights<sup>15</sup>. A working party was set up. It consisted of six councillors and six local women, the latter elected at an open meeting of the women's centre (Riley 1990:52, Goss 1984:111). The women's groups, who led the campaign, maintained their autonomy. Local feminists did not formalise their involvement in the administration of the council until May 1983, when the working party was changed into a Women's Committee.

The literature gives no indication to what extent the Lewisham working party was connected to the Greater London Council's initiative that followed in September 1982. Practitioners use the Lewisham initiative to date the Women's Committee movement, as well as to locate it firmly in the provenance of the WLM. However, the GLC initiative in ideological and practical terms represented a much more sophisticated level of engagement with the local state (Riley 1990:52). The initiative was driven by feminist councillors with the support of the new urban left under the leadership of Ken Livingstone.

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<sup>15</sup> The initiative developed in parallel to an initiative for race equality. Lewisham Council scrutinised its role as an employer, a lobbyist and a provider of services in relation to these two groups, looking to improve equality of opportunity. The Sex Equality Working Party aimed 'to remove institutional obstacles which blocked women's career progression and to introduce fair practices coupled with the development of childcare facilities to cater for women's special needs' (Riley 1990:51).



A young and determined Valerie Wise piloted through the establishment of a full committee of the GLC and a Women's Unit to service it (Goss 1989:144).

It was the first Women's Committee to be set up in UK local government. The following section examines the experience of the newly elected socialist feminists as they entered state politics. The GLC's Women's Committee Support Unit (WCSU) provides a useful case study through which to explore the development of women's practice for two reasons. First, the WCSU kept full and detailed records of the discussions of its internal working and structure. These records, which consist of the reports of WCSU staff meetings and include personal position papers, give a unique insight into the problems the women's officers grappled with. Second, the WCSU had something to prove to the external women's movement, whose concerns about corruption by state power have already been discussed <sup>16</sup>. The WCSU's documents make it clear that women's officers were aware that they had to respond to fears that they were co-opting radical groups into a 'femocracy'. Officers seem to have been constantly vigilant to prevent the bureaucracy getting the upper hand.

### **Nature of feminist practice in the local state**

One of the fundamental principles of feminist activists outside the state was to find new ways of organising daily economic and social life to prefigure the development of a communal and inclusive society in which tasks and rewards were shared equally. Grass-roots women had developed non-hierarchical forms of decision making which allowed every member to input their opinion and effort into achieving the common task (Button 1984). How have women officers inside the bureaucracy attempted to develop new ways of working together with their bureaucratic colleagues? Using official and personal documents produced by the GLC's Women's Support Unit it is possible to reconstruct the daily account of the way women's officers tried to develop pre-figurative working arrangements. The process describes the thinking and actions of feminist councillors and officers, who had to reconcile

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<sup>16</sup> This was especially the case with the GLC Women's Committee that was set up due to the efforts of powerful women within the Labour left.



their commitment to feminist principles with their role as representatives and paid employees of local government, in order to maximise the outcomes for women. The GLC material does support the existing literature's claims that the structures of the bureaucracy around them were ultimately constraining. However, it also suggests that some of the problems lay with the application of feminist theory in practice. The principle of task sharing and collective powers of decision making produced its own form of exploitation in practice, since it was based on an erroneous assumption that women had equal ability and equivalent economic situations. Theories of patriarchy and capitalism were no longer applicable to women's actual experience. This process of aligning feminist principles and practice is crucial to increase our understanding of how to effectively deliver institutionally policies and benefits for women.

### **Negotiating a place in the bureaucracy**

The political structure within which the [women's] committees operate is a party/state which is male dominated, sexist, heterosexist, racist and hierarchical, the WLM's rejection of these characteristics represents a fundamental principle which we should never abandon. (Flannery & Roelofs 1983:71-72)

The question of how to organise the unit recurs again and again in the records. The intention of WCSU officers was clearly to find a structure which optimised their effectiveness in the bureaucracy while at the same time making as few compromises to feminist principles as possible. The structure they eventually settled on represented an alternative way of working. Roelofs observed that:

[It had a] particular emphasis on accessibility, participation, maximum involvement of the maximum number, non-hierarchical structures with a distribution of authority, rotation of tasks, sensitivity to different women's needs, abilities, development and competence, diffusion of information and equal access to resources .. the idea of mass involvement and for women themselves to make the decisions (Roelofs 1983:18).

This new way of working in turn served to deepen staff commitment and understanding of the feminist goal for a more equitable organisation of everyday life. Arguably the way



of organising the unit represented in itself a mechanism for consciousness raising. What did the process of negotiation involve?

The first recorded meeting of the WCSU took place between Valerie Wise, Chair of the Women's Committee and staff members in September 1982; staff were still in the process of being recruited. Less than four months later the issue of hierarchy and collective ways of working was on the minuted agenda (17/01/83:30)<sup>17</sup>. The unit was by this time participating in a London-wide campaign to encourage women to claim the benefits they were entitled to, and processing grant applications. The records suggest that the way of working was participative and centralised, every member of staff used the same filing system, and performed menial and specialist tasks. At the meeting in March 1983 (07/03/83:31) all staff stuffed envelopes to save time on this routine task. There appears to have been no fixed allocation of duties, and staff treated each other as equal participants in all the unit's activities.

Simultaneously the unit initiated the series of open public meetings, which have been well documented (Goss 1984). These aimed to establish a 'Programme for Action' designed by the women of London themselves. The minutes suggest that this exercise was organised in ways that resembled activities in the WLM rather than a group of bureaucratic staff. At the meeting on 21 March 1983, it was recorded that:

If Ester encounters any last minute panic relating to these meetings it was agreed that she could call on all the sisters in the unit for help. All sisters agreed with the rota system for loading the trolley, collecting the lunchboxes etc ... problems had arisen with the lack of volunteers for Saturday meetings – the load should be shared! (21/03/83:33).

The expectations on staff's involvement went beyond paid office hours. The observation in the practitioners' literature that working as a women's officer was more like working as a paid activist is relevant here. Women were judged not only on the quality of their work, but the quality of their feminist commitment.

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<sup>17</sup> All references in this format refer to the Women's Committee Support Unit Meetings Minutes 13 Sept 1982 – 4 July 1983 LSPU/WEG/01/25 (Appendix 2).



The unit's staff was continuing to grow throughout this period, with a target size of 31 (21/03/83:34). Recruitment reflected the increasing size of the workload. As there was a huge response from women's groups to the opportunity of grant funding the first differentiation of tasks was made. Grants allocation work was separated off. Some women in the unit also assumed responsibility for the development of working groups that arose from the public consultation. These groups brought together ordinary women around single issues to inform policy making and encourage learning and new activity (28/03/83:35)<sup>18</sup>. The unit appeared to be at a moment of metamorphosis. A hand written note attached to the agenda of the meeting of the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1983 addressed the issue of the unit's emerging 'structure'. This note posed a number of concerns and recorded the subsequent discussion.

Four problems were raised concerning the lack of hierarchical positions and its impact on equality and output. First, the disparity between grading and salaries of staff, and levels of responsibility was pointed out. Staff were currently expected to share all tasks equally. This potentially resulted in the oppression of lower grade staff (28/03/83:35). Second, the insistence that staff participate in all tasks, so that no individual assumed all the menial jobs, posed a further difficulty. The level of clerical work expected of each member of staff limited their developmental work at a time when there was increasing political pressure for results. Consequently, 'it was more work to work collectively' (28/03/83:36). The last two points acknowledged the failure of the unit to adequately service the elected members' needs and also to challenge the work of the larger bureaucracy in any way.

It is important to try and challenge the working of the GLC, attacking [its orthodoxies] where they exist. This is a better way of affecting change, not by the confines of our example in this unit which no one will take notice of (28/03/83:36).

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<sup>18</sup> For example, the 15 issues covered included transport, employment, lesbians, childcare and violence.



The discussion provoked by these points concluded that collective principles could be made to work but suggested that it was only possible within small work teams, rather than as an organising principle for the whole unit (28/03/83:37). In small teams, work programmes could be used to allocate tasks consensually giving everyone their own area of responsibility with access to training should they need it. The note called for tighter time management, task allocation procedure and a strategic overview to run alongside work planning.

It appears that a number of events intensified this debate causing staff to question more deeply their motivation and ability to adhere to the principle of a collective form of working. The ongoing recruitment process produced a much larger and diverse staff group in terms of abilities, skills and experience (25/04/83:41). Simultaneously, minutes record the incessant nature of the work, as feminist councillors intensified the number of welfare campaigns and issues they wanted the unit to address<sup>19</sup> (28/03/83:36).

The issue of collective working was explicitly raised by the most senior officer in the unit, who had assumed responsibility for the process of grant awards and administration concerning the unit's relationships with women's organisations. She submitted a report and set of proposals 'To Improve our Work System in WCSU: Seeking to Develop a Team Approach' for discussion at the unit's team meeting at the end of April 1983 (25/04/83:40). She argued that 'the myth of collective working be once and for all relegated to the grave and that all pretences of "lip service" be relegated along with it'

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<sup>19</sup> Ken Livingstone the leader of the Council staunchly supported the committee. The Women's Committee minutes show that he attended 22 of the 56 committee meetings which took place between 22 June 1982 and 25 March 1986. His deputy Iltyd Harrington attended 16 (GLC/DG/MIN/223 see Appendix 2). The political intention to redress the balance in favour of women was symbolised by the increase of the Committee's grant aid budget from £350,000 in its first year to £10million by 1986. It is no wonder that women's groups reacted 'in surprise and their bank managers in delight' at this release of funds (Flannery & Roelofs 1983:69). It prompted an enormous tide of new and ongoing grant applications. Women employed on a temporary basis to assist in the processing of these applications described how they walked into offices where applications were piled randomly in huge piles against the walls (Yeandle 1997). On top of the increasing quantity and complexity of working procedures, politicians also expected the Unit to support them individually, in their role as high profile feminists in the London Labour politics. There are many entries that discuss Valerie Wise's mail 'basket' and the way in which her personal correspondence was to be dealt with.



(25/04/83:40). In practical terms she supported the recruitment of clerical assistants to the unit which until then had been resisted.

The pretence of collective working arose from the contradiction of expecting a collective to fit into an established bureaucracy. 'No matter how we work', she argued 'the rest of the GLC will see Louise as head, she's responsible and will see E2's (lowest grade currently in the unit) as having specific designated functions' (28/03/83:23). The feminist principle of sharing all tasks equally was being undermined by the larger value system of the authority that imposed arbitrary rewards against named functions. Consequently staff were incompletely appraised and paid unequally for the work the unit currently expected from them. The unit could not expect to change this value system. The officer went on, 'this does not mean I am challenging or disagreeing with the concept of equality'. She considered that by accepting the GLC's functional roles and hence ending the contradiction did not mean that the principle of equality was abandoned. She argued for a differentiation between equality of material function that was impossible, and equality of status.

We must not give little value to those jobs and skills viewed as manual. Who is more essential – a dust man or a policy maker? We all need policy but if the rubbish is not collected, the rubbish very quickly becomes a high priority and the so-called manual job suddenly essential (28/03/83:42).

In effect she was arguing for a style of working in which each individual's contribution was valued equally.

The need to accept functional roles and also exclusively 'manual' roles within the department was supported by three further arguments. The first two of these were still bound up with the need to meet the unit's bureaucratic responsibilities. As mentioned above the workload of the unit was increasing at an alarming rate over which it had little control. A collective way of working exacerbated this pressure. The report comments,

We are currently very isolated. We all work on our individual areas, we are totally self reliant and cannot use the [different] skills of our colleagues... The consequence of this isolation is enormous stress and inefficiency (28/03/83:43).



The report argued for different but interdependent roles to mitigate both these effects.

The second argument supporting an adoption of a bureaucratic style structure related to the issue of exploitation. The report argued that the illusion of collective working actually served to hide exploitative relationships which feminism deplored. Lower grade officers in the unit were exploited by the differential between wages and task assignment. In the same way 'we are not being any less exploitative by farming out [clerical work] to other parts of the GLC' said the report's author (28/03/83:45). She suggested that a more equal solution would be to adopt a formalised structure (including typists and administrative support) and to try to control for the worst effects of hierarchical organisation from within the unit.

This does not mean that I would agree in any way to dumping all the filing and photocopying on to one person. Good management means nurturing and building up skills and only putting on responsibility when it can be dealt with (28/03/83:44).

A system of team working was put forward, based on three grades of officers, a policy developer, a policy researcher and a runner.

I actually believe that our aim of sharing tasks – to enhance our skills and share the jobs considered to be more lowly – would actually come into effect far more ... because each of us would be reliant on each stage being completed as we would all be working on the same task. We would each learn about the past experiences of the others as we discussed the work (28/03/83:43).

Team working relied on co-operation and equal input into tasks. It also could be seen to offer the opportunity for 'training each other' and the transfer of information and knowledge (28/03/83:43). From the point of view of feminist practice this last process was crucially important since it provided an opportunity for younger girls to get involved, which the unit at that time lacked (28/03/83:44).

By not accepting CR [grade officers] into the unit we are actually preventing younger girls (schoolgirls who have not yet progressed up the ladder to E2) from gaining by the valuable experience of working in this office (28/03/83:43).



Related to this point, the third argument the report put forward dealt with the fundamental issue of difference between women. A hierarchy of different grades was better suited to the range of different abilities and skills that women could offer. Again there was the need to separate feminist principle and the reality of practice. 'It is impossible at this time, and for a long time in the future, for the E2s (lowest non-clerical grade) to contribute in a really meaningful way to the issues being dealt with' (28/03/83:41). The report considered that an acceptance of grades and job descriptions could facilitate women's future contribution. 'It does not mean that we do not continue to teach each other our skills but that we do it in a more structured way' (28/03/83:41).

One year after operating as a collective the WCSU adopted a team based working approach that consisted of all grades of officers. The practitioner literature describes this change in negative terms. It typifies the WCSU as operating originally as a feminist island in a sea of local authority bureaucracy, which struck out boldly with 'no hierarchies, no lines of authority, no leaders and no stars' (Coote & Campbell 1987). It considers that the unit was forced to concede to a bureaucratic form of organisation due to its highly visible quarrels which exposed its operations to ridicule (Lovenduski & Randall 1993:152) and accusations of inefficiency and bad management (Goss 1989:154). The literature's assessment of the GLC WCSU supports the view that state bureaucratic power is inevitably corrupting. It appears to suggest that the unit was reduced to a 'femocracy', a bureaucratic structure with a token feminist label.

The archival material of the WCSU appears to contradict this assessment. The acceptance of hierarchical organisation did not represent a hasty abandonment of feminist principles in preference to bureaucratic responsibilities. A team based approach was developed through lengthy, albeit heated, discussion. One of the outcomes was that the women in the unit for the first time explored the contradictions inherent in the concept of collective organisation itself. This contradiction has been termed the tyranny of structurelessness (Wolff 1977). Officers discussed the elements of collective organisation, and inserted the



key principles of participation, access, personal development and the equal value of every individual's contribution into the new structure.

There were management difficulties. For example, the archive records show a growing dissatisfaction with the leadership of Louise Pankhurst, as Head of the Unit. Staff on lower grades complained that she frequently sorted matters out without consulting the other women in the unit (05/05/83:76), and that her manner was 'overly authoritarian' in respect to the re-organisation and deployment of staff. However, these were not problems that arose from a lack of feminist commitment, but from the common inability of individuals to motivate and relate to work colleagues. The adoption of a structured team approach therefore also contained the recognition that feminist commitment was not enough. To ensure that the benefits for the feminist movement were secured from the state bureaucracy, officers also needed adept inter-personal skills and the ability to grasp and operate financial and legal accountancy systems. These skills did not denigrate feminist outputs, but facilitated them. Other practitioners had realised this too. As one of Stone's participants in her case study of Sheffield City Council commented:

You need people with organisational skill and a track record, not just an ideological commitment. People here were appointed because they had produced and done things [in the women's movement]. If you appoint people without organisational skill you're heading for trouble (cited by Stone 1988:25).

The team working that was adopted by the unit appears relatively unexceptional by today's standards. However, the principles in the report that were implemented, still represent an innovative way of working, which was not shared by the rest of the GLC (Brownill & Halford 1990:404). This example arguably supports the contention of the literature as a whole that women's initiatives were pioneers of good practice and that their delivery of equal opportunities, which includes their objectives, their methods and their ways of organising, holds lessons which are insightful for contemporary practitioners. It also highlights the subjective nature of all historical accounts that attempt to explain and justify a particular set of practice and actions. The literature provides practitioners' views of their own practice. Although I have drawn on this literature to



guide my own study, I have attempted to identify its idiosyncrasies and orthodoxies and to remain alert to their contradiction.

### **Policy agenda and activities undertaken by women's initiatives**

At the beginning of the 1980s the archived record shows that Valerie Wise chaired a group of representatives from London Borough Women's Committees which discussed common policy objectives. In 1983, Riley had pinpointed five common issues arising out of the 11 committees that were then in existence, these were;

- To promote women's welfare, interests and rights;
- To eliminate discrimination against women contained in legislation and policy;
- To promote positive action and real equality of opportunity for women;
- To encourage and support the development of local women's groups;
- To make council decision-making accessible and accountable to women (Riley 1990:52).

These issues are very broad and were translated into many different types of policies and practices by women's initiatives. However, they provide a useful framework for the discussion of the areas of work that women's initiatives developed, which were 'new' in terms of the local government's agenda.

The first issue of promotion related to the visibility of women's position. Initiatives organised or funded voluntary agencies to run campaigns about women's legal entitlements, to publicise public services and to research women's domestic and employment situations. They were directly addressing the issue raised by Button (1984) and many others that the community and the workforce consisted of groups of individuals whose particular needs had never been articulated before nor considered by the bureaucracy. The second issue, to ensure equal treatment for women in policy and legislation, typified the interrogation by women's initiatives of the Council's internal procedures in the areas of employment and service delivery. Initiatives often took the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) as a starting point to check procedures for direct and indirect forms of discrimination. There are examples in the literature of practitioners discovering discrimination in the areas of recruitment, promotion and



resource allocation. Much of the discrimination they discovered was due to a lack of information or understanding about social inequality.

Promoting equal opportunity describes actions that were focused on women's employment. Initiatives developed targeted training programmes for women, inside and outside the organisation, to tackle their horizontal and vertical segregation in the labour market. These programmes also included training around self-assertiveness to build women's confidence. In some cases they were accompanied by policies to tackle workplace harassment which had been identified as a barrier to women's progress at work. Practitioners also report how they pioneered new forms of working arrangements, such as flexi-hours and job share arrangements, that recognised the private lives of parents and carers. Some practitioners describe how they supported women employees in their attempts to have their pay, work arrangements and conditions reassessed (especially in the wake of the changes introduced by Competitive Compulsory Tendering, Escott & Whitfield 1995).

The fourth issue, to develop local women's groups, served a dual purpose according to the literature. Initiatives channelled funding to the women's voluntary sector in order to improve and create services that were relevant to women's everyday needs. In doing so they also generated a demand in the community which justified the continued need for a women's initiative. The creation of new services by grass roots women's groups has permanently reconfigured councils' lists of responsibilities. Services such as medical screening and family planning have become unquestioned parts of local government provision.

The literature highlights that funding distribution was potentially 'one way of releasing political power to women, irrespective of their race, class, politics, ability, religion or sexuality' (Whitting 1987:103). There is a lengthy debate on the question of whether Women's Committees could provide a structural framework for the women's movement. Gelb considered that joint funding could provide links between traditional, socialist and radical feminist groups, and reach out to the vast number of



British women who had up until then been unaffected by the feminist movement (1986:118). Others agreed with her that the committee structure could be a lifeline for the flagging women's movement.

Women's Committees ... or special committees with responsibility for grant aid, [have] an important role to play in assisting the development of *a strategy* [for women]. (Whitting 1987:103 my italics).

However, in practice, practitioners have admitted to the problems of relying on a funding strategy to achieve all women's aims. First, there was the question of who should benefit from funding and which women were qualified to make this decision. Second, the local authority retained a degree of control over the criteria for successful grant applications. This meant that women's groups had to manipulate their project proposals to secure endorsement from the funding departments (Whitting 1987:108)<sup>20</sup>. Far from infusing the WLM with new life, some practitioners contend that local authority funding has changed its recipients beyond recognition. The debate reaches no conclusions, since no one could possibly 'know what all the energy added up to at either national nor local level' (Whitting 1987:113). Goss and many others asserted the importance of the continuation of an autonomous women's movement;

Local authorities are poorly adapted, as yet, to take on a major campaigning role, and although they have an important part to play in resourcing and supporting campaigns, there is a danger they can slow them down or take them over (Goss 1984:128).

The fifth policy issue around representation was the *raison d'être* for many Women's Committees. It expressed the new left commitment to participative democracy by offering a channel for the experience of the broader women's movement to be fed into the decision making process (Whitting 1987:109). Practitioners describe the many innovative methods they used to ensure that their decision making was as open as it could be to local women. Systems for public consultation were nothing new to



local authorities<sup>21</sup>. However, it is clear from the literature that these precedents did not mean that 'open' government was an accepted way of working. Central government down graded the status of 'representatives' from the community. In the 1988 Local Government Act, co-optees were prevented from voting on council committees, a motion which many Labour controlled Councils upheld. Practitioners report occasions in which Labour councillors simply reversed the decisions reached through a consultative process because of the low value they placed on co-optees' contribution (Goss 1984:125). Much of the literature's discussion of co-optees focuses on the difficulties of ensuring consultative systems are representative, a problem which was common to all previous initiatives of participatory democracy<sup>22</sup>.

All these activities under Riley's five headings were underpinned by different approaches to equality. Practitioners differentiate between those that aim to achieve equality of opportunity (equal treatment based on fair procedures) and those that aim for equality of outcome (redistribution of power and resources). Very often internal employment issues are associated with the former and external community work with the latter. This distinction divides activities into two types, transformative (radical) and reformist (liberal). Recently, Cockburn (1990) has attempted to demonstrate that this classification is divisive and misleading. She claims the two approaches can be placed on the same continuum of actions. Equal opportunity activities, or short agendas, act as starting points for more radical policies (long agendas). An agenda of varying length neatly portrays the negotiation process that women's representatives have been involved in. Riley says:

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<sup>20</sup> Women's groups tended to become less self-sufficient and more reliant on regular funding as they recruited new staff and expanded to new premises. One area of their activity that particularly suffered was campaigning since it could not be justified under a service orientated remit.

<sup>21</sup> For example the 1968 Skeffing Report on 'People and Planning' formalised Neighbourhood and Community Councils (Cockburn 1977).

<sup>22</sup> Harriss identifies that the first problem was who to consult with. Choosing established community groups inevitably meant that newer, less well organised groups were overlooked. Holding open meetings failed to bring these groups to the fore since the most articulate groups were more likely to attend and to dominate the agenda. In the presence of 'professional' community activists, the consultation exercise became a gesture of intent rather than meaningful democratic exchange with ordinary women (Harriss 1989:44).



[Women's officers] moved back and forth between two goals, presenting arguments about fairness and equity to staff, particularly in Personnel, and arguments about outcomes to women Members and pressure groups (Riley 1990:54).

The literature suggests that an investment in personnel issues was advantageous to Women's Units as it enabled them to prepare the staff for more radical changes. By starting modestly in a key area of the organisation, Women's Units were able to legitimise and advertise their existence among the workforce, extend their access to information and decision making and bring about significant changes in employment policies, which paid dividends when they attempted more ambitious projects (Riley 1990:57).

### **Women's initiatives' achievements**

The huge diversity in the structure of women's initiatives described in the first section relates to their choice of policy agenda. Halford and Duncan's study gives apt examples of the ways in which initiatives were set in a certain way to address certain issues, according to the context of the political negotiations:

In Wandsworth ... the aim was equal opportunity internal employment policies as part of 'good management practice' in a tight labour market. In Camden the women's initiative was much more of a feminist initiative as one part of the 'new left' political change within the Labour Party while in Kirklees the women's initiative was, in political terms, an appendage to concern for ethnic minority equal opportunities issues (Halford & Duncan 1991:8).

As a result the achievements of initiatives have also been varied. Evaluating them is further complicated if we take into account individual councils' own criteria for success. Broadly they can be grouped into two areas, new policy issues and new organisational arrangements and procedures.

Women's initiatives have added weight to the arguments for the community to be consulted about what needs it has, that the local administration can fulfil. In doing so the list of accepted local government responsibilities has been permanently extended.



Feminists have convinced local chambers that the personal is political. There is greater recognition that the local state should provide support for 'private' circumstances such as domestic violence and sexual preference. The structural and material position of women is more widely known about. This has encouraged more sensitive economic planning and initiatives targeted to particular skills gaps. The funding of grass roots women's groups for the provision of women's services has laid down local government's commitment to new issues in bricks and mortar. The women's voluntary sector has been given the opportunity to enlarge and consolidate its service output so that in many cases organisations can continue to work even if local council funding runs out.

As the section on the GLC WCSU explores, women's initiatives' achievements also lie in pioneering new forms of relationships between local bureaucracies and local populations and within bureaucracies themselves. Even where women's officers were forced to compromise their original intentions, their practice nevertheless 'presented fundamental challenges to local authorities' (Riley 1990:53). The significance of these working practices are only now being appreciated as the benefits of more consensual co-operative ways of working are coming to be recognised by business, and by government. Women's initiatives have developed many types of consultation mechanisms that have provided positive examples of accountable and meaningful decision making. Women's enthusiastic response to specialist services has demonstrated the benefits of tailoring service delivery more closely to service users' self defined needs and profiles. Lastly, women's officers close working relationships with other equality practitioners has helped to ensure that equal opportunities objectives for service delivery were holistic and recognised the needs of people who were multiply disadvantaged (Riley 1990:55-56).

How widespread were these achievements? The only surveys that have addressed the effect of women's initiatives on the sector as a whole have placed them in the larger context of equal opportunities policies. These surveys demonstrate that although the agenda has become more commonplace the provision of specialist initiatives has not.



For example the EOC study of all local authorities in 1988 found that of 514 local authorities consulted, 227 described themselves as equal opportunities employers. Employment practice had been the starting point for a majority of authorities, but only 16 authorities had included service provision in their equal opportunities guidelines. On closer inspection, employment initiatives broke down to reveal a much more mixed bag of results. Only 130 of the 227 local authorities had a written policy explaining their status as an equal opportunities employer, only 52 had written guidelines for officers on racial and sexual discrimination and only 26 monitored the composition of their workforce (EOC 1988 cited by Coyle 1989:45). The transitory and inconsistent nature of equal opportunities achievements for women underlines the resistance there has been to feminists' entry into the local state.

### **Barriers to practice**

The literature reaches two conclusions about why the impact of women's initiatives is so meagre. First, initiatives for women have been understaffed and under resourced due to a lack of political support from the Labour left described above (Button 1984). Consequently much of their work has been marginal to local authority activity (Coyle 1989:46). Only a few London and large metropolitan Labour councils have stood out as exceptions. Practitioners have claimed that the lack of a statutory basis contributed to produce incoherent political and managerial frameworks for equality delivery which were often unworkable<sup>23</sup>. The second observation is that a piecemeal result was and should have been predictable since women's initiatives set out to transform the accepted organisation and structures of local authority work (Little 1994:89, Coyle 1989:47). They were attempting to change the status quo, an objective that was bound to produce resistance.

It is one thing to set up a formal local government body, such as a Women's Committee, and to formulate policy recommendations. It is quite another to implement policies, to change what local authorities do - how they actually

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<sup>23</sup> Women involved at councillor and officer level have had to fight for budgets, create forms of organisation and determine priorities on a hand-to-mouth basis, and with no blueprints (Wilson 1987:129).



employ staff, buildings and equipment to deliver services in local areas (Halford and Duncan 1991:7-8).

One of the first things that many women's initiatives say they did was to commission surveys into the use and perception by women of local authority services. This proved that there had been a failure by service departments to recognise, let alone respond to, women's demands:

Without the distinctive experience and perception of women, impractical, clumsy and downright discriminatory decisions were made, even by the most progressive Labour councils (Goss 1989:143).

Practitioners consider that generalised indifference and a lack of knowledge about the purpose of equal opportunities for women has caused the most widespread resistance to change (Coyle 1989:44). The literature describes how initiatives used hard facts to prompt managers to consider equality recommendations, with some success. They report that managers began to act out of personal conviction, but also out of a desire for personal career development when it became evident that the policies were there to stay (Riley 1990:65).

For the small number of managers who were won round it seems that there were many more who were blinded by the institutionalised nature of sexism and acted to uphold it. Women's initiatives describe how they faced active resistance from departments, who did not want to give up notions of professional expertise to listen to what women wanted. Halford and Duncan, in their study of equality delivery, have described the departments in Haringey London Borough as a collection of 'empires' and loose fiefdoms (Halford & Duncan 1991:13). These fiefdoms resented any encroachment on their territory. Resistance to change was made easier by the insular nature of departments and their careful and deliberate hoarding of reliable and up-to-date information. It is a description that is common in the case study accounts that follow in Chapters 5,6 and 7.



Women's initiatives describe how they have been hampered in their efforts to demand greater co-operation from bureaucratic departments because of their own status in the bureaucracy. Very often women's officer positions were graded at a low level<sup>24</sup>. Coupled with a lack of adequate resources women's officers consider that they have been in a weak negotiating position *vis a vis* authority colleagues and superiors in other departments. The lack of clarity of their remit and reporting lines has reduced their scope of action. (Riley 1990:59).

Feminists' expectations of what could be achieved have created barriers. Riley (1990:60) speaks of a 'superwoman' image emerging in response to the multiple tasks involved in setting up and running women's initiatives. Women report how they ended up working ineffectively far beyond their 'official' capacity.

The [clerical assistant] ends up being a counsellor, social worker and general information worker to the women who contact the unit about an enormous range of issues, although she's only paid to do routine paperwork (cited by Stone 1988:34).

It is clear from officers' accounts that they made very personal commitments to women's liberation and so inflicted enormous expectations on themselves, increasing the pressure. Their work was a personal test of loyalty. It was also something many of them enjoyed and readily carried over into their social lives. As Riley points out 'no other Council Officer would ever be expected to, or would themselves expect to, successfully carry through such multifarious roles' (1990:60). This mind set has made the recruitment of assistants or successors problematic. It has also meant that many feminists after a long period of activity have been 'burnt out' and left the job in search of less stressful activity. The literature recognises that pressure on women's officers to perform was applied by councillors and community women. Both these groups had unrealistically high hopes about the nature and speed of change that was possible.

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<sup>24</sup> The rationale behind this decision was to avoid intimidating potential candidates from the women's movement and to reduce opposition from authority officers.

The literature's description of the bureaucratic barriers is one of its most valuable contributions to our assessment of contemporary practice, since it contains details of the change strategies which practitioners have developed. However, perhaps because of the notion that women's initiatives were a phenomenon of the 1980s radicalism in local government, practitioners since the 1990s have not considered their experiences to be relevant. This is an oversight that this thesis aims to address. It argues that not only are there valuable lessons from the early practice of women's initiatives, but also that the stages and conditions that they describe may be necessary prerequisites for the development of the more sophisticated gender approaches to equality delivery that are currently being promoted.

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This chapter has reviewed the location, structures and agenda of women's initiatives in the local state in the UK, from their inception until 1990. The next chapter takes up the practitioners' accounts again to describe what has happened to the provision in the very different economic and political context of the last decade. It examines the policy and theoretical arguments that have shaped this development.



## **Contemporary Equality Delivery: Policy, Practice and its Theorisation**

This chapter brings the account of women's initiatives up to date. It begins by reviewing practitioners' responses to the changes to women's initiatives in the early 1990s. Many practitioners have interpreted the closures and changes to specialist women's provision as evidence of a reassertion of patriarchy in the Labour Party. In contrast, a minority view has emerged and begun to question the usefulness of the original structural form of women's initiatives in the changed economic and political context of local government. It argues for the development of a strategic approach to equality delivery that involves the mainstream. The validity of integrating practice into the mainstream is supported by recent feminist theoretical analysis of the nature of women's paid employment and feminist contributions to organisational theory. Leading contributions to this debate are examined.

Practitioners in Europe have mirrored the thinking of some of the UK's practitioners. European feminists working through the institutions of the European Union have developed a strategy of mainstreaming gender equality. In 1996, it was launched throughout the Union's practice and structures. I describe this strategy in detail since it has influenced the debate in the UK. The chapter concludes by asking how the European and UK conceptualisations of mainstreaming differ. It suggests that a new way of conceptualising the achievement of sex equality is needed in order to adequately describe and analyse the changes that have taken place in the UK.

### **Women's initiatives in the 1990s**

Practitioners discuss the reorganisation of women's initiatives in terms of economic and political expediency. First, the legislative agenda of Margaret

Thatcher's government (1979-1991) began a process of change in local government, that transformed its role from that of a service provider to a manager of contracted services<sup>1</sup>. This process was accompanied by tight financial restrictions on public spending which necessitated the reorganisation and downsizing of local government functions. The implicit motive of this agenda was to discredit and heavily penalise Labour controlled authorities. The literature reports that spending cuts resulted in a severe reduction or freeze on the grant aid and revenue budgets of women's initiatives and, in some cases, redundancies of staff (Parkin 1992:23).

Second, the previous chapter established that women's initiatives have never been supported by a majority of Labour members, as their number and level of resourcing attests. However, in the early 1990s, practitioners have reasserted the view that the party saw their work as politically expendable. Against a backdrop of sensational right wing media coverage, which branded women's initiatives as part of the 'loony left', practitioners describe how 'the mandarins of Walworth Road' sent instructions to local party offices instructing that politically contentious activities should be reined in because they were damaging the party's election chances (Taylor 1996). The lack of political support served to exacerbate the financial position of many initiatives. In practitioners' opinion it also gave a signal to existing critics that their work was marginal and could justifiably be closed down (Taylor 1996).

Tables 1, 2 and 3 in the previous chapter illustrate that the rise and fall of women's initiatives mirrors the political fortunes of their hosts. The trends are summarised in Table 1 below. During the period 1980 – 1997 provision for

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<sup>1</sup> The Thatcher Government's policy agenda for local authorities aimed to impose monetarist controls on public spending and introduce market forces in areas of work traditionally regarded as part of the public sector. These changes were fuelled as much by the new right belief in the free market, as by Margaret Thatcher's personal determination to break the power of the public sector unions, which had been so apparent during the winter of strikes in 1979. The strategic realisation of these policies manifested itself in the development of legislation to control local authority spending through the block grant system; the requirement for local authorities to submit the management of certain service areas to market discipline, through compulsory competitive tendering; the imposition of central control on local authority planning jurisdiction through the introduction of Enterprise Zones and Urban Development Corporations; and lastly the replacement of the rates system with a community charge, which was intended to sensitise electorates to the spending levels of their local (Labour) authority (Stewart & Stoker 1995).



women's initiatives in the new urban left strongholds (London, Scotland, the large metropolitan cities outside the capital) was reduced as these authorities faced particularly stringent cuts to their block grants. Women's initiatives across the sector show a shift from specialist to a generic equality focus and from full standing status with decision-making powers, to sub or even non-committee status with a purely advisory role. Many were closed.

1986 and 1988 (Halford & Duncan 1991)

Region	Women's Committee	Women's Sub-cmte.	Other committee	Other Sub-cmte.	Non-cmte initiative	Status unclear
TOTAL N=64	22 (34%)	9 (14%)	8 (13%)	7 (11%)	13 (21%)	5 (8%)

1991 NALGWC

TOTAL N= 62	16 (26%)	11 (18%)	9 (14%)	13 (21%)	13 (21%)
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1996 WLAN

TOTAL N=56	9 (16%)	7 (12.5%)	10 (18%)	21 (37.5%)	9 (16%)
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**Table 1: Summary of changes to women's initiatives (see Tables 1-3 in previous chapter)**

Even in the early 1990s, as initiatives fought to maintain their budgets and specialist status some practitioners were unsure of the value of what they were defending. They acknowledged that equality work had always been seen as an add-on to the core business of local government. As the financial cuts started, it changed to being labelled a luxury (Stone 1988). Specialist provision had consistently been stereotyped as 'feminist policing'. The literature acknowledges that a top down approach to impose and uphold equal opportunities practice was not only the antithesis of the meaning of equality, but also provoked fear and opposition which was counter to the main objective (Button 1984).

Positive action methods targeting women are an example of a type of feminist practice that typifies the concerns feminists have had about the merits of their approach. Practitioners report that these measures prompted angry questions from authority staff, demanding to know why women had been specially singled out.

Resistance was rooted in a lack of understanding about women's equality, but also the use of discrimination in respect to men's rights and opportunities (Fritchie 1988, Webb & Liff 1988). Women's officers recall that it was not only men who asked why they were excluded. Women too expressed concerns that these measures undermined their ability, as they implied that women need a helping hand. Some women also felt excluded. Positive action programmes ignored their different needs. For example training programmes for women managers were irrelevant to the majority of women with few qualifications, who were primarily concerned to hold on to jobs that fitted with their domestic circumstances (Davis, Holland & Minhas 1990).

Caught in a vicious circle women's officers describe how they simultaneously tried to improve the profile of their work by mitigating the effects of a women-only focus and increasing its scope. They deliberately looked for other officers to take on the work, or disguised feminist objectives by inserting them under the heading of another agenda (Stone 1988). They attempted to work in consensual rather than authoritative ways. This strategy relied upon identifying sympathetic individuals with the power to open access to funds, and, in a hostile environment, to force compliance from staff. Some descriptions conclude that the most effective equality work was achieved in departments that took on an equality remit for themselves (Parkin 1992). They underline the importance of ownership as a mechanism which can raise people's consciousness so that they can come to understand how equality principles can be incorporated to their work and indeed enhance it (Young 1989). Ownership had to be built up slowly, individual by individual, but as a strategy it was then more sustainable and did not involve policing or imposition.

In the early 1990s, a minority of local government practitioners were arguing that this strategy should be formalised as a new way forward. They considered that specialist provision was still essential but that instead of remaining in separate structures women's officers should be integrated into central structures. The focus of their work would then be to transfer the responsibility for the equality agenda to key individuals in mainstream departments, who had the means to deliver it through their own particular power structure (Parkin 1996).



One of the most succinct diagnosis of the changes required, was delivered by Gurbux Singh, Chief Executive Officer of the London Borough of Haringey, in May 1991 to a conference organised by the Local Government Information Unit entitled 'Priority for Equality'. He argued that the way forward was to mainstream equal opportunities. He described mainstreaming as the long-term strategy for equal opportunities in the context of the privatisation of the public services<sup>2</sup>. In this scenario he reasoned:

It is unlikely that existing equal opportunities structures can survive. ... Equal opportunities cannot forever remain on the sidelines and the day has come when it has to be owned and incorporated into mainstream functions (LGIU 1991:6).

He recommended to delegates that authorities needed small centralised equalities structures to fulfil a development and monitoring function. This would be accompanied by mainstreaming of equalities work to all service staff, supported by effective monitoring and evaluation systems and named implementers.

'In this way' he concluded 'I feel that each main service can begin to feel the ownership of its equalities initiatives as never before' (LGIU 1991:6).

There are very few records describing the unofficial decisions that women's officers made to embed their practice more comprehensively and securely into the mainstream, as economic circumstances became more acute in the early 1990s. In 1991, the Institute of Local Government Studies commissioned Parkin to research 'Women's Units at a time of change'. Parkin had experience of working in two large women's units both of which had been abolished by incoming Conservative administrations (Greater London Council's Women's Support Unit, Women's Unit in Ealing LB).

She argues in her report that the size and variety of barriers to women's equality, meant that progress was unlikely to be made without women's officers to 'initiate, catalyse, co-ordinate and argue for change' (Parkin 1992:24). Her study demonstrated that maintaining a focus on women was important to practitioners<sup>3</sup>. However, the

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<sup>2</sup> Here, he was referring not only to equal opportunities for women, but also black and ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities.

<sup>3</sup> The women's officers, who she spoke to, were reluctant to become generic equalities officers since this role 'speaks with a language other than the earlier emphasis on women's rights/oppression' (Parkin 1992:5).

difficulties posed by gross under resourcing due to capping, and marginalisation caused by structural and ideological separation, had forced women's officers to experiment with a variety of strategies, which acknowledged that an exclusive emphasis on the sanctity of women's practice and structure was ineffective at bringing change. Parkin had recognised the problems of exclusive practice from her own experience working at the GLC WCSU:

The unit became a little island off the shore of the local state unable to challenge it successfully. It was a model perfectly appropriate to working **outside** the state, building alliances with the local women's movement, but an unsuccessful model to attempt to shift power **within** the state (emphasis in the original, Parkin 1990, cited in Parkin 1992).

She constructed a continuum to describe the different strategies which women's officers were using (Table 2).

	Inside the Council	Outside the Council
<b>1</b>	<b>Hectoring /Policing:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct attack on sexist attitudes and practice.</li> <li>• Unit represents feminist wisdom.</li> </ul>	<b>Feminist Island:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organises events appealing mainly to feminists</li> <li>• Unit does not address the way the Council operates</li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	<b>Establishing procedures/monitoring:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up policies, guidelines</li> <li>• Women's Unit as a catalyst to assist others to act</li> </ul>	<b>Women's Committee work:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supports women's voluntary sector</li> <li>• Introduces new services to Council's remit</li> </ul>
<b>3</b>	<b>Collaborative work:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with departments on joint projects</li> <li>• Women's Unit as facilitating partner</li> </ul>	<b>Joint initiatives:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborates with external agencies</li> <li>• Engages with Council's wider agenda e.g. around safety, poverty, health</li> </ul>
<b>4</b>	<b>Incorporation:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working to support women's traditional role</li> <li>• Women's Unit no longer represents a challenge</li> </ul>	<b>Work with traditional roles:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supports traditional women's services</li> <li>• Manages Council's existing provision as it relates to women</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Strategies for change used by women's initiatives, representing a continuum of feminist practice (adapted from Parkin 1992).**

As practitioners moved from 1 to 4 the council's acceptance of the women's equality work increased, as simultaneously its feminist challenge decreased. Strategies 2 and 3 attempt to integrate women's officers while maintaining a focus on women's oppression. As Stone commented four years earlier, it was a balance that women's officers found hard to achieve.



As far as women's issues were concerned, the crux of the difficulty of finding a workable political mechanism seemed to be the need to provide a forum where women's issues could be discussed and politics 'developed' without 'dilution' ... but at the same time ensuring that they were fed and acted on by the mainstream (Stone 1988).

The discussion of the GLC WCSU in Chapter 2 demonstrates that the need to make feminist principles workable was an issue that women's officers were aware of from the beginning and tackled instinctively. However, for the first time in the early 1990s, this debate reached a wider audience and practitioners started publicising and recording their integration strategies.

One of the most favoured models, described in Parkin's research and discussed in the context of the Women's Local Authority Network (WLAN) conferences in 1996, was based on a free standing women's initiative with formalised links into department management structures. These links could either be in the form of policy planning mechanisms (action plans) or dedicated officers whose work was co-ordinated by the unit. This structure was very similar to the model Gurbux Singh had advocated (LGIU 1991).

The consciousness of the decision to deliberately and cannily find disguises for feminist practice in order to embed it into mainstream procedures was most clearly explained by the Head the Equalities Unit in a Scottish authority (see Appendix 2 for list of case study data). My discussion with her was part of my primary fieldwork in November 1996, in which I piloted my data collection template. Scottish authorities had not been subject to the same degree of financial pressure as their English counterparts in the early 1990s. The financial situation only became difficult after the local government reorganisation of Scotland in 1996. The Head of the Unit had insisted on the generic title of 'equalities' to avoid the stereotype attached to women's officers. In her view this helped post-holders perform in the job and also in their future career choices. She had deliberately attached staff to individual departments so that each member of the team achieved an individual profile for equality expertise. Their posts were safe guarded because each team member therefore was seen as a necessary player. With a contact in every department the unit's strategy was to ensure that it was involved in all city-wide projects. This involvement was either nominal,

achieved by including a commitment to equality in the framework documents (for example in city regeneration), or practical, whereby the unit was a full partner in cross agency work. Local women's use of leisure services was one example where the benefits of considering equality implications had paid off. The city had the highest participation rate of women in Britain. The unit used this example to argue that it could contribute to the achievement of the authority's efficiency and service quality objectives.

'Inequality has developed over several 1000 years so we're not going to get rid of it. The equalities unit has to make an impact, and to maximise its impact we have to integrate. ... I'm not optimistic about our chances, I'm realistic. It's hard work and we always have to be on our toes. The rules are changing, the financial situation between local and central government is changing, staff are changing although not quickly enough at the top. We need them to pass the equality message on for it to become part of the culture. I never look at what we've achieved, I'm always looking at what needs to be done,' said the Head of the Equalities Unit (FJ 8:1).

Parkin had drawn similar conclusions. She argued that, in the context of the switch to competitive delivery of council services, strategies to work collectively with other agencies, constructing shared or parallel goals, were the most effective. She also highlighted the need for women's initiatives to maximise the opportunities of other agendas such as customer care, local management in schools and concerns about demographic change (see Riley 1990<sup>4</sup>). She ended her report as follows:

By incorporating equalities dimensions to these areas of work the issues are not left behind as the tide turns. Islands of feminist practice in the local state will no longer be nourished; feminist practice has to be transported to the mainland. Yet it needs practitioners there too in order to survive. (Parkin 1992:30)

### **The development of theories of gendered organisations**

Feminist theory in the areas of work and organisations has supported arguments for a shift in feminist practice through its reconceptualisation of the nature of state power. An understanding of men's power as fluid, circumstantial and

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<sup>4</sup> 'Effective equality programmes at the local level can ensure that limited Council resources and services are targeted to those most in need, such as lone parents. The effective promotion of other services, such as leisure to women, black and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities – can result in a more intensive use of scarce resources' (Riley 1990:49).



primarily perpetuated through language and culture recommends the use of vanguard actions to chip away at conceptual constructions. Strategies based on an all-or-nothing objective of women's equality risk reinforcing stereotypes, and do not make use of the opportunities for effecting change through the micro level of interaction. This literature recognises partial solutions as achievements rather than as failures or feminist concessions. A focus on pragmatic engagement allows for gendered as well as women only strategies. It encourages feminists to form a closer relationship with the mainstream and its economic concerns.

Feminist academics have engaged with organisational theory to explore the patriarchal nature of the practices of the state and other institutions. Their analysis of the agency of organisational members suggests that 'the mainstream' is not a coherent entity but a diverse collection of routines, dialogues and structures, which individuals can effectively influence, and over time permanently re-configure.

Halford was one of the first theorists to look critically at the claim of women's initiatives that the patriarchal state was actively co-opting the women's movement's energies. The empty rhetoric of the host councils was put forward as evidence of patriarchy in action. Halford has attempted to measure this phenomenon of 'tokenism'<sup>5</sup>. She concludes that it is too simplistic to say that tokenism applied to the experience of all women's initiatives, since no allowances had been made for the ways in which local 'social relations' vary (Halford 1988:258). Subsequent empirical studies of other employment sectors support the view that all social interaction and activity in bureaucracies has a gendered subtext (for example Acker 1992, Cockburn 1991). It was the meanings and stereotypes attached to different relationships and behaviour that was keeping women in their place.

Parkin and Maddock (1992) have used the concept of gendered cultures to describe the nature of patriarchal power in organisations. They suggested that gendered cultures are the unwritten rules and expectations about men's and women's behaviour at work. They are oppressive towards anyone except the dominant group of men.

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<sup>5</sup> Sometimes called 'gesture politics'.

Significantly, they identified several cultures, such as the barrack yard<sup>6</sup> culture, in which men suffered similar pressure and exigency as women on a similar occupational grade. Their typology implies that patriarchal power operates to set up different expectations of gender roles in different workplaces.

Acker (1992) has made a key contribution to our understanding of how gender identity is constructed at work and can determine women's behaviour. She says:

Gender is not something that people are, in some inherent sense, although we may consciously think about ourselves in this way. Rather, for the individual and the collective it is a daily accomplishment that occurs in the course of participation in work organisations, as well as in many other locations and relations (Acker 1992:250).

She goes on to argue that gender construction is not neutral. In her view it usually (although not exclusively) results in the symbolic or material subordination of women (Acker 1992:251). Her analysis provides a framework to which a large number of studies can contribute. Based on an understanding of the social construction and performance of gender, these studies no longer appear to represent individual snapshots of women's experience in the workplace, but are examples of how gendered identities such as manager, dinner-lady come to be formulated.

Cockburn's wide range of research on women's employment records a large number of ways in which gender identity, premised on different masculine and feminine emotions, sexuality and bodies, permeates working life. She challenges the biological essentialist view of men's domination through physical strength by suggesting it is both socially constructed and politically acquired and organised (Cockburn 1981:43). She notes the deliberate de/sexualising of men and women in organisations, for example through uniforms, office layouts and companies' rewards. Stanko (1988) and Pringle (1989) have clarified the way in which women's traditional occupations have been routinely sexualised and their subordination eroticised. One such occupation is that of personal assistant or secretary. Pringle's research showed that the female secretaries in her study were fulfilling the gendered role of 'office wife' (Pringle 1989).

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<sup>6</sup> This culture is driven by the profit motive and enforced by fear of unemployment and bullying managers.



Acker (1992) has suggested that individuals formulate their gender identity in relationship to their understanding and experience of hierarchical structure, interpersonal relationships, personal reflection and discursive and symbolic representation. These four areas represent categories for analysis. In the course of every day interaction individuals do not differentiate between them. All areas contribute to reinforce the subjective patterning of an individual's gendered identity. The contributions of a number of key studies are listed below according to these analytical categories.

<b>Structural:</b> observable effect – hierarchies, building layouts, logos	<u>Kanter (1976)</u> Career progression, women's mobility up the hierarchy sends out a positive or negative message to women. <u>Hearn (1982)</u> portrayal of women as natural carers and hence their suitability for personal service occupations is deliberately perpetuated by professional associations' membership.
<b>Personal and interpersonal:</b> Repeated behaviour, events, Experience	<u>Acker &amp; Von Houten (1992)</u> Recruitment and discipline procedures mimic the mechanisms of control which women experience in their domestic situation. <u>Adkins (1995)</u> a lack of support procedures and dismissive attitudes of managers serve to condone sexual harassment.
<b>Symbolic:</b> vocabularies, buzz words	<u>Pringle (1989)</u> Stereotypes of domestic relationships are imposed at work, for example the 'office mother'. <u>Adkins (1995)</u> segregation of women and men to different jobs in the leisure industry was premised on a belief in women's 'sexual availability' and attractiveness and men's 'strength'.

**Figure 1: Summary of feminist literature grouped according to Acker's analytical categories (Acker 1992).**

Feminist organisational theory has convincingly argued that the negotiation of gender and sexual identity between bureaucratic colleagues does play a part in determining women's status in the workforce. However, these descriptions do not tackle the form of political action which needs to be taken in order to overcome these bureaucratic barriers. Adkins (1995), has pulled the question of feminist practice back into an economic framework of analysis. She is interested to explore how gendered ideas, images and cultures act to produce the material inequalities of the labour market and how women can challenge them to bring about change.

Marxist feminist theories of women's oppression under systems of patriarchy and capital cannot supply an answer to Adkins' question. This work mainly has been part of a larger project to clarify feminism's relationship to the socialist movement. For



example, the explanations of Rowbotham, Segal & Wainwright (1979) Hartmann (1979) McIntosh (1978), Bruegel (1982), Walby (1986) are too abstract to supply models for daily feminist practice in the state. More recently Australian academics have attempted to plug this gap. Watson (1990) came from the defensive atmosphere of British academic feminism into the clout and sophistication of Australian women's politics - typified by the operation of the 'femocrat'<sup>7</sup>. Drawing on her new environment, Watson's edited collection of essays addressed the failure of feminist literature to focus usefully on practice. Explicitly, it kept the theoretical framework of women's oppression, but attempted to apply it to the local political situation and to employ post-modern ideas of the fluidity of power (Watson 1990).

In attempting to draw together all these theoretical approaches Watson recommends Pateman's conception of 'fraternity' as a useful starting point (Pateman 1988). The concept of 'fraternity' accommodates a diverse number and nature of gender positions while recognising oppression. It expects different degrees of oppression to arise due to differences within the gender groups<sup>8</sup>. Unlike the blanket definitions of 'patriarchy' (Walby 1986) and 'male dominance' (Burstyn 1983), 'fraternity' comes closer to recognising the intersecting effects of class, race, disability, deviance etc. on an individual's position in the bureaucratic hierarchy and in their contractual relationship to the state (Pringle & Watson 1990:231). 'Fraternity' also uncovers the group-interested<sup>9</sup> norms that underpin 'neutral' state pronouncements and practices.

Along similar lines, Acker (1992) has developed an idea of the worker owning a unique set of cultural characteristics. These characteristics are compared to an organisation's notion of an ideal worker under capitalism. An individual's progress in the organisation is dependent on the degree to which their personal characteristics match those of the 'abstract worker'. Acker understands that the abstract worker implicitly displays male characteristics; it is therefore harder for women to match the ideal. This ideal sustains patriarchal structures in a larger context than that of the organisation. It is also important for the continuance of the capitalist system that

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<sup>7</sup> The Australian term for women bureaucrats.

<sup>8</sup> Thus while men oppress women in general, a woman's other identities can mediate to reverse this relationship. For example a middle class woman may have more opportunities in the labour market than an unskilled man. This analysis also accepts that some women may oppress other women.



assigns women to a domestic, reproductive role. The organisation actively uses the individual's gender and sexuality as resources in its engagement with the capitalist context. For example capitalism uses women's 'weaker' bodies or 'caring' nature as the reason for women's segregation into lower paid sectors of work.

So where does this leave practitioners wondering how to continue to practise their politics in the state? Allen argues that the term 'the state' distracts feminists from attending to the specificity of its individual parts (Allen 1990:34)<sup>10</sup> and from mounting effective resistance. She and Pringle and Watson agree that a concept of the Marxist state has little meaning in the current political climate (Allen 1990, Pringle & Watson 1990). Both writers urge feminists to prioritise their efforts to understand their own local situation in order pragmatically to chip away at gendered conceptualisations of power. Franzway *et al* put it this way:

We need to know the ways masculinity is embedded in state structure, because without clarifying the mechanisms of men's power, it is impossible to anticipate the ways in which potential feminist transformation may be mobilised and men's power reconstituted. At the same time we need to identify points of opportunity and the mechanisms of change that make successful strategies possible (Franzway *et al* (1989:32).

This last comment brings a mainstreaming strategy very much to mind. It recognises the importance of changing the structure of mainstream thinking to effect material changes, and the need to change the attitudes not only of men but also of women.

The mainstreaming strategy promoted by the European Union is one of the first examples of feminist state practice, which explicitly reflects the understanding that social inequality is caused by complex gendered power relations. The following section describes the development of feminist equality delivery through the institutions of the European Union, to explain how a recognition of gendered organisational practices came to be expressed as an approach to mainstream gender equality.

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<sup>9</sup> The idea here is that among men there is a dominant group which dictates the behaviour and defines the status of different sub groups of men.

<sup>10</sup> Such as the police and the criminal justice system.



## **European development of a gender perspective in mainstream practice**

The Union's first legal commitment to equality arose unintentionally from economic concerns<sup>11</sup>. Article 119 of the founding Treaty of Rome (1957) enshrined the idea of equal pay for equal work. The article was not developed in a meaningful way until the 1970s when plaintive cases, supported by the women's movement, were presented to the European Court of Justice. The case law that these cases generated strengthened the article in detail and description. The Commission went on to formalise its commitment to the principle under the Delors presidency by issuing a series of Directives which required member states to take legal action to ensure gender equality in the areas of employment, social security and pay. It was persuaded to take this step by external pressure coming from the women's movement across Europe (Hoskyns 1992). The Directives have provided a foundation on which a wide variety of national social policy instruments have subsequently been developed.

The women's movement lobbied the Commission for a greater influence over the control of the Union's resources. In a mirror image to women's initiatives in the UK, the Union established the Women's Rights Committee in the European Parliament and an Equal Opportunities Unit in the European Commission's Social Affairs Department (DG V) to provide administrative support and policy guidance. The unit is actively involved in devising policy, securing budget lines and carrying out monitoring to support a raft of positive action projects run by women around Europe. The main structure for these projects is the Community Action Programme for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. The resourcing and political support for this provision has been modest and its achievements small scale<sup>12</sup>.

The Community Action Programmes for Equal Opportunities provide a snapshot of the development of the new understanding of the causes of women's inequality. The first two of these programmes (1981-1985 & 1986-1990) addressed women's

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<sup>11</sup> The French government were concerned that the great disparity in the rates of pay between men and women in Spain would put French businesses at a competitive disadvantage (Hoskyns 1992).

<sup>12</sup> The positive action strategy of the Commission places no statutory demands on member states to follow its lead. Hence the programmes rely on national groups to act to apply for funding and information. The degree to which member states have taken up the opportunities offered by the action programmes is largely determined by the activism of their women's movements. Unlike the direct impact of the Union's legislative instruments, the structural provision has had a more understated influence in member states. It provides modest funding for women's projects, and a precedent for targeted provision that can be used to strengthen the arguments of national lobbies.



exclusion from the labour market and public institutions. The third programme (1991-1995) targeted women's training opportunities in sectors where women were particularly under-represented. All three programmes were based on the understanding that women are a disadvantaged group, who require special treatment. The fourth programme has promoted the strategy of mainstreaming. It recognises that since the current social arrangements are perpetuated by gendered thinking, special budgets and intervention on behalf of women are not enough to secure permanent change. It places a new emphasis on gendered differences rather than on women's disadvantage.

How did mainstreaming gender equality emerge as the Union's new approach to achieving social justice? Women working in the Equal Opportunities Unit developed mainstreaming equality as part of the Union's platform at the 4<sup>th</sup> United Nations Conference on Women, in Beijing in 1995. This was the first important public articulation of the concept. The delegation succeeded in embedding the concept of mainstreaming into the conference resolution. 14 national governments signed the 'Platform for Action', pledging to use a mainstreaming approach to address the critical areas of concern in their national contexts. They have agreed that:

Governments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes, so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively (United Nations 1995, Item 25:13).

The new approach has received top level political support because of a unique combination of political events, one of which was the entry to the Union of the Nordic States in 1995. Norway<sup>13</sup>, Sweden and Finland have the most advanced state equality provision of the European nations, which has supported a tradition of women's full time paid employment. In an effort to redistribute the burden of domestic tasks (which remained primarily the responsibility of women) the Nordic countries have moved away from an analysis of women's problems to a perspective which focuses on men as

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<sup>13</sup> Norway did not become a member state in 1995, however it does have a special relationship with the European Union.

well. Their entry reinvigorated the debate about where the European Union's policy was heading<sup>14</sup>.

A focus on reordering the work and home lives of both genders fitted the European analysis of the future of economic growth. This analysis emphasised the increasing contribution which women were making to member states' workforces (EOR 1998). The extension to the Union membership of the Eastern states, prompted a discussion about the diversity of European citizens and the need for policies to be flexible enough to take account of their different situations. A similar view has been taken by trans-European businesses which have developed increasingly more sensitive, individualised methods of human resource management to enhance every worker's potential contribution to performance and productivity. These methods contributed to a business case for equal opportunities, enacted through strategies such as 'managing diversity'.

Observers report that an important push came from the five women commissioners who put up a spirited battle for a greater gender balance in the Union's institutions. They were supported by the European Parliament which expressed its 'gross dissatisfaction of the Commission's approach to equality' (Green 1998). It was no coincidence that this demand should be raised at this time. The leader of the largest group in the Parliament, the Party of European Socialists, Pauline Green considers that the composition of 60% women MEPs have made a significant difference to the Parliament's awareness of the issue of women's equality (Green 1998).

In response to the women's lobby and following the momentum generated by the Beijing conference, Jacques Santer, as President of the Commission, established a Group of Commissioners on Equal Opportunities in autumn 1995<sup>15</sup> to consider the Union's equality project. On the group's recommendation, the Commission issued a Communication on Incorporating Equal Opportunities for Women and Men into all Community Activities and Policies (COM (96) 67) in February 1996. This document

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<sup>14</sup> There was concern in these countries that their convergence could result in a process of levelling down national equality programmes to the lowest common European denominator (Rossilli 1997). Their commissioners consequently put pressure on the President for the EU equality framework to be strengthened.



has been the basis for all subsequent action. The Communication clearly defines equality in terms of a gender perspective.

The challenge is to build a new partnership between men and women to ensure that both participate fully on an equal footing in all areas and that benefits of progress are evenly distributed between them (COM (96) 67:2).

It goes on:

The promotion of equality must not be confused with the simple objective of balancing the statistics: It is a question of promoting long-lasting changes in parental roles, family structures, institutional practices, the organisation of work and time etc. and does not only concern women, their personal development and independence but also concerns men and the whole of society (COM (96) 67:5).

The Communication describes the Union's conception of equality as both pluralistic and humanistic, and consequently equal opportunities practice is a means of encouraging progress towards democracy in Europe and the rest of the world (COM (96) 67:1&5).

Mainstreaming is the strategic approach that describes how a gender perspective will become the natural goal of all policy makers. The Communication recognises that this mechanism needs to be more exhaustive than previous approaches<sup>16</sup>. Mainstreaming focuses on enhancing the influence of the Union's equality policy over the Union's total resources (Crowley 1998). It aims to do this by mobilising 'all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality' (COM (96) 67:2). Specifically, its horizontal impact will be achieved through the 'simultaneous mobilisation of legal instruments, financial resources and the Community's analytical and organisational capacities' (COM (96) 67:5)<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> The group has become a symbol of the Commission's commitment to equality. It also acts as a clearing house for new policy suggestions and a think-tank to anticipate future policy (Crowley 1998).

<sup>16</sup> An analysis of the 'meagre' resource base and 'modest' achievement of the existing equality policy strengthened this determination (COM (96) 67:4)

<sup>17</sup> The Communication identifies six key areas on which mainstreaming a gender perspective can initially be focused (employment, entrepreneurs and SMEs, education and training, people's rights and external relations) as well as the Commission's own personnel policy. It also targets the Structural Funds, which, as the Community's main financial instrument, hold untapped potential for developing equal opportunities work and carrying it forward.

The Communication begins to tackle the practical implications of how to mainstream a gender perspective. It recognises that this will involve 'nothing short of a cultural transformation of individual behaviour as much as of attitudes and collective practice' (COM (96) 67:1). It emphasises that progress will depend on a 'significant increase in co-operation' (COM (96) 67:21) between departments and a stronger partnership with member states and other players. Information and awareness is made a priority work area (COM (96) 67:14). The Communication envisages that the Fourth Community Action Programme on Equal Opportunities will play a lead role in disseminating good practice.

The Equal Opportunities Unit has worked proactively to translate the policy commitment into clear practice guidelines by commissioning empirical studies. It has been keen to stress the continuity of mainstreaming with existing equality approaches, most notably specialist women's provision. It has attempted to tackle the simplistic interpretation that mainstreaming involves the removal of specialist accountability in favour of general mainstream responsibility.

In January 1997 the Strategy Paper on Mainstreaming following up the Communication (EQOP 02-97rev DG V/D/5) was published. It emphasises that a mainstreaming strategy does not entail the discontinuation of positive action, because a gender approach addressing 'neutral' policies may reveal discrimination which can only be changed by developing 'specific action to accommodate the specific needs of either women or men in the area in question'. The paper argues that a 'dual and complimentary' approach is needed.

On one side the systematic application of gender impact analysis and its continuous monitoring and evaluation of all community policies and activities. On the other side, the continuation, and when feasible, strengthening of the specific positive measures which are currently being applied (EQOP 02-97rev DG V/D/5 Jan 1997:section 1).

Similarly, discussing the implications for personnel, the paper recommends that responsibility for implementation in the Commission's own directorates 'should be clearly anchored' in specific personnel at an appropriate organisational level and that these individuals should be sufficiently trained. It does not therefore support generic responsibility, but instead clearly states that the implementation of mainstreaming is a



management responsibility. The long-term objective of the implementation process should be that 'all staff incorporate the gender and equal opportunities approach as a basic reflex in their work' (EQOP 02-97/rev DG V/D/5, Section 3.1), at which point specialist staff would no longer be required.

The central objective to ensure that the gender perspective is a basic reflex of every participant, at every stage of the policy making process, has given rise to the development of a set of new policy instruments. These include gender proofing, gender audits and gender impact assessments<sup>18</sup>. These instruments have a dual purpose. They secure gender sensitive outcomes to policies and also act as mechanisms for raising policy makers' awareness of the gender issues as they use them in their daily work.

Commentators have argued that a mainstreaming strategy is 'transformative' (Rees 1996). I suggest that the European definition of a mainstreaming strategy has made three important new contributions to the understanding and implementation of equality objectives. First, the innovation of a mainstreaming approach arises from its use of a gender perspective, which aims to make its outputs gender inclusive. As already mentioned, it reflects the conceptual shift in our understanding of patriarchal power. A focus on gender fits neatly with the Union's aim for closer integration of the diversity of Europe's citizens. It also matches pluralistic arguments of the business case for equal opportunities and the practical ideas of managing diversity.

Mainstreaming can be applied to both economic and socially driven agendas based on individual merit and rights. It has a large number of possible supporters. Historically some of the most significant advances for women's rights have been made on the basis of a liberal framework. It is an effective motivator for political action, since it avoids blame and confrontation and offers everyone a share of the benefits. It attacks the symptoms of inequality and escapes a debate about the causes.

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<sup>18</sup> Gender proofing - textual check to prevent gender bias. Gender audits - a collation of baseline information about men and women's relative positions based on disaggregated statistics. Gender impact assessment - the evaluation of projected policy outcomes by gender.



Second, a mainstreaming approach formally recognises that the mainstream plays a part in the creation of unequal social and economic relationships<sup>19</sup>. An attempt to achieve gender equality must therefore start at the top. Pauline Green speaking at the UK Presidency event in 1998 suggested that the main achievement of the European Union's recent equality policy has been to raise the 'profile' of equality (Green 1998). For the first time there is an explicit recognition that without high level political commitment nothing is achievable. The instructions to governments given out in the Communication have been progressively strengthened<sup>20</sup>.

The third contribution is mainstreaming's explanation of the interrelated nature of the equality perspectives and methods. It argues for the need to keep legislative and positive action strategies to address certain intractable circumstances. In this way it provides a holistic conceptualisation of the equality agenda, reflecting the view of academics such as Cockburn who has argued convincingly that all equality practice can be viewed as being on a continuum stretching from short-term to long-term objectives (1990). The new gender tools that mainstreaming has added to the practitioners' armoury are concerned with women and men's relative situations<sup>21</sup>. These instruments are couched in language that managers can understand, which helps to make the prospect of gender awareness less threatening and more accessible.

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<sup>19</sup> The UN defines 'the mainstream' in the gender guidelines for its development programme. It is clearly the target for mainstreaming instruments;

- What is the mainstream?  
An interrelated set of dominant ideas and development directions and the decisions of actions taken in accordance with these. It has two aspects - ideas (theories and assumptions) and practices (decisions and actions). Mainstream ideas and practices determine who gets what. They provide the rationale for the allocation of resources.
- What is being mainstreamed?  
The legitimacy of gender equality as a fundamental value that should be reflected in development choices and institutional practices.
- What is the target of mainstreaming? Who or what are we trying to change?  
The developing country (governments and programmes and the general society)  
([www.UNDP.org/organisation/gender/](http://www.UNDP.org/organisation/gender/) Guidelines for agencies wishing to build capacity for gender mainstreaming)

<sup>20</sup> The Amsterdam Treaty, signed in 1997, gave gender equality a legal basis for the first time in the Union's history. On this basis, the Union's Employment Strategy published in 1998 promoted equal opportunities as one of its four central 'pillars'. Member states are required to formulate actions and targets for each pillar in their annual National Action Plans, bringing equal opportunities to the centre of government policy-making. A similar revolution will be effected among regional policy makers in 2000 when new guidelines for the Structural Funds come into force making equality opportunities outcomes an allocation criteria.

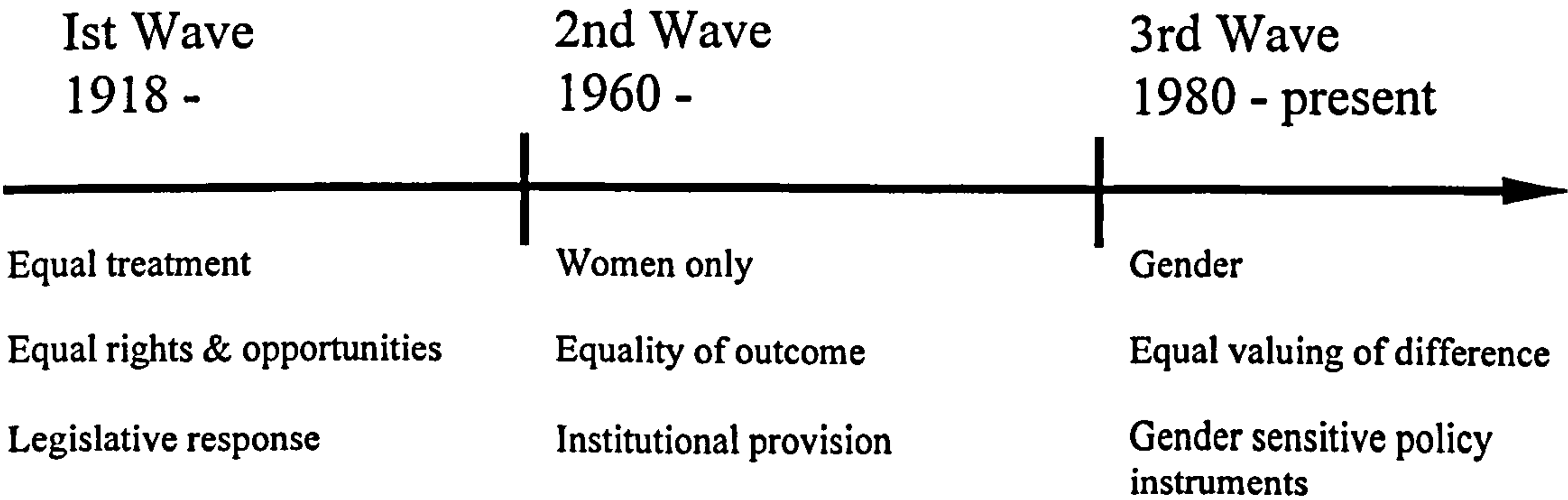
<sup>21</sup> These are tools for policy makers, designed primarily for large public institutions and organisations. There is a lack of practical advice for smaller companies and a lack of vision about the possible results that raising awareness of gender among smaller workforces could achieve. Managing diversity faces a similar dilemma.



**The conceptualisation of changes in women’s equality practice**

The robust development of mainstreaming at a European level appears to represent a new phase in European equality delivery. It is possible to argue that the UK practitioners, who have protested strongly against adopting a mainstreaming approach simply have not moved on from a strategy of positive action and an all-or-nothing attitude towards the goal of women’s equality. This prognosis falls back on an explanation of equality developments as linear and progressive. The last section of this chapter argues that to understand the reasons behind the ambivalence of practitioners in the UK to mainstreaming, it is first necessary to change our conceptualisation of equal opportunities practice in the 1990s from a linear to a holistic framework.

It is most usual for feminist literature to divide the political campaigns for women’s equality into three distinct historical periods, first, second and most recently, third wave feminism. First wave feminism describes the period of campaigning for women’s suffrage at the turn of the century that was based on the liberal principles of equal rights and treatment before the law. Second wave feminism is said to have arisen in the context of the radical social movements of 1960s and is typified by demands for positive action and separate women’s provision. Finally, in the 1990’s, feminist politics has been influenced by post-modern thinking and a critique of the essentialist nature of second wave feminism. It claims to recognise the differences between women which in some cases can result in their situation being more similar to that of men than other women.



**Figure 2: Northern European Equality Timeline**

A periodic description assumes that there has been a causal relationship between each phase. Hence according to this description, in the 1990s we have progressed irreversibly on from the mistakes of a women only approach to one that focuses on gender. The timeline implies that each phase is distinct from the one which came before. I would argue that few women's movements, if any, can describe their experience in this linear way. For the women's movement and its equality practice in the UK, these divisions do not capture the complexities of the struggle on the ground or place those struggles in their temporal, spatial and social context (Horelli 1998, Bennett, Booth & Yeandle 1998). A periodised conceptualisation can cause us mistakenly to label UK practitioners, who are resisting a mainstreaming approach, as backward.

As a result of my close collaboration with colleagues at CRESR<sup>22</sup>, I suggest that contemporary practice of women's equality practitioners is simultaneously being exposed to the different perspectives of all three periods. These perspectives can be described as an *equal treatment perspective*, a *women's perspective* and a *gender perspective*. They recommend three different types of practical actions; respectively, legislation, institutional provision and gender sensitive policy instruments. Different national and local women's initiatives have pursued certain methods and certain perspectives in preference to others because of their particular political and economic contexts. The challenge that the European mainstreaming approach has laid down is that if any of these perspectives are weak (not only the newest gender perspective) then the potential for the achievement of equality is undermined.

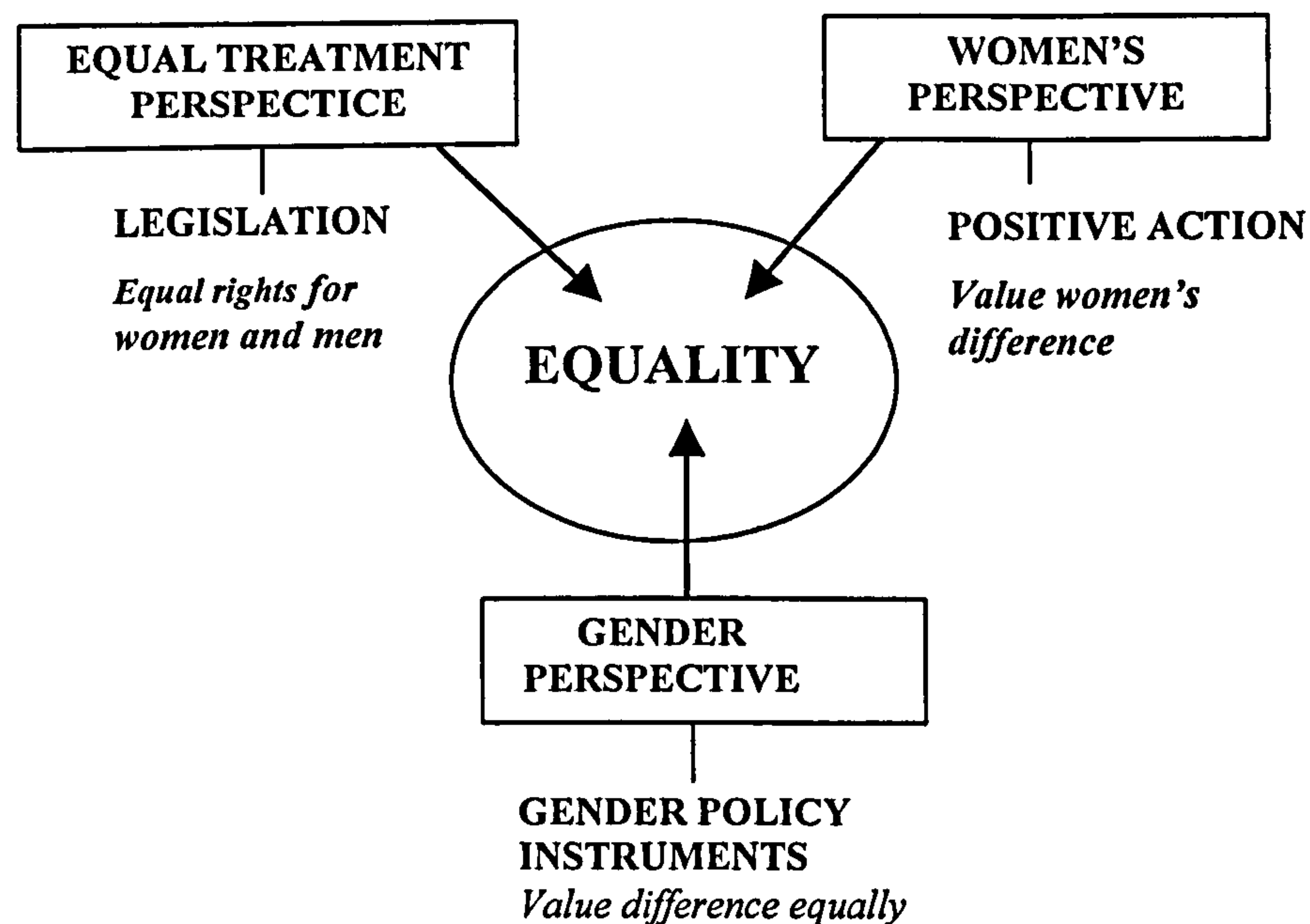
The metaphor of a 'three legged stool' is an apt way of visualising how the three perspectives complement each other. Each 'leg' of the stool represents one of the three perspectives. These perspectives all work together to achieve gender equality in all social arrangements, which is the necessary underpinning of a feminist commitment to a more egalitarian society. The diversity of equality work and of socio-political contexts mean that the 'three legged stool' may be uneven. One or more of the perspectives will be less developed than the others in temporal and spatial locations. Arguably, the *gender perspective* will be the least developed since it is the

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<sup>22</sup> Yeandle, Booth & Bennett (1999)



newest perspective and has arisen from an analysis of the shortcomings of the other two. It is possible to find examples of how the *equal treatment perspective* and the *women's perspective* are mutually supportive. Many women's initiatives depend on legal precedents, for example, in the use of quotas to give preference to women in elections to unrepresentative government structures. Similarly, campaigning from a women's perspective has put pressure on governments to strengthen their implementation of anti-discrimination laws.



**Equal treatment perspective:** Describes actions that guarantee women the same rights and the same opportunities in the public sphere as men. Its main way of delivery is through statutory and mandatory legal instruments.

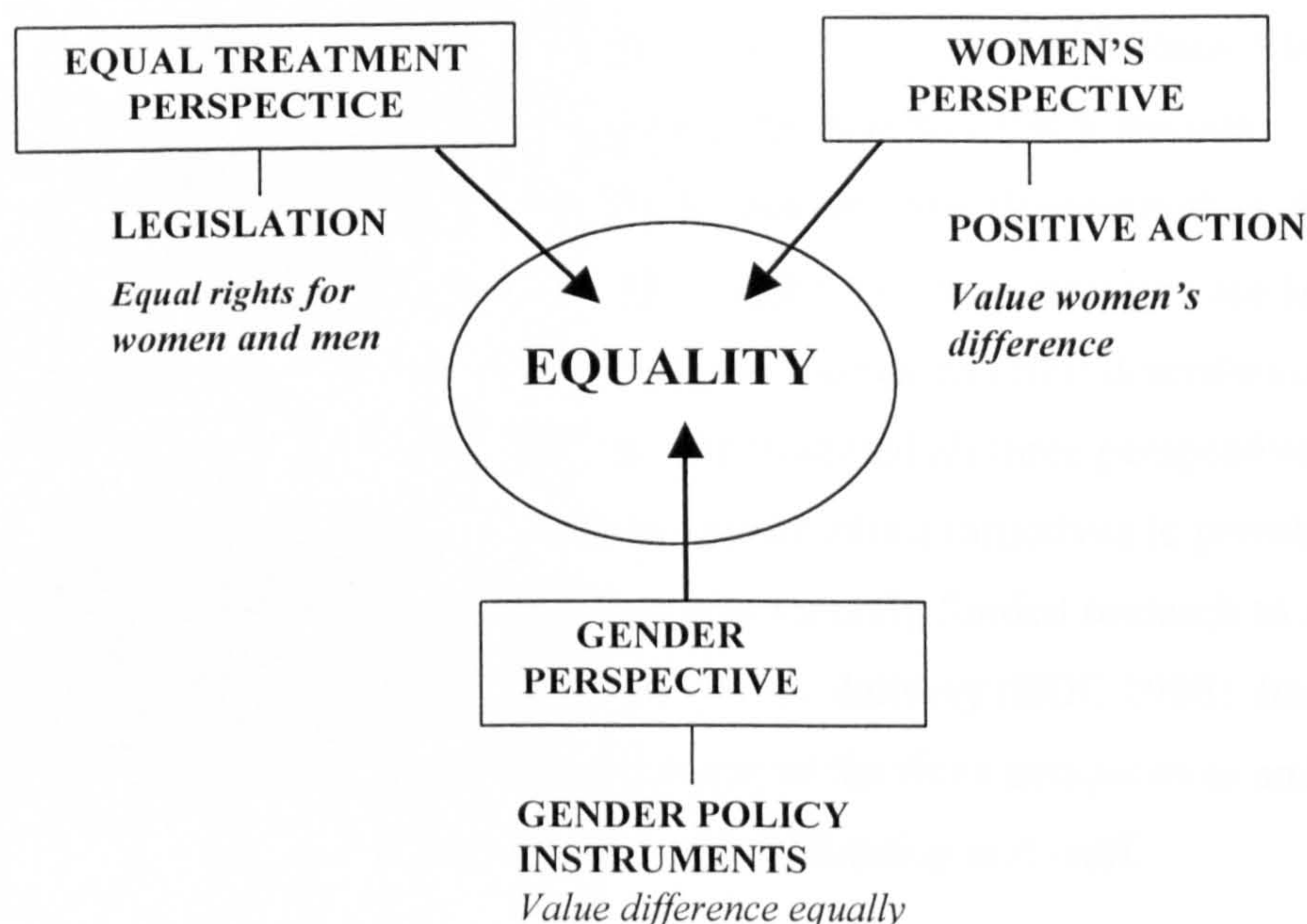
**Women's perspective:** Women's initiatives have operated on the understanding that women are a disadvantaged group in society who deserve and require particular treatment to rectify past experience of oppression that has become institutionalised. Delivered through specialist provision and positive action programmes.

**Gender perspective:** Aims to transform the organisation of society to a fairer distribution of human responsibilities. It focuses on men's roles as well as those of women and acknowledges the differences between women's situations. The transformation of men's lives is premised on the assumption that men are not deliberate oppressors of women but can also be disempowered by current social arrangements. New instruments for gendered policy making have been developed.

**Figure 3: The Equality Stool**



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**Figure 3: The Equality Stool**



How can the model of the equality stool assist in the search for a more sophisticated understanding of practitioners' behaviour in the UK?

### **Applying the equality stool to UK equal opportunities practice**

In the UK the equal treatment perspective is symbolised by women's enfranchisement, the legal acts for women's equality, most notably the Sex Discrimination Act (1975)<sup>23</sup> and the pseudo legal instruments such as industrial tribunals rulings. This framework came about due to pressure on the British government from the women's movement, but also as a result of women's lobbying at a European level<sup>24</sup>. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), the non governmental agency that was set up to implement the Sex Discrimination Act, has significantly advanced the scope of the UK's legislative base through case law, especially in the area of employment practice. Although its remit describes an equal treatment perspective, the EOC has at times represented all three perspectives. It has used positive action tools to promote equal opportunities initiatives to private employers and public policy makers. It has also recently funded research to establish best practice guidelines for gender sensitive policy delivery (EOC 1998). Its ability to act as a co-ordinating body for the development of the three perspectives and methods is limited however because of its own shortage of funding and staff.

The women's perspective in the UK is most strongly represented by women's initiatives at the local government level. They have developed positive action policies and methods, for example the use of women-only training to address women's vertical and horizontal segregation in the labour market. As Chapter 2 described, positive action strategies and hence the women's perspective has no statutory basis. This has acted as a barrier to women's initiatives' achievements. The Sex Discrimination Act has endorsed some areas of their work. For example the notion of indirect discrimination has enabled practitioners to act against subjective recruitment practices, which have been developed due to lack of awareness and 'tradition'. The lack of legislative authority may partly explain why women's practitioners in local

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<sup>23</sup> Also the Equal Pay Act 1970 and amendments to existing legislation, such as changes to social security etc.

<sup>24</sup> Changes in legislation at the European level were passed on to the UK when it signed the Treaty of Rome in 1971.

government are very reluctant to embrace the gender perspective and a set of tools that rely on the mainstream taking action.

Feminist theorists have contributed to the development of a gender perspective. It emerged from an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of equality delivery using positive action strategies and hence is a response to the women's perspective. The emergence of a politics of identity, discussed in Chapter 1, highlighted the differences between women as well as between women and men. The gender perspective emphasises the relevance of men's lives and ambitions to the equality debate, and moves away from the idea of women as a homogeneous group, by recognising that there are differences between women due to factors such as class, race and age. It addresses the feelings of resentment caused by the use of positive action, which placed all women together in opposition to all men, often against many women's wishes.

Although feminist theorising has contributed to the emergence of a gender perspective in Britain, it has been mainly developed in practice by the private sector acting out of economic interests. Business has been one of the key proponents of an heterogeneous approach to customers and workers in order to better meet their needs and maximise their capacities. This has manifested itself in the business case for equal opportunities and 'managing diversity'. The former is a set of arguments which make a case of the advantages of providing equal opportunities for men and women workers, in terms of profitability and efficiency. Examples of programmes which adopted the business case are Opportunity 2000, focusing on women in management and Investors in People, a benchmark for staff training and development. These programmes currently disproportionately benefit women because they are more limited than are most men in terms of their educational achievements, their personal aspirations, and their domestic responsibilities.

Managing diversity starts from a very similar premise. It aims to value the different skills and qualities people can bring to the workforce and to deploy them adeptly (Kandola & Fullerton 1994). It was first developed in the context of expanding multinational US companies who in the mid 1980s acquired substantial overseas workforces. A mechanism was sought to build staff's company identity and to provide



managers with a set of guidelines about how to relate to and motivate non US staff. Rather than a set of business reasons it represents a set of tools and methods for effective human resource management.

### **Explaining women's practitioners' ambivalence**

Applying the concept of the equality stool to the situation of women's initiatives in the UK enables us to identify the possible reasons for practitioners' reluctance to embrace mainstreaming as an approach. Their uncertainty relates to the association of the gender perspective with economic arguments in the UK, and the historical lack of government support for either the equal treatment or the women's perspective.

The development of a gender perspective in the UK with the private sector's economic ambitions has contributed to make women's practitioners wary of a mainstreaming approach, which spearheads the delivery of equality through this perspective. The gender perspective is not grounded in an ideological commitment to a more egalitarian society, it is understood primarily in terms of the business case for equal opportunities. There is a possibility that the commitment to mainstreaming will be transient, since equal opportunities is only cost effective at times when the economic cycle is buoyant and there is competition for skilled labour. In this scenario women workers are highly prized as an untapped resource and as a growing section of the labour force. Employers are prepared to bear the extra costs of supporting women's greater responsibility for children and other dependants in order to facilitate their participation in the labour market. However, with no moral or political basis, practitioners have expressed fears that the gender perspective and mainstreaming can too easily be dismissed and reversed when economic climates change.

As I discussed earlier in the chapter, equality practitioners in the UK had already discussed the option of mainstreaming equality several years before the European Commission Communication was published. Notably the UK definition of the approach does not have a gender perspective. It describes the way in which the women's perspective can be grafted onto local government structures in such a way that it cannot be easily shaken off in a climate of increased resource constraint. The gender perspective is new and largely untried by UK practitioners.

Further alarm was raised in the UK due to the failure of the Communication to clearly explain that the mainstreaming approach relied not only on the gender perspective, but also on the equal treatment and women's perspective. Some local authorities interpreted the Communication as a signal to move on from specialist women's provision to make equality work the responsibility of women and men in the organisation. Mainstreaming was given as the rationale for closing women's initiatives. A gender perspective, without the prospect of a women's perspective, appeared to indicate that mainstreaming focuses on individual differences and the barriers to personal advancement. It appeared to practitioners to represent a watering down of the radical agenda and the loss of an analysis of women's oppression.

Women's practitioners have been particularly defensive of the women's perspective because of the difficult battles they have had to fight to gain state provision in the UK. Chapter 2 described the meagre resources that have been given to women's initiatives and the small number of authorities that have made an institutional commitment. The women's perspective is an under developed leg on the British equality stool. Likewise the legislative base in the UK is also weak. National legislation meets minimum European requirements for government intervention to secure women's equality. Equality for women in Britain has been advanced by the recent European Directives, which have forced the government to amend and implement national legislation. The low level of resourcing of the EOC indicates the lack of political will or priority given to sex equality<sup>25</sup>. The retrospective examination of what has changed for British women in the twenty five years since the operation of the act only serves to underline practitioners' claims that developments under the equal treatment and women's perspective have been limited.

Finally, women's practitioners are sceptical about the mainstream. The use of mainstreaming by some councils as the justification for the closure of their women's initiative confirmed their suspicions. Past experience has convinced women's officers and councillors that the UK government and even the Labour movement would not

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<sup>25</sup> Practitioners report that recently this situation is improving, due to the election of the Labour government in May 1997 (The election occurred half way through the period in which the fieldwork for this study was completed). On 18 May 1998, the Blair administration launched a mainstreaming initiative (Ruddock 1998). It has put in place a number of provisions for women's equality, such as



act to uphold women's political practice. In many cases practitioners thought that the state deliberately attempted to sabotage it. As a result, practitioners vociferously defend the need for equality specialists, who are not only the guardians of the equality commitment but also are the only officers in local government who are capable of implementing a mainstreaming strategy in a meaningful way. While the Communication supports the need for specialist implementers as trainers, it does not see a role for them as agitators against the mainstream.

Tokenism was discussed at length in Chapter 2, revealing that there is evidence to suggest that equality strategies to date have suffered from gesture politics on the part of the Labour Party. Mainstreaming's emphasis on the use of methods of gendered policy-making has put practitioners on their guard. They anticipate that the introduction of such instruments into the mainstream will become an end in itself, rather than the means fundamentally to reorganise social arrangements. They also are all too aware of the ability of politicians and administrators to hide the absence of real change behind important mission statements, and adhere to policy guidelines in a superficial way. Again, initial confusion relayed by the Communication left practitioners wondering whether mainstreaming was a set of tools for gendered policy making or a strategy (methodology) which had a larger agenda. The latter is the case but this has only been clarified in subsequent strategy papers and the Presidency events that aim to explain the approach to national audiences.

It appears that before the gender perspective can be pursued in a meaningful way in the UK state, demonstration of a commitment and real understanding of the equal treatment and women's perspectives has to be strengthened. This conclusion is supported by recent trans-national research carried out by CRESR that suggests that while it is not essential that each leg is present for equal opportunities policies to produce outputs, it seems likely that their combined presence aids the achievement of transformative results (Yeandle, Booth & Bennett 1999).

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Ministers for Women, and the Women's Unit located in the Cabinet Office, which complement and reinforce the work of the EOC.

This chapter has described the way in which economic and political changes in the last decade have meant that women's initiatives are operating in an increasingly hostile environment. As early as 1991 feminists were already starting to debate the best way forward. They were beginning to argue for the need for a corporate position. Feminist theory on paid work and organisations supported the need for a more engaged stand. It encouraged feminists to give up the idea of effecting a total transformation of gender relations, or separate spaces for women, and instead to focus on small changes to practices, attitudes and language. It demonstrated that achievements in these areas would contribute to long term change. The European Union's strategy of mainstreaming gender equality exemplifies feminist theory in practice. To understand UK practitioners' reluctance to adopt mainstreaming, despite their own acknowledgement of the need for a corporate approach, it is necessary to consider their particular history and the way in which the gender perspective has developed in the UK.

There are competing definitions of mainstreaming in UK local government. The case studies, which follow in Chapters 5,6,and 7, tell the stories of equality delivery in three different local authorities and hence describe three different perceptions of the usefulness of a mainstreaming strategy for feminist practice. Before describing their experience, I give a full explanation in Chapter 4 of why these three authorities were chosen and how I went about collecting the impressions of their practitioners.



## Research Design and Methodology

This research project originated from a single question raised in response to a 1994 newspaper article about women's committees. I wondered, was feminism still happening in town halls? It appeared unlikely given the slow but sure fragmentation of the women's movement since the early 1980s. The article did not address the contemporary situation, and after some further investigation of my own it seemed neither did the sociological literature.

As Dawe (1973) says it is common for research projects to arise from people's own interests. At the time of asking this question about feminist agency I was working for a large corporation whose senior levels were dominated by men. The small number of senior women made no impact on the overarching culture which was paternal and often covertly sexist. From this vantage point, the example of local government women's officers, operating with a sanctioned political purpose to address the relationships between women and men, was an arresting one. Hammersley & Atkinson (1983) have argued that personal interest is often not only the starting point for research, but that it may also be crucial for successful outcomes. My personal experience, which prompted me to attach great importance to gendered organisational change, has sustained my interest throughout the long process of research. Passion nearing obsession is a useful sociological resource (Junker 1960).

While researchers who start from a personal interest have frequently had first hand experience of the social relationship they choose to study, my connection to the project was not so intimate. My lack of experience of working in either local government or holding a position with a political remit was both a strength and a weakness. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) argue that 'strangeness' is essential

where the goal is to document unextraordinary settings, as it prompts the researcher to ask the obvious and hence unasked questions. The problem I faced was a lack of information from which to design the study. My research process therefore necessarily began with an extensive mapping exercise and careful consideration of which methods would best enable me to immerse myself in this particular set of social relationships and events.

### **Refining the research focus**

I attempted to map the experience of feminists in town halls in two ways, first through an extensive literature review and second by collecting accounts from contemporary practitioners. The literature consists of a small number of studies carried out by practitioners in the 1980s that describe their authority and its achievements. Most of these accounts are readily available because their authors now work in academia. There is also a small collection of academic analysis. This analysis examines how the women's committee movement started and its relationship to feminist theory. Of prime importance among these is a survey carried out by Halford in 1986 and 1988 of all existing women's initiatives. Her attempt to identify the common national features provided me with a baseline against to compare and contrast the data I collected. The work of Stone (1988) gives an in depth description of the problems faced by one case study authority. I used her study to guide my methodological approach, in particular to construct an case study template to structure my collection of data (see Appendix 1).

My second line of investigation was assisted by the timely intervention of a member of my supervisory team who put me in contact with her friend who was the former Head of Ealing Borough Council's Women's Unit. This former officer was able to describe in detail the London developments and their emergence from the radical politics of the Greater London Council (GLC). Her description alerted me to the national nature of the phenomenon. We also discussed the issue of 'mainstreaming', and the shift away from specialist equality provision that she considered had occurred since the early 1990s.

For more detail about the shift she recommended that I should approach the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees (NALGWC). It was the only



link that she could remember existing between the women's committees. The association had changed its name to the Women's Local Authority Network (WLAN) when I contacted it in September 1996. WLAN was established in the aftermath of the abolition of the GLC to formalise the contact that had been established between the GLC Women's Committees and other committees across London. The association annually surveyed all local authorities asking about their equal opportunities provision and published these results. It also ran four conferences a year on different issues pertinent to its membership.

Although, I expected WLAN to become a 'gatekeeper' to my work in the field (Gilbert 1993), this did not occur for a number of reasons, which I go on to explain in the section on case study selection. I approached the co-ordinator of the network, who encouraged me to become a member of the association. I subsequently attended four conferences (1996-1997) and listened to many councillors and women's officers speaking of the problems they faced in their practice. I eventually used this forum to disseminate my researching findings and to publicise the existence of my study. The co-ordinator became a key informant for my research, acting as a sounding board against which I could test ideas and themes which were emerging from my fieldwork. My participation in the network provided a 'thickness' and depth to my understanding of the historical experience of feminist Labour party women.

The mapping exercise established the number and form of the remaining initiatives, which informed my decisions about the research design. Contact with practitioners identified which issues were most relevant to them. As Bell and Roberts (1984) have observed I was then in a good position to choose more confidently which issues were most current and most interesting, and I did not have to rely on my subjective judgement alone. Mainstreaming was an emerging issue. The original contention that specialist equality provision was a valid mechanism for achieving greater organisational equality was being challenged. This challenge was evident in the increasing removal of dedicated provision in the early and mid 1990s. Feminist officers were no longer defending their practice from criticism from right-wing and conservative opponents. Within the Labour movement itself a liberal agenda was being advanced which supported a pluralistic gender inclusive approach to equality.

## **Research Objectives**

It is important to highlight that as I began to design the research process, I had already formulated a set of questions which were both historical and contemporary in their focus. Fielding (1993) considers that it is a practical necessity to be clear about what the research objectives are before starting to look for answers, as they guide the choice of methods adopted. The research objectives were as follows.

1. To describe how women's equality officers are currently operating in local government bureaucracies.  
To identify how and why their practice and strategies differ from those employed by women's units in the 1980s.  
To bring up to date empirical knowledge of women's political practice in state bureaucracies, by locating the findings within the framework of earlier studies.
2. To identify the understanding of practitioners of the shift from a women's centred approach to a generic approach to equal opportunities.  
To relate these perceptions to feminist theories of the state as an institution and the role of feminist agents within it.
3. To identify the component practical elements which define an approach as gendered.  
To identify the underlying context and motivations for adopting a gender approach.  
To assess the use and the perceived usefulness of the concept of 'mainstreaming equality' as a practical strategy.
4. To synthesise the different conceptualisations and presentation of feminist practice existing in the literature, to suggest a new way of understanding and implementing equal opportunities for women.

## **Implications of the research objectives for research design**

I am interested in women's experience of political practice on three levels. The first level of inquiry concerns *what* strategies women's equality practitioners have used over time, and aims to provide an up-to-date description. The second level concerns *why* they have chosen to use these particular strategies, and aims to explore the meanings which practitioners attach to the different actions they take. The third level aims to use these



insights to explain contemporary practice in terms of its underlying understanding about the nature of feminist practice and the functioning of the local state.

Identifying *what* strategies have been used requires the systematic collection of factual examples of practice. It has an empirical purpose, to provide detailed information about the contemporary situation that is largely undocumented. Feminist theorists such as Oakley (1981) and Smith (1989) have argued that recording women's agency also has a political purpose. Women's activity often has a different focus and location from that of the 'male' stream. The act of detailing actions and achievements serves to publicise women's alternative strategies to practitioners and to celebrate their achievements. Records can also prevent women from duplicating previous activities without learning from them. In this way records contribute to a feminist epistemology. The first objective of this research is to examine women's political practice over the timeframe of two decades. This relatively short period meant that there were still a large number of practitioners who were either still in their positions or working elsewhere in the public sector, and who were contactable. The research design needed to use historical methods and to take into account the issue of memory recall. I did not consider that enumeration of women's initiatives was as important since their location, size and level of resourcing had already been recorded by others (e.g. WLAN 1995).

The second research objective pursued the *meanings* embedded in the experience of political practice. This depended first on exploring practitioners' memories and perceptions of their own practice, without imposing presuppositions upon them and second on interpreting these freely recalled reflections. The search for meaning was exploratory, a qualitative investigation was necessary to facilitate, as far as possible, the expression of the practitioners' life-world view. Thus the nature of women's practice acted as a significant determinant of the research design in this case. Practitioners held roles in their organisations which aimed to change work relations, and this had brought them into conflictual situations. The sensitive nature of their work gave rise to problems of access that have to be addressed by the type of qualitative methods selected and the mechanisms to ensure that the information collected is reliable.

Underpinning a qualitative approach, research objectives 3 and 4 call for the use of an interpretative framework, since their aim was to explain the relationship between

practitioners' perceptions of state power and their subsequent adoption of certain forms of equal opportunities practice. Other theoretical frameworks suggested by academics working in the area of organisational change have been used to provide analytical starting points. Attempting interpretation requires a form of hypothesis testing during the process of data collection. Owing to the non-standardised research context however, more than one research method was needed to triangulate the findings so as to ensure that the themes explored in the data collection process were relevant and adequate.

## **Research Design**

### ***Why use case studies?***

Yin (1989) describes the conditions for choosing between research strategies as follows, choice is dependent on:

- the nature of the research question
- the extent of control the researcher has over the circumstances of the research
- the relative degree of focus on contemporary or historical events.

As the previous section indicated, the research objectives were both descriptive and explanatory, aiming to answer how and why feminist practice had changed. The frequency or incidence of certain behaviours was not as important as changes in their nature over time. This form of questioning lends itself to a case study approach. One of the essential characteristics of case studies is that they aim to preserve the 'wholeness' of the cases being studied (Rose 1991:191) because they recognise that the relationships between actors, the system and their context are often inextricably inter-linked. Accurate description and theoretical findings are possible because of the breadth and depth of the information collected. The case study approach provided mechanisms for ensuring that valid and reliable data could be collected to answer several different forms of questions simultaneously. The table below has been adapted from Yin's description of design testing.



<u>Tests</u>	<u>Objective</u>	<u>Action</u>	<u>Which phase?</u>
<b>External Validity</b>	Establish the domain to which findings can be applied	Multiple cases producing replication	Research design
<b>Construct Validity</b>	Appropriate operational measures / methods	Multiple sources Link evidence Informants check	Data collection
<b>Internal Validity</b>	Establish causal paths, distinguishable from spurious relationships	Pattern matching Explanation building	Data analysis
<b>Reliability</b>	Operations of the study can be repeated with the same results	Investigator reflection Case study protocol	Data collection

**Figure 1: Four Design Tests Adapted from Yin (1989:40-41)**

Construct and external validity refer to the ability of the case study design to provide an accurate description of a phenomenon that can be placed into a wider context of events. Accuracy relies on the repetition of descriptive evidence. There may be mutually supportive evidence from many different sources within each case study. Evidence may also be shown to be valid, and apply to a larger context, because it is exhibited by several different case studies. Internal validity works in much the same way but establishes also the accuracy of theoretical inferences. Again it may be possible to put forward theoretical explanations for certain behaviours in the circumstances of one case or, if multiple cases have been compared, for those explanations to extend to the common domain in which those cases operate.

The two further conditions which Yin considers to be important in the choice of research design relate to the nature of the phenomenon being studied. The key features of women's initiatives in the local government sector were discussed in Chapter 2. Three features were particularly relevant to my decision to select a case study design. First, women's initiatives cannot be studied outside of their organisational context. Their activity is intimately dependent on their location in the local government sector, for example their relationships with the local Labour party and the local women's movement. For this reason the research inquiry needs to focus

on the 'bounded system' of which the initiative is part (Allen & Skinner 1991). I agree with Rose (1991) that in this case:

The relationship between the system and its context may be as important as the relationships and interactions within the system.

Case studies are a suitable research strategy for organisational settings (Yin 1989). By sanctioning the use of a variety of research methods within a pre-determined analytical framework it is possible to study very complex relationships in situ. A case study research design provides a triangulation mechanism to deal with the contradictions and anomalies of the data collected.

The second feature of women's initiatives that influenced the choice of research design relates to the range of data sources available in a local authority setting. This variety lends itself to an approach that uses a number of different data collection methods. There is the opportunity to:

- interview participants to get at feelings, ideologies, values, personal relationships, and to tease out motivations for the actions taken;
- to observe committee meetings and community events to discover the unspoken positions, and to validate what has been said by practitioners;
- to read archived material such as minutes, mission statements, local newspapers and publicity, to identify significant factors in the local context, and to validate factual information.

Lastly, women's initiatives have a past and a present which are equally important given the brevity of their existence. The interrogation of contemporary phenomena in context is one of the strengths of a case study approach. Its range of methods means that in the situation where it is not possible to trace practitioners to interrogate their account of historical events in the 1980s, archiving methods can be adopted to plug the gap. In this way perceptions and beliefs can be included alongside evidence based on reported actions, formal commitments and instructions, which ultimately gives a richer picture and greater insight into the whole experience.



### ***Multiple case study design***

The research objectives and the nature of the subject both called for a multiple case study design, with the cases consisting of a number of different local authority organisations.

The research objectives aimed to establish findings that would offer insights into women's operations in the local state. Taking only one case would not have provided the degree of detail needed to deepen current understanding of the processes at work, because the unit of analysis (women's initiatives) were significantly dissimilar. They have been established from very different support bases and consequently their form, remit, and resourcing has been inconsistent. The co-ordinator at WLAN considered that the economic and political pressure of the 1990s had exacerbated the differences between women's initiatives, as women's officers negotiated different survival compromises. In her view, 'the only thing women's initiatives have all got in common is their uniqueness' (Taylor 1996). Thus the other available argument in support of a single case study design also fell down - choosing one authority which represented an exception to the rule was not a viable way of shedding light on the deficiencies of our current understanding.

I selected a multiple case study design to provide a range of authority experience. Using the mapping exercise it was possible to ensure that there was both replication and diversity in the empirical practice of the authorities selected, despite their different histories. Replication assists the development of a rich theoretical framework that can later become a model for considering new cases (Yin 1989:54). Diversity of data permits the detailed exploration of a phenomenon which in turn can produce fresh insights into poorly structured explanations and rich and compelling ideas for further research (Schofield 1969). This method of generating theory from multiple examples of grounded observation was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Multiple cases study designs do have drawbacks that need to be balanced against the advantages that comparison and breadth gives to the research findings. There are three main difficulties, all of which are difficulties of case studies approaches in general. A multiple case study approach demands more resources and time than a single study. It is more difficult to manage the quantity of data generated. The multiple design also leaves

the researcher unable to focus exclusively on the unusual, critical or revelatory case (this being the rationale for choosing a single case study design) (Yin 1989:53).

Manageability is a common complaint about case study designs (Hakim 1989). While they provide material for lengthy descriptions which are rich in detail, they may be lacking in clarity, and produce few conclusions because the researcher has been swamped by the volume of information. I tried throughout the design and fieldwork stages to be alert to this problem, carefully controlling the time I spent on each case study and the data sources I examined. It was a difficult to achieve a balance between richness and detail and manageability, because uncovering the feelings and tracing the actions of participants meant sifting through a very large amount of detailed information, which was vital to ensure that I interpreted the data in its own context. To collect every piece of information available is a misunderstanding of the term holistic. The researcher's task is to record only that information which either contributes a new perspective in the investigation or reinforces an existing one.

Case study work also places great emphasis on the skills of the researcher. During the pre-fieldwork phase it was necessary to develop a clear understanding of the information required, and then to remain focused on the research objectives throughout. Researcher competence is essential for reliability, and hence for credibility of the research findings (see figure 1). Sloppy work would affect the veracity of the evidence collected, making the study unreliable since its findings could not be replicated by other researchers following an identical method. This issue is taken up again in more detail in the section on fieldwork role.

### **Selection of the case studies**

My case study selection was theoretically rather than quantitatively directed (Rose 1991). The researcher chooses cases which 'the analyst believes exhibit the operation of some identified theoretical principle' (Mitchell 1983) to ensure the representative nature of the sample and hence the wider application of the data collected from it. My research objectives dictated that I needed to identify authorities with practice that had changed over time; specifically those which had been established prior to the emergence of a generic approach to equal opportunities and which had continued long enough after its emergence to have experienced its impact and debates.



The unit of analysis was the work of the women's unit, because this was what effected bureaucratic change, with women's officers designing and implementing the women's policy agenda. My discussions with women at the network meetings of WLAN also suggested that women's officers attended to women's policy-making exclusively unlike their political counterparts who had multiple responsibilities. Women councillors were committed to furthering policy making for women, but mindful of the need to represent all their constituents they often preferred to sit on service committees, such as housing or social services, rather than on the women's committee. As members of the service committees they would introduce a feminist perspective into discussions.

I decided that three was the optimum number of case studies required in order to observe any replication of practice, while meeting the time and resource limitations of my study. Finding three authorities did not initially seem an easy task. As the description of women's initiatives in Chapter 2 described, there had only been 43 recorded authorities which had dedicated resources to the furtherance of women's rights (Halford 1988), and the majority of these initiatives were no longer in existence. Indeed, many had been closed for more than five years. These latter initiatives were ruled out as possible case studies, first because of the difficulty of locating the former participants and second because of the timeframe which meant that they had not been affected by the impact of the more recent equality arguments. The first task of the selection procedure therefore was to identify those authorities which had initiatives currently operating or which had been amended since the discourse around mainstreaming began. As I indicated above I initially expected that WLAN would act as gatekeeper for making contacts.

I began working with the WLAN co-ordinator to identify possible case study partners. However none of these arrangements established my final case study relationships. The annual WLAN directory was not a definitive document, as it was based on responses to an optional survey. It was possible that some authorities with initiatives were not listed, or that women in non member authorities would be represented as individuals whose organisational affiliation was not readily available. I therefore relied on the personal contacts of the network co-ordinator to guide my selection. She suggested six councils that had a long association with WLAN and in her view had 'a dynamic outlook' (Taylor 1996). I wrote to three authorities which fitted my women's unit profile, naming the



WLAN connection. The response was perhaps predicable. Two replied that to interview all staff members represented a significant amount of the unit's productive time that, unfortunately, they were unable in the short term to give up. The head of the women's unit in the third authority in Scotland agreed to meet me but admitted to 'being up to her eyeballs' in work<sup>1</sup>. The subsequent interview<sup>2</sup> with her and her staff highlighted that the differences between the English and Scottish context was greater than I had anticipated<sup>3</sup>. Could these differences be contained without detracting from the central focus of the thesis? I decided not. This added another criteria to my selection profile, authorities had to be English. This decision related to the earlier point about the need for the researcher to consciously manage data collection to fit the budget and time restriction and also to weigh up the amount of contextual information required to fully engage with a case.

Back at the drawing board, I had what can only be described as a lucky break. I was fortunate to meet the former women's officer of a Midlands District Council attending a student conference as a mature student. She advised me to contact the neighbouring council, using her name, as it had sustained a women's unit for longer than her own. This authority became Belford District Council, my first case study<sup>4</sup>. The unit had been replaced by organisation-wide responsibility for equality, implemented via its mission statement. The time elapsing between my fieldwork starting and the unit closing was only 18 months and consequently the majority of the unit staff were still working for the authority, albeit in different capacities. I was able to trace two key actors who had changed employment.

In the course of conducting fieldwork in Belford DC, I contacted one of the former senior officers who had taken another job in an authority near London. My request to interview her concerning Belford DC prompted her to invite me into the authority she headed up, to look at the mainstreaming approach that she was implementing there. I had found case study number two, Portheld Borough Council, another authority which had a history of dedicated equality provision, but unlike Belford DC was putting in place a much more

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<sup>1</sup> The local government reorganisation of Scotland conferred unitary status on this authority.

<sup>2</sup> List of case study data appears in Appendix 2.

<sup>3</sup> Apart from the local government reorganisation, the delayed introduction of budgetary cuts had allowed women's initiatives to continue to grow faster than their English counterparts.

<sup>4</sup> All authority names and those of the research participants have been changed to ensure the anonymity of participants' contributions.



rigorous framework to support the move to mainstreaming, with the co-operation of former equality staff.

My final case study, Calder City Council in the North East arose from personal contacts, who had experience of conducting research in the region. Calder CC was in the process of moving from an equalities unit to a centralised delivery mechanism based on figure-head staff. Despite the state of flux and uncertainty as staff applied for the new jobs on offer, I was permitted access. According to several participants, the location of the city at a distance from neighbouring towns of a similar size meant that people tended to 'stick around'. I was therefore able to interview staff who had worked in the original women's unit that had operated between 1986 to 1989.

All three cases studies fitted the theoretical criteria. They also showed (an unintended) diversity of geographical locations and institutional forms.

I experienced different research conditions in each authority. How much change was taking place determined how secure the participants felt about their work. It also influenced what they were prepared to tell me, and how optimistically they viewed their past and future practice. The differences between the case studies are summarised in the table below.

Criteria	Belford DC, Midlands	Portheld BC, nr London	Calder CC, NE
History of dedicated Structural provision for women's equality	1986 – 1993 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women's Unit</li> <li>- Women's &amp; Equality Unit</li> <li>- Mainstreamed</li> </ul>	1989 – 1997 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Corporate Women's Equality Advisor &amp; Core Values</li> <li>- Departmental responsibility</li> <li>- Mainstreamed</li> </ul>	1984 – 1997 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women's Unit</li> <li>- Equalities Unit</li> <li>- Equalities Unit with women's specialists</li> <li>- Corporate Equality Advisor on Women</li> </ul>
Participants Experience of Mainstreaming	Mainstreamed  High level initiative  Disillusionment  Success of past practice. Current apparent stagnation	Transition  High level initiative  Less critical due to failures of previous methods  Attitude of new chances	Transition  Low key  Disaffection  Facing redundancies
Ongoing commitment	Mission Statement	Framework for Action (participation of 120 managers)	1 Corporate Equality Advisor

**Figure 2: Comparison of conditions between the three cases**

## Methodological approach

### *Qualitative research*

Of fundamental importance in the selection of methods for this project was the exploratory nature of the research task<sup>5</sup>. As Harding (1987) states, qualitative methods use 'close up', detailed observation of the natural world by the researcher and attempt in so doing to avoid any prior commitment to a theory or set of assumptions. I considered that this approach was integral to the project in two ways. First, there were very few accounts of the activity of women in local government (including reports published by practitioners) written after 1990. Undirected empirical investigation appeared to offer a more reliable means of generating themes about current practice, than a positivistic prediction based on out of date information. Second, feminists have argued that qualitative research approaches are a more fruitful way of accessing women's experience (Mies 1983). Ramazanoglu (1989<sup>a</sup>) and many others have said that dominant academic paradigms are implicitly homocentric. Inadvertently they reprioritise women's experience in terms of men's. Hence research that does not attempt to examine and suspend the set of assumptions it may be bringing into the field is less likely to 'hear' the accounts women speak and to report those accounts faithfully (Stanley 1990<sup>b</sup>).

Choosing a qualitative research approach affected the way I implemented the research methods. The primary data for this thesis was collected from interviews with key actors in each case study and from participant observation of relevant authority meetings and at WLAN events. Participant observation provides a second 'line of sight' (McCall & Simmons 1969) to obtain a more substantive picture of practice *in situ*. Secondary sources enabled me to verify some of what I had observed. They included material in the form of formal reports and informal diaries produced by the key actors over the whole course of their work as equality officers, council minutes relating to their activities and available newspaper cuttings and publicity leaflets which described those activities to the general public. In both types of data collection I relied on a phenomenological understanding of how meaning is generated and therefore how the researcher can best

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<sup>5</sup> That said, qualitative and case study approaches are not axiomatic. It is possible to design case studies which do not involve close observation and which test known formula in order to refine existing theory.



access it. I used an interpretative framework (a case study template<sup>6</sup>) to guide my collection of data, in order to manage the quality of information being offered to me and to remain focused on the research objectives.

### ***Combining phenomenological understanding with an interpretative framework***

Potentially a phenomenological and an interpretative approach to data collection are in competition. A phenomenological approach makes two assumptions: First that there is an accessible meaning, contained in an event, which can be communicated by the interview participant through language. Second that the words chosen by the participant to communicate their experience are innocently and accurately chosen. These expectations give rise to a series of questions; can the participant adequately convey their subjective memory into words? and if so, can I, as the researcher, understand the meaning those words describe? Does the participant believe that what they are saying is the 'truth'? Do their words describe the whole meaning of the event as they remember it? A phenomenological approach therefore made it incumbent on me to do everything possible during an interview to facilitate the expression of the participant's meaningful experience or, during the reading of a text, to suspend disbelief and read uncritically.

In contrast, an interpretative approach doubts the straightforward veracity of the participants' recalled memory, or written expression. The participants' communication of their experience is not the 'true' reconstruction of that experience as it happened, because it necessarily expresses the influences of society acting on the participant. Therefore, the researcher is justified in choosing and introducing pre-conceived themes (theories) to structure the sense she makes of the participants' statements. In order not to jeopardise the participants' free expression I had to design non intrusive ways of introducing themes into interviews and to be prepared to accept their interrogation and dismissal by the participant. Thus texts require a double reading: The first time listening for the intention of the author; the second adding in my understanding of the context, audience and purpose of the document.

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<sup>6</sup> The design of the case study template (Appendix 1) is discussed below in the section entitled 'Reflexivity'.

Achieving a perfect balance between the two approaches was an impossible task. However, there is less likelihood that by 'submitting oneself in the company of the members' daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject' (Goffman cited by Ashworth 1987) I would misconstrue the meaning of their language. According to Ashworth the descriptive accuracy of research findings is improved if the researcher first attempts to immerse themselves in the 'life-world' of their participants and second throughout this interaction holds their own presuppositions up for scrutiny and contradiction (Ashworth 1987). Carrying out research methods based on these principles was extremely taxing. It raised issues about my role in the field and ethical considerations about the relationships I formed there.

## **Field work**

### *Access*

I want to highlight the different conditions of access I was granted in each of the cases since they affect the type of data I was able to collect and the way in which I was able to process it during the fieldwork period.

I instigated the contact with Belford DC and Caulder CC. In the case of Belford DC my first interview was with the Chief Officer of Personnel, in the absence of a named post holder for equality work. In Caudler CC I was able to write to one of the women's officers who a work colleague had recommended to me. These interviews acted as fact-finding exercises to establish the history of the initiative, who the key actors had been and their current whereabouts. I sought permission to use my participant's name in order to approach subsequent actors. I did not interview the Chief Executive in either case or seek to 'formalise' my presence in the authority. I discussed access and the use of data on an individual basis with each participant.

In both of these case studies I had a high degree of control. Most importantly, I was able to decide on the order of interviews. In both cases I preferred to start with the practitioners to obtain a very detailed picture of their activities and perceptions of change. I waited to interview senior officers. This enabled me to gain a sophisticated understanding of the authority's circumstances, in order to maximise my time with them. Hakim (1987) recommends this approach of prioritising key participants who are capable



of analytic reflection. I was able to space out the timetable of the research interviews to allow me an opportunity to re-read interviews and texts, so that new themes could be explored with subsequent participants. In Belford DC I arranged a visit to the local archive centre to review what material the authority produced.

My access to Portheld BC arose from an invitation from the Chief Executive to carry out a case study. Her sponsorship labelled my research with a certain outlook. She considered that the authority was 'explicitly in transition' to a mainstreaming approach. Portheld BC thus represented a particularly interesting and extremely up-to-date example of equality practice. Punch (1986) and others have warned researchers about the inexorable and corrosive effective of the agenda of an 'over mighty sponsor'. However, I put these concerns aside initially because of the Chief Executive Officer's insistence that she expected me to be critical. She wanted someone standing outside the process to give an independent perspective on the current state of play. Nevertheless, I remained a special guest, and therefore gave up the control which I had in the other cases. It is difficult to assess how sponsorship by the Chief Executive affected the relationship I established with the other participants in Portheld BC, who like me had been 'assembled' for the day (schedule explained below). Some participants were critical of the process underway and did not appear to be intimidated by my closeness to the key protagonist. However I did feel that I had been chosen to play a part in convincing certain actors, indirectly through my interest in the initiative, that it was a good thing. These negative feelings about the reasons for my invitation were mostly assuaged by the frankness of my conversation with the Chief Executive and her very apparent enthusiasm and sagacity about the issues of equality.

In Portheld BC, I did not decide who to interview or when to see them. The fieldwork timetable arranged for me was intensive. I interviewed from 9am until 5.30pm with an hour for lunch, before participating in an equality panel meeting with elected members in the evening. It was an advantage to be able to get immediate clarification from subsequent participants on issues that immediately grabbed my attention. However as the day went on I struggled to process the huge amount of material that was offered to me. Fielding describes this as field fatigue:

Erosion of memory is not related to time so strongly as it is to new input; that is the more stimuli to which you are subjected during a day the more detail is forced out (Fielding 1993:161).

The transcription process afterwards gave me the opportunity to relive the fieldwork day and extract insights that had not immediately occurred to me. However it was also frustrating that some points remained unclear as I had no further opportunity to raise them *in situ*.

#### BELFORD DC

Order of contact	Interviewed in reference to experience in post of:	Nature of contact	Location and date of contact
CO & TL	Assistant Director of Personnel Women's Officer (Women's Unit)	Interview 1h 30	CO's private office, 7/10/1996 TL invited by CO
BV	Chief Women's Officer	Interview 1h 30	Private office, 4/11/1996
WB	Women's Officer (Equal Opportunities Unit)	Interview 1h 30	Meeting room, 28/11/1996
JM	Economic Development Officer	Informal conversation 40 mins	Canteen, 28/11/1996
EV	Officer in charge of information centre	Informal conversation 30mins	Information centre, 28/11/1996
IA	Community Development Officer	Interview 1h 15	Open plan office, 13/12/1996
IB	Chair of Women's Committee	Interview 1h 30	Own home, 20/2/1997
OA	Chair of Women's Committee	Interview 1h 30	Private council room, 21/2/1997

#### PORTHELD BC

Order of contact	Interviewed in reference to experience in post of:	Nature of contact	Location and date of contact
DG	Chief Executive Officer	Interview 1h 40	Private office, 6/2/1997
OC	Personnel Officer responsible for equality training	Interview 1h 15	Open plan office, 6/2/1997
BS	Community Liaison Officer	Interview 1h 45	Meeting room, 6/2/1994
AQ	Corporate Director with Responsibility for Community and Equalities	Interview 1h	Private office, 6/2/1997
OG	Equality Advisor with lead role on Race	Interview 1h 15	Meeting room, 6/2/1997
Equality Policy Panel	Councillors and DG	Observation	Meeting room, 6/2/1997



## CAULDER CC

Order of contact	Interviewed in reference to Experience in post of:	Nature of contact	Location and date of contact
BD	Women's Officer	Interview 1h 30	Meeting room 23/1/1997
FQ	Head of the Women's Unit	Interview 1h 30	Open plan office, 2/6/1997
EV	Head of Equalities Unit	Interview 1h	Private office, 6/6/1997
KS	Link Officer	Interview 1h 30	Meeting room, 19/8/1997
LE	Women's Officer on secondment	Interview 1h 30	Private office, 20/8/1997
EL	Deputy Chair of Women's Committee	Interview 1h 30	Meeting room, 5/9/1997

**Figure 3: Lists of case study participants and interview schedule<sup>7</sup>**

### *Field role*

Punch (1986) has suggested that the researcher's role is fundamentally deceitful, since it requires her/him to simulate (like an actor on stage) a rapport with people they wouldn't usually mix with. He suggests this is a moral decision for every researcher to face individually. The British Sociological Association recommends that researchers should fully explain the purpose of their research and ask participants for their consent to take part (BSA 1993). However, there is considerable debate about the desirability of doing this. In sensitive areas of sociological experience, and probably in all research, a participant will inevitably conceal attitudes or behaviour they consider the researcher will interpret as undesirable (Steier 1991). This concealment may kill some projects 'stone dead' (Punch 1986). I faced this dilemma: feminist politics is a contentious issue. It was likely that participants would clam up if their ideological position was different to my own, I therefore decided to emphasise that the study was about 'equal opportunities for women', as a pseudonym for feminism which is less threatening. I also managed the impression I gave out to participants (Burgess 1984) by empathising with whichever feminist position the participant defined for themselves.

In the majority of cases my complicity with my participant was genuine. With a few participants I took a stance which was 'feminist neutral', and in one person's case critical of feminist values. However I felt the unease described by Finch (1980) in her discussion of the ethical implications of partial disclosure and feigned friendship. Finch has written extensively on the female researcher – female participant relationship which can very

<sup>7</sup> As I explain in the section below, my research purpose was out in the open, I used a standard introduction with each participant, and gained their informed consent on an individual basis.

quickly become intimate (Finch 1993). Intimacy can expose the participant to manipulation. Women may be discouraged from criticising the research agenda, they may also reveal information that afterwards they may want, but be unable, to withdraw. Punch (1986) and others have suggested that one way of lessening the risk of exploitation occurring is for the researcher to offer participants certain types of control during the interview. The researcher can also agree to keep their identity confidential.

I followed this advice by offering participants choice of the interview location (excepting in Portheld BC where this was decided for me) and control of the tape recorder. I did not consider it was necessary to hand over veto of the interview transcript. This was because of the type of participants of my study. They were all professional officers or councillors, who were articulate and used to asserting their authority. None of them were nervous about being recorded and they were clear and unembarrassed about specifying what was and was not on the record. Respecting participants' confidentiality had two elements. First, during the period of field work, I made a conscious effort not to 'tell tales' about what any other participant had said to me (Warren 1988), even if I was asked a direct question by a participant. In the transcription and writing up stages I gave the three authorities and each participant a pseudonym. This was extremely important to ensure that no reader could conclusively identify any of the case studies, since some participants made potentially slanderous comments about colleagues, or raised objections to corporate policy which could have put their job in jeopardy.

### *Reflexivity*

An interpretative approach introduces the need for vigilance. The research is aiming to produce data that is an accurate description of the participant's experience, not the over forceful interpretation of the researcher. During all the interviews, I tried to avoid leading the participant's thinking, or setting up a situational demand through the introduction of themes. As Hakim (1989) suggests the use of vignettes or open ended questions are important techniques designed to avoid this. I was able to compile a number of vignettes from my pilot interviews and from my informal conversations with WLAN members. Throughout each interview I tried constantly to submit my themes to questioning in order to remain alert and receptive to their contradiction (Ashworth 1987).



The interview process can be described as cyclical. First I constructed a case study template (see Appendix 1). This was divided into four themes that I had identified from the mapping exercise:

1. The juxtaposition of feminist practice in the authority to the context of formal politics - exemplified in the officer - councillor relationship
2. The culture of the organisation and its receptiveness to feminist ideas - exemplified in the practitioners' relationships with authority colleagues
3. The definition of feminist agency - the self identified role of practitioners
4. The equality agenda in the authority, its description, interpretation and purpose as stated by practitioners, which included the policies, resourcing and structural changes over time

Each of these themes had several smaller points of inquiry. I used the themes to prompt discussion with each participant. Inevitably their replies caused me to amend and reprioritise the issues I pursued under each theme. The themes themselves remained uncontested throughout my fieldwork, although, under theme 4, the structural context of the authority assumed a surprising significance. On the same day as each interview I noted any immediate questions that occurred to me in a field diary. This provided me with a rolling set of issues. I again fed these into the structure and subject of the proceeding interview.

I used a similar procedure of cyclical cross-referencing to check the factual data relayed by participants. By collecting the documents and newspaper articles which they referred to I attempted to check the accuracy and veracity of the participants' claims. I assembled other forms of supporting evidence guided by the themes of the case study template. These included the authority's published material such as Council minutes, leaflets (from receptions, libraries, archive centres) and research reports. Triangulation serves to reinforce the validity of the findings (Yin 1989). As Purvis (1992) suggests, I also used it as a way of identifying how well participants were able to recall historical details and therefore to gauge to what extent their present memory was affected by contemporary events happening around them.

### ***Participant selection***

As I have described, in all but one case study I was able to choose who I would interview. I used a technique called 'snowballing' to identify the potential pool of key actors. This technique relies on one participant identifying others who they consider played a significant part in delivering or shaping the form of equality practice. In Belford DC and Caulder CC each participant gave me on average three other peoples' names. I pursued each suggestion until I reached a point where suggestions were repeated and no new names came up. Hakim (1987) described this as the saturation point.

Snowballing can be criticised as 'convenience sampling' (Hakim 1987) without rigour or principle. It can also lead to a biased population of participants (Reinhartz 1992). In defence of this method I would argue that, although it is opportunistic, it is not motivated by my own convenience, but instead has been negotiated in relation to the nature of the phenomenon I am studying. Feminist practice in local government, described in the Chapter 2, is extremely varied. The equality practice in each of my case studies has assumed a certain shapes depending on the local political, economic and social circumstances of the authority and its agents. Consequently my three case studies do not share the same hierarchical structures or post titles. My potential participants had a different range of responsibilities and authority, as did their colleagues and superiors. It was therefore impossible to design a sampling frame based on shared criteria. A snowballing method is useful in this study because it is sensitive to the local environment. It prevented me from jumping to conclusions as to who the key players were, which allowed me the possibility of meeting people who had crucial yet overtly understated roles in determining equality practice. To mitigate a biased selection of participants I invested time to speak to women's officers in other authorities to discover the types and range of people they had interacted with and then compared this to my case study participants.

### **Data Management**

#### ***Data collection***

In Belford DC I experimented with annotation rather than taping interviews. According to Fielding (1993) written notes are a more reflective way of recording data. I wrote up by field notes in prose almost immediately after each interview to ensure that I recalled the maximum amount of detail. Although these transcripts are necessarily shorter than



those of the other two case studies they do show the same degree of detail. I noticed that in Portheld BC and Caulder CC I had been less observant of discrepancies and had not asked for clarification as often as when the tape was running. This may have been due to laziness induced by the guarantee of a replay. However I may have asked for more clarification in Belford DC because it was my first case study and I consequently had less understanding of local authority jargon and its legal context. The advantage of taping became apparent in Portheld BC. I had judged that I would be too tired from the intensity of the interview schedule to take detailed notes all day by hand and had reverted to a tape recorder. The taped interviews hold a greater amount of detail, they also allowed me to listen to the voice of the participant again which on many occasions helped me to clarify the meaning of what they were saying. This convinced me that the compromise between reflective or comprehensive recording was worth making.

I kept a fieldwork diary, where I recorded what Punch (1986) has called 'theoretical memos'. It proved to be a very useful mechanism to help me recognise and reflect on the presuppositions which were gaining importance during the periods of my case study fieldwork. I used these observations to improve my interviewing technique and direct my collection of documentary sources. They also assisted me in producing a better reading of analytic themes during the stage of data analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

Spiegelberg (1980) has described the basic stages of qualitative data analysis as noticing, collecting and thinking about interesting things. The stages are not linear, they each contain the entire process. For example, as the researcher starts ordering and collecting the things they have noticed, new observations and thoughts occur to them. Conclusions emerge from a repetitive process of reading the data that is reflexive, progressive and reiterative.

Meaning unit analysis typifies this style of analysis. I broke down the text of my interviews into passages each containing one discrete meaning – meaning units. To ensure that I fully understood the sense that was being communicated I re wrote the passage in my own words. I was then able to represent what was of interest in the passage and to assign it to a descriptive category. In some cases meaning units are relevant to more than one descriptive category.

These descriptive categories correspond to features on a topographical map (Agar 1996). They arise from the thematic case study framework used in the interviews (previously discussed). New categories are added when the data reveals a repeated idea that the existing themes do not reflect. The categories on the map do not themselves transparently reveal new patterns, rather they facilitate their discovery. I started with the ideas expressed in the meaning units of one category, or even in a number of individual meaning units and from this starting point attempted to trace associations to other units within the category and then between the categories, across the entirety of my data. It is necessary to saturate associations with appropriate meaning units (Silverman 1993). In this way, to continue Agar's metaphor of cartography, I was constructing ad hoc maps which drew together only the relevant features along the route to a final conclusion.

This method of analysis avoided intensive coding of my data early in the analytic process since collecting the meaning units into small categories can distort and destroy the endeavour to arrive at holistic conclusions. As Holsti (1969:278) observes:

A serious problem is sometimes created by the very fact of organising the material through coding or breaking it up into segments, in that this destroys the totality of the philosophy as expressed by the interviewee -which is closely related to the major goal of the study.

Like Holsti, I have attempted to protect my analysis from distortion by working at all times back and forth between parts and the whole transcripts of my interviews. This technique of disassembling and then reassembling data to provide interpretations of the issues outlined in the research objectives closely describes Glaser and Strauss's (1967) definition of the construction of 'grounded theory'.

## **Assessment of the Research Process**

### ***Limitations of the study***

This study attempts to describe the development of feminist practice in the local government sector in a holistic way, to address both the empirical and theoretical gaps in the existing literature. In the following case study chapters I describe the context in which practice has occurred and the changes which practitioners have made in terms of their daily activities and the ways in which they think about their role and their political objectives in the three case study authorities.



The empirical description cannot supply a model to explain the development of equal opportunities for women in local government *per se*. It may not even hold insights for the authorities who have participated in the women's committee experiment, though this is more likely. The contribution of my study is to deepen the understanding of the process of equality delivery and of practitioners' conceptualisation of barriers they have faced. The detailed description of feminist practice can suggest ways in which a future equality policy can be advanced, specifically the strategy of gender mainstreaming.

The study is not easily replicable in a case study form for two reasons. First, the phenomenon of women's units is rapidly disappearing. In 1995 the majority were no longer operational, but it was still possible to trace former participants because unit closures had only started in earnest as public budgets came under increasing pressure in 1991. With each year that passes the possibility of tracing participants to collect oral histories becomes more problematic as they move on to new careers, new sectors or retire. Assuming that they can be traced I would expect the content of their recalled memories to have changed since it is shaped by contemporary events. Second, WLAN is now closed. The falling number of women's units reduced the affiliation income paid to WLAN. A decision was taken in September 1997 to close the network while there was still enough money to pay the staff and wind up the association. The association's records are currently being stored by Manchester City Council and there is no formal access to them. More significantly the resource of information held in the heads of long standing members of the network is now not being passed on via the quarterly conferences. The one common link that held the phenomenon of women's units together, and which ensured that good practice ideas were exchanged has ended.

My own role as researcher in the study also imposes limitations on what the study has achieved. My own subjective judgements have affected every step of the process. Although I have tried to mitigate the impact of my own suppositions and my own presentation by using the research checks and tools available to me, inevitably my interpretation will at different points and to different extents be present in the findings. Punch (1986:15) comments that:

A full history of the research process is an essential element in reporting a project because of the light it can shed on the nature of the data.

The account of the research process provided aims to provide a frank account of the difficulties I encountered during the research process so that the reader can make their own judgement about the validity and reliability of the findings.

Finally this study is necessarily a snapshot of feminist practice which is changing fast in response to a dynamic equality agenda being driven by the European Union, business and the new Labour model of social justice. In 1998 the gender mainstreaming debate reached the popular press. Central government launched 'mainstreaming' in all government departments in May 1998 (Ruddock 1998). Mainstreaming is more widely known about in the local government and public sector arenas following the EOC study of local government initiatives completed in September 1997 and the UK Presidency event in June 1998<sup>8</sup>. In the last year it has gained greater credibility and proponents as a method of equality delivery. This was very different from when I started my study. The only public discussion of mainstreaming by the sector as a whole was initiated by Gurbux Singh the Chief Executive of the London Borough of Haringey. He mentioned mainstreaming as one of a number of future strategic approaches in his keynote address to a conference on equal opportunities and local government in May 1991 (LGIU 1991). In September 1995, a year before I started my fieldwork, the Beijing UN Conference for Women put mainstreaming on national governments' agendas. The subsequent launch of the European Commission's Fourth Action Programme for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 1996-2000, set up budget lines for mainstreaming work. However the publicity and the reality of funding came later. In 1996-1997 my participants had heard about the mainstreaming agenda but it had not gained the credibility, prestige or the acceptance it currently enjoys at senior management levels. The timing of the study therefore has significantly influenced both what my participants believed and what I observed and interpreted from their remarks.

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<sup>8</sup> During the UK Presidency, a meeting of policy makers, practitioners and academics was convened in London in June 1998 to discuss the issue of mainstreaming. Representatives from the European



## **Presentation of the case study data**

The case study data is presented thematically according to the principal themes (see case study template):

- political context of the authority,
- organisational structure and culture,
- institutional support for women's initiative,
- catalysts for change,
- policy and procedures,
- barriers,
- results and outcomes.

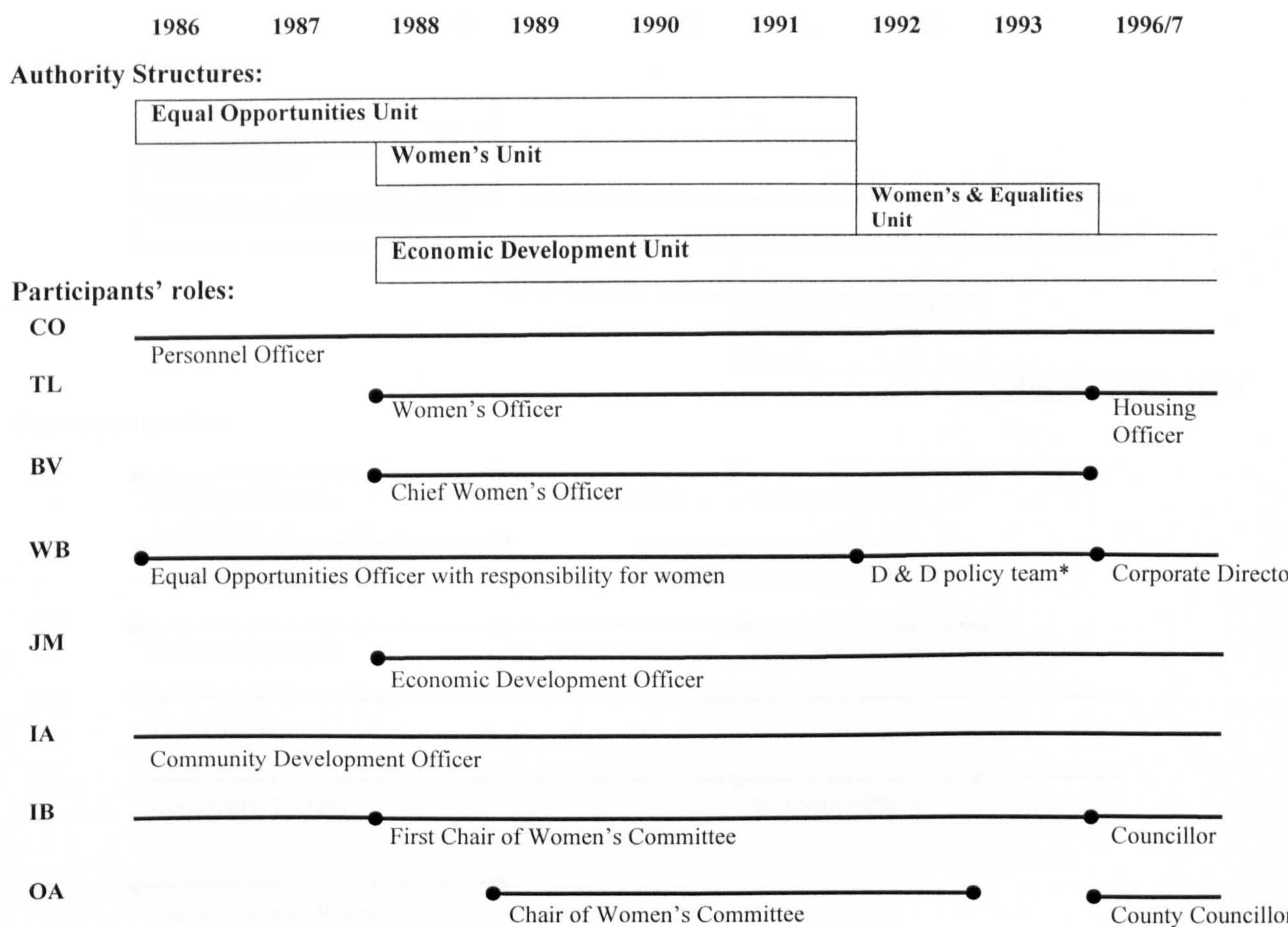
A common format is used for each of the three case study accounts. Each theme has been broken down into a number of sub-themes, which were identified in the detailed analysis of the case material. The case material contains three types of information: factual data describing the location and timing of events, the participants' understanding of their own and other peoples' motivations for acting in the way they did, and lastly participants' perception of the meaning and impact that those actions had on events and outcomes. Participants were consistent in their account of factual events. This information could also be verified by the case study documentation (listed in Appendix 2). However, only rarely did participants' views expressed in the interviews, reflect common, undifferentiated accounts about motives, meanings and impacts: this was to be expected given the diversity of participants' functional roles and political convictions. Where participants' views were contradictory. I have taken care to include all viewpoints in my discussion.

There is considerable variation between case studies, in the sub-themes which emerged. This can be attributed to the different political and economic situation of the authorities, and the life cycle of their women's initiatives. To some extent this variation is also a result of the particular combination of participants I was able to interview. The risk of bias resulting from these factors is discussed below.

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Commission, other member states and the UK government spoke of their actions to date and their plans for the future.



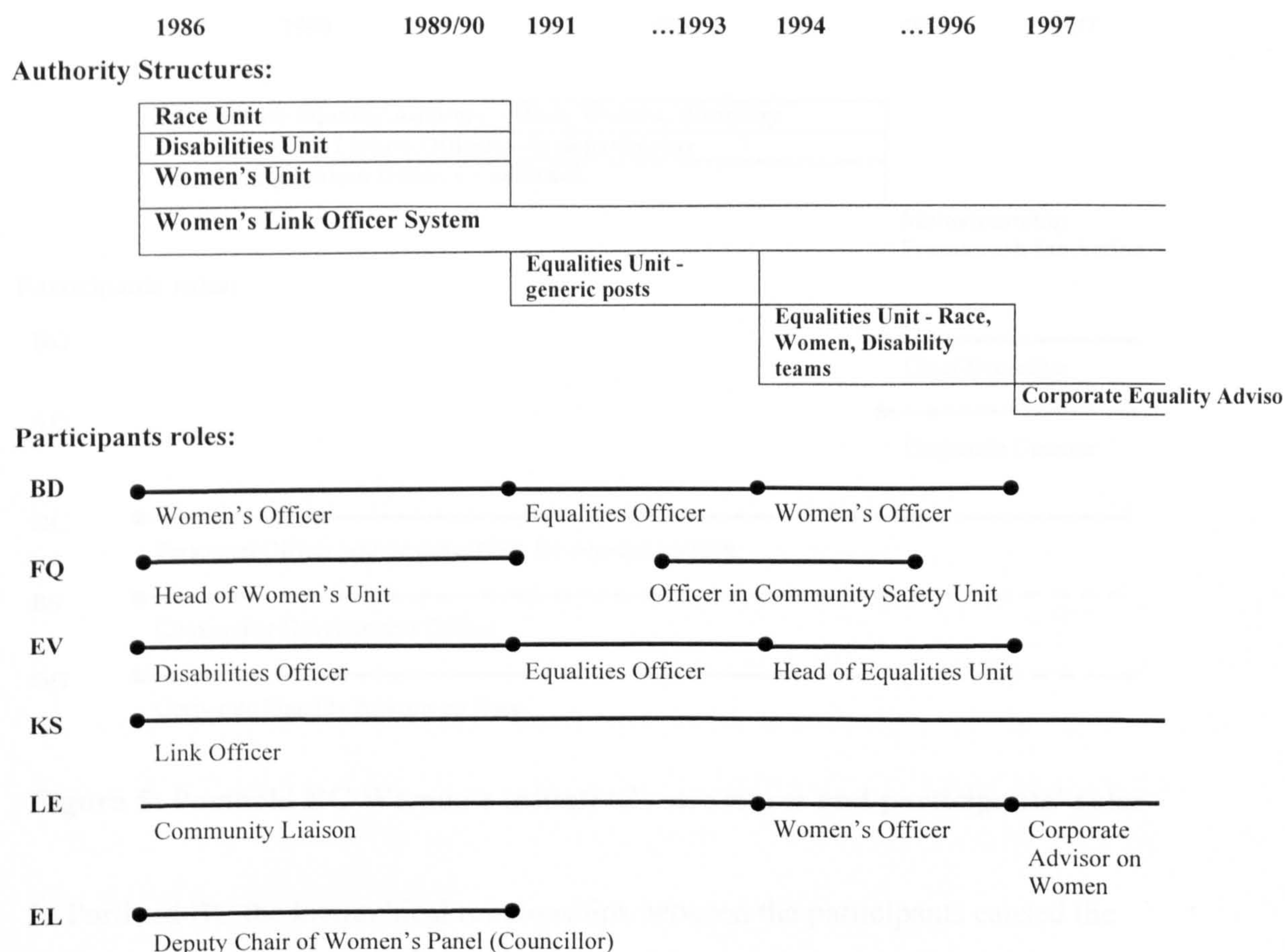


\* D & D – Decentralisation and Democratisation

**Figure 3: Belford DC Women's initiative's structures and participants' roles**

Participants in Belford DC showed the greatest degree of consensus on the motivations and meanings explaining the women's initiative's development. This may be due to a combination of three factors. First, there was a close friendship between the women connected to the women's initiative, who despite moving to new employment were still in regular contact with each other. Second, they had a similar understanding of the cultural barriers and motivations of senior officers due to their shared structural location within the authority, under the direction of the Assistant General Manager (Figure 3). Lastly, the small size of Belford DC meant that each participant had come into contact with the key actors and had heard a similar version of the political arguments.

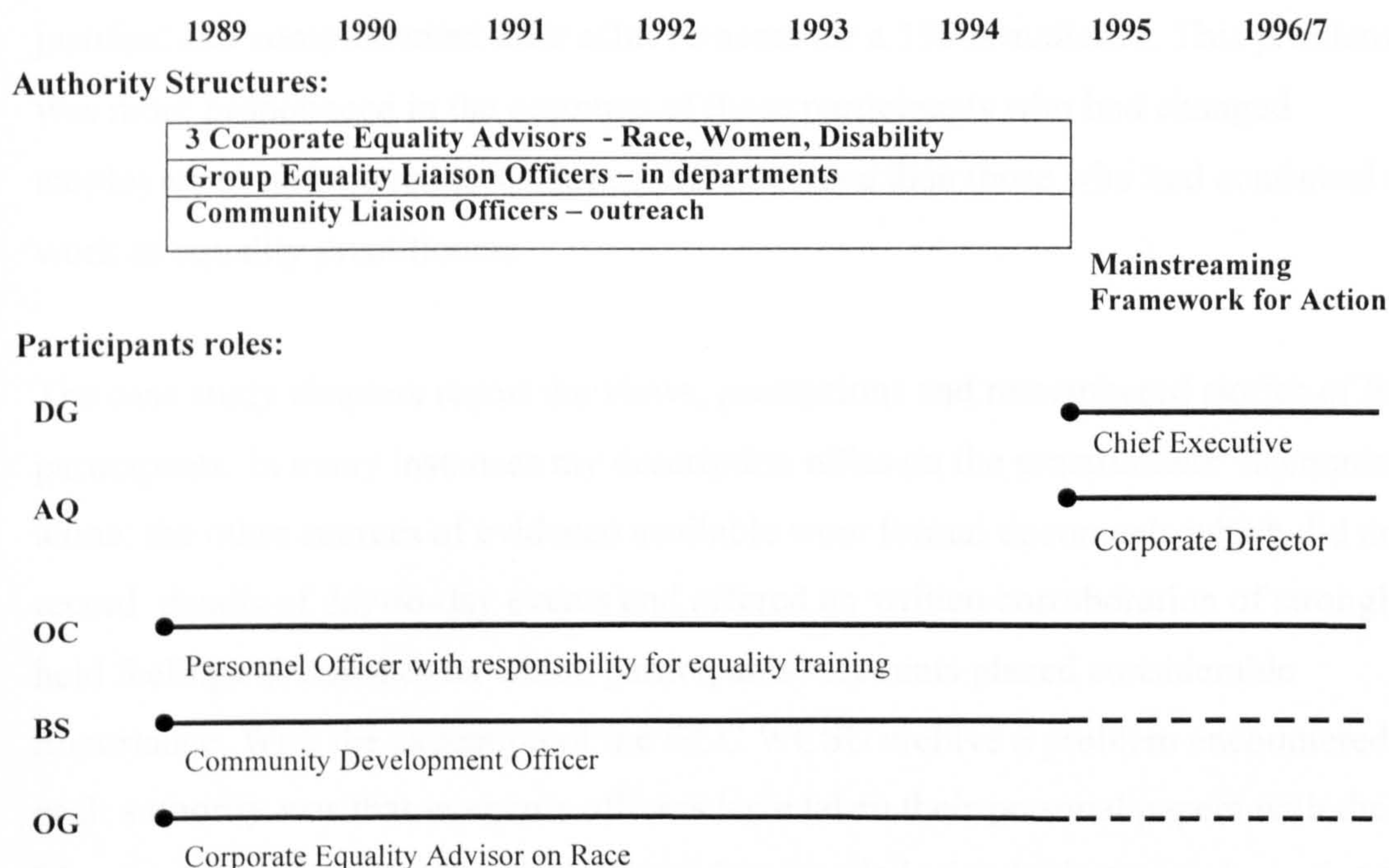




**Figure 4: Caulder CC Women's initiative's structures and participants' roles**

In Caulder DC participants were well known to each other, as all of them had been at the authority for many years. Many had similar political backgrounds in the women's movement. However, for the duration of the women's initiative the majority of participants had held many different positions apart from the one related to equality work. Several had had a period away from the authority working in another part of the public sector and returned at a later point (Figure 4). They had never worked together as a team and were unable to comment on the work of other participants. Hence some of the sub-themes in Chapter 6 rely on the perspective of only one or two participants. Put together, however, these individual stories of strategies and experiences (at different times and in different locations) have frequently revealed a surprising degree of similarity.





**Figure 5: Portheld BC Women's initiative's structures and participants' roles**

In Portheld BC the hierarchical relationships between the participants caused the greatest problems for my analysis of the data. There were two types of participants, the new leadership and the former staff who had worked on equality objectives under the old regime (Figure 5). For the former equality staff, the key issues were viewed from the perspective of having actively contributed to the events concerned. In contrast, the new leaderships' comments arose from their interpretation of what the situation had been like, in terms of their previous experience in other authorities. Their perspective was important however, since their analysis of the past practice in Portheld BC provides the rationale for the current changes. In most instances the leaderships' interpretation of past events appears to match the memories of the existing staff. Nevertheless the existing staffs' accounts suggest that the situation was more contradictory and fluid than the new appointees claim to believe.

An important issue in all three case studies is about the nature of participants' memories of past practice. The linear conceptualisation of equal opportunities, discussed in Chapter 3, is relevant here. The perception that second wave feminism, representing a set of ideas and practices, is over appears to have affected the accounts



which some participants gave. They offered me a 'tidied up' version of events which justified and complimented their achievements for a 1990s audience. This problem was more pronounced in the accounts of those participants who had changed employers or had moved to work in a different area than those who had continued to work as equality practitioners

The case study chapters report the views, perceptions and remembered stories of the participants. In many instances my description relies on the practitioners' accounts alone: the other sources of evidence available were formal documents which did not record details of day-to-day events and offered no written corroboration of strongly held feelings or hunches on which participants' accounts placed considerable importance. With the exception of the GLC WCSU archive a problem encountered in each authority was that women's officers have taken their personal papers with them. The emotional investment which officers have tended to make in their jobs meant that many of them have kept their daily agenda and personal notes for sentimental reasons or because they believed the authority would simply 'throw them in a skip' once the unit was closed (Becker 1996).

The quantity of formal documentary data sources available to me varied considerably between case studies. Belford DC has an established archive centre which holds all the authority's public publications and bound volumes of council committee minutes. Neither of the other authorities had this dedicated facility. Caulder CC, as I explain, has received particular media attention for its opposition to the spending restrictions imposed by central government in the mid 1980s. There is consequently independent academic commentary on the development of its political objectives. Portheld BC yielded the least documentation. I was given the key equality texts by the Chief Executive Officer which related to the new approach to equality delivery. I was unable to obtain any documentation that related to the development of equality delivery prior to her appointment. The case study documentation is listed in Appendix 2.

The case study chapters which follow are not intended be read as a factual account of what has happened: they aim to describe the attitudes and opinions of the key players,

and to make links between their attitudes, beliefs and views of the world, and the actions and events they have described.



## **Women's Equality Practice in Belford District Council**

This chapter aims to give a full description of past and present women's equality practice in Belford DC, based on the opinions and remembered anecdotes of the key actors. As Chapter 4 acknowledged, the research participants' accounts are contradictory and cannot always be substantiated with other forms of evidence. I have indicted when this is the case. The aim of the chapter is not to give a factual account of what has happened, but instead to describe how participants viewed events and how their attitudes shaped what actions they took or thought others should take. Contradictions between participants are insightful since they reveal different underlying conceptualisations of equality practice. The chapter does not pursue each person's story individually but looks at the participants' accounts collectively in reference to the themes outlined in the case study template (Appendix 1). The structure of each of the case study chapters is the same. It describes the political context of the authority, its organisational culture, the institutional support given to the women's initiative, the catalysts for equality work, the policy and procedures pursued by women's officers, and the barriers they encountered. It concludes with the participants' views of the results and outcomes of the women's initiative. The chapter begins by giving a brief overview account of the development of the women's initiatives in Belford DC from 1983-1993.

### **Description of the Women's Initiative**

In Belford DC equal opportunities was initially addressed as a personnel issue. A working party of members, supported by the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) pushed for a post to be dedicated to developing internal equal opportunity policies. The post holder felt that she was not supported by her senior management:

The Chief Officer was a middle aged man from Yorkshire who had read all the books supposedly, but what he did totally implied that he hadn't understood or believed anything (WB 1:5).

The Women's Section of the Labour Party was becoming increasingly active as its members were drawn into the London debates around women's rights and the Greater London Council's agenda for participatory democracy. It supported the Equal Opportunities Officer and argued in the Labour group for more substantial provision, on the grounds that equal opportunities would never be adopted by a male dominated chamber and authority without structures to drive it.

Consensus grew among the Labour group that the Council was 'in a good position to do something constructive with equal opportunities' (WB 1:1). An Equal Opportunities Sub-Committee and Unit were set up in 1986. Addressing all forms of discrimination, this proved to be popular with members, and the committee meetings were always well attended (TL & CO 3:4). On the insistence of feminist Councillors, the Equal Opportunities Sub-Committee was established with a condition that part of its work would be to prepare for separate women's provision.

Halford argues that 1987 was the strongest moment of the Women's Committee movement, with the greatest number of committees being set up around the country (1988:42). This external agenda was indeed a persuasive lever when used in combination with the argument that Belford DC prized its 'ability to innovate' (Belford DC 1993). In 1988 the Women's Committee was set up as a full standing committee of the Council. Throughout its existence the Committee was consistently chaired by women members although, owing to their small number, men were allowed to sit as members<sup>1</sup>. The Committee's Women's Unit was composed only of women. As it reported to a full standing committee, the Unit had the status of a department in the authority. This meant that it was headed up by a Chief Officer. Unlike other departments, however, it had a tiny staff composed only of back-line policy makers. Thus despite its departmental status, it closely resembled the less powerful development teams (such as the Equal Opportunities Unit and the Economic

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<sup>1</sup> The Sex Discrimination Act (1975) did not provide a legal basis for excluding men from Women's Committees. This decision was reached by common agreement in Chamber discussion.



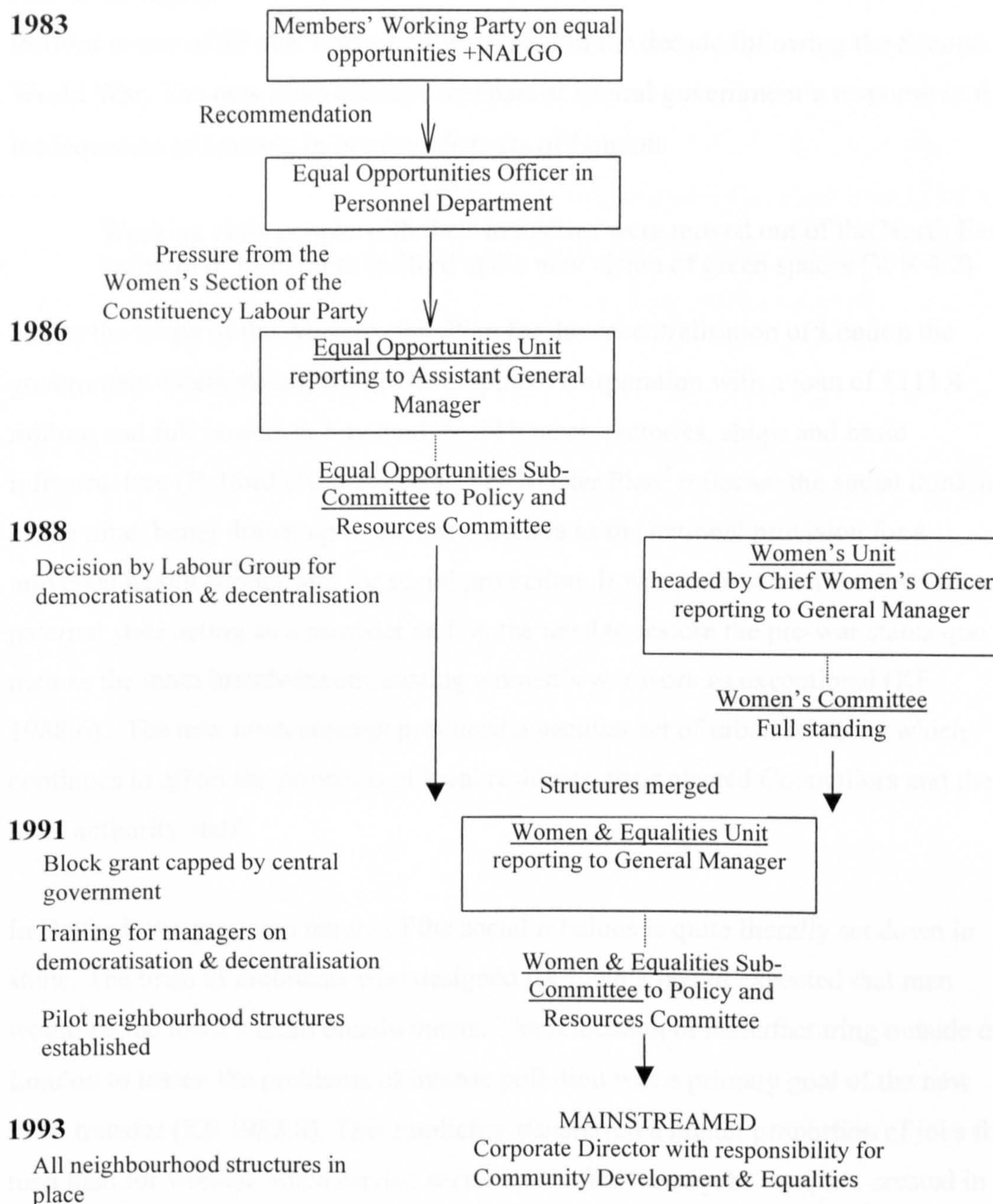
Development Unit) which were located in the authority's central back-line office of the General Manager.

While these developments were occurring, a small group of Labour members, which included several leading feminist Councillors, was arguing that the authority should change its style of service delivery. A programme of democratisation and decentralisation was proposed and won majority support in 1991. By this time the need to decentralise was driven by more than ideological commitment. The Council was facing serious financial shortfalls due to central government policy to cut public sector spending. Decentralisation therefore also entailed downsizing. Accordingly the Women's Committee and Equal Opportunities Committee were merged along with their support units, and became the Women's and Equalities Unit. There was considerable negative response to this move, particularly from the black and ethnic minority community, which did not feel that the new structure properly represented their interests.

In 1993 the Women's Unit was 'mainstreamed' to fit into each of the decentralised neighbourhood offices controlled by neighbourhood committee. The rationale for mainstreaming the unit was that it was an anomaly as a discrete service department. All women officers were encouraged to apply for other jobs in the authority so that their expertise would be dispersed throughout the new structure. Those who were unsuccessful were made redundant. Under a new corporate mission statement, equality became the responsibility of every member of staff. The title of 'Community Development and Equalities' was given to one of the three new neighbourhood service Corporate Directors. Equality Action Plans developed by the Equal Opportunities Unit were retained to provide a monitoring mechanism.

Participants' overall feeling was that mainstreaming represented a defeat for the previous equality initiative. There was general consensus that the transition had been badly managed and that in consequence a confused message had been sent out about the new equality arrangements. This confusion became worse because the Corporate Director with responsibility for Community Development and Equalities left soon after the process was complete, leaving the authority without a mainstreaming 'champion' (WB 8:5).





**Figure 1: Development of the delivery of Equal Opportunities for Women in Belford DC 1986-1993.**

The fieldwork for this study was undertaken three years after the unit was disbanded and by that time the majority of the research participants felt that equality work had become *ad hoc*. They found it very difficult to describe what was going on.



## Political background

### *New town legacy*

Belford is one of 32 new towns that were built in the decade following the Second World War. The new town concept was part of central government's response to the inadequacies of housing in bombed districts of London.

Working class people with their industries were moved out of the North East segment of London to Belford and a new vision of green spaces (WB 4:2).

Under the terms of the Abercrombie Plan for the decentralisation of London the government established Belford Development Corporation with a loan of £111.4 million and full powers to buy land, build houses, factories, shops and basic infrastructure (Belford DC undated<sup>6</sup>). The Master Plan<sup>2</sup> reflected the social thinking of the time, being drawn up in the same decade as the national provision for a universal health service and for social protection. It was premised on the need for a paternal state acting as a provider and on the need to restore the pre-war status quo of men as the main breadwinners, casting women's war work as exceptional (KF 1988:6). The new town concept produced a peculiar set of urban relations which continues to affect the priorities of local residents, their elected Councillors and the local authority staff.

In Belford, the gendered nature of the social relations is quite literally set down in stone. The team of architects who designed the town's layout expected that men would be the town's main breadwinners. The relocation of manufacturing outside of London to lessen the problems of intense pollution was a primary goal of the new town transfer (KF 1988:8). This implicitly transferred a higher proportion of jobs for men than for women, since service sector and office based jobs were not created in Belford until much later. The wholesale transfer of people and livelihoods meant that narrow views of appropriate employment roles also got transferred (KF 1988:8).

This division of labour was reinforced by the spatial location of industries outside the town, accessible primarily by car. Domestic life was confined to neighbourhood clusters made up of two to four housing estates, each with a central 'hatch' consisting

of a large shopping area, churches, library, medical and community centre, secondary school and a small service industry. Neighbourhoods were 'built for white non-working Mums in nuclear families' (WB 4:1). Women could work in local retail and health services until they had their children, at which point they would retire to the home with easy access to the local facilities on their doorsteps. There was no provision for childcare included in the Master Plan (KF 1988:7). Planners were concerned to achieve stable communities. An emphasis was placed on locally situated recreational and community services to overcome the anticipated problems arising from the break-up of kinship ties as families moved from densely populated districts of London.

Over forty years later, the town's neighbourhoods remain very tight knit, as people continue to identify with their local hatch. Community activity continues in the form of a thriving voluntary sector (MJ 1994:33) and Council provision of community services. The problems experienced by maturing urban environments brought about by changes in the manufacturing base and by married women's entry into the labour market, have been less evident in Belford than in other towns of a similar size, due to the planners' success in securing the dominance of the skilled manufacturing sector and men's jobs (KF 1988:8). Women remain a largely under trained, under-utilised work force. Furthermore the problems associated with demographic changes in household size and types have also been obscured by the neighbourhood context. The majority are still overwhelming white working class families. Black and ethnic minority families are very isolated. One participant remarked:

The ethnic minority population is so dispersed and hidden in pockets in Belford it is difficult to represent their interests or get them to represent themselves (JM 1:1).

The Council has been a regional innovator in the field of equal opportunities, committing considerable resources to work in the areas of disability, anti-poverty, women and race. However within this general stand for social equity, inherited from the post-war consensus, there are many different views about which constituents are most disadvantaged, and what women's real needs are. The working class bias of the town's population has affected political perceptions. 'There was the notion that anti-

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<sup>2</sup> The name given to the plan, drawn up by the Belford Development Corporation.



poverty strategies equalled equal opportunities' (TL 3:1) said one community development worker. The ethnocentricity of the working class population contributed to the invisibility of ethnic minority constituents, and as already mentioned, this made the race issue 'contentious' (TL 3:2).

Women's equality was not universally supported by a Council and authority dominated by men. Furthermore, its supporters were divided in their opinions of what the Council should provide. There was a desire among some politicians to build on the benefits of social stability and identity provided by the neighbourhood structures. Swayed by parochial concerns, they gave particular emphasis to providing local services to women constituents. As one equality officer explained 'the [Women's Section of the Labour Party] wanted a women's centre ... community issues were what the members really wanted' (BV 3:1). Other councillors took another view. They challenged the reinforcement of women's traditional roles and women's lack of access to well paid employment and hence independence. They argued that fundamental change to women's lives could not be achieved through the provision of support services alone and focused on economic development work on a town wide basis:

The increasing polarity between male and female employment in Belford ... constitutes a real waste of Belford's resources. ... Arguably traceable to the assumptions guiding the government's initial involvement in New Town development, it may require an equally sustained form of intervention to reverse (KF 1988:9).

The different priorities held by the various participants in the equality process produced tension between the key actors. It also meant that a combination of different projects and methods were undertaken by the Women's Unit in response to its own agenda and that of their Committee councillors.

### ***Bureaucratic tradition***

The use of an appointed corporation to design and build the town has impacted on the shape and mentality of the authority administration. For many years the two co-existed until responsibilities were finally transferred as building neared completion and the Corporation was wound up. This process was not fully completed until the

late 1970s<sup>3</sup>. The Corporation was able to operate in a top down way, by virtue of its absolute powers conferred by central government. For example, it steam-rolled the Master Plan over the heads of existing middle class villagers, who protested at the 'invasion' of London working class (MJ 1994:34). Its management of the housing stock gave it considerable influence over the form of people's everyday lives, and likewise its management of infrastructure and facilities strengthened the tendency for an interventionist, paternal style of governance that aimed to secure holistic provision of services and jobs for all residents. Many of the professionals working for the Corporation were committed socialists and believed in high quality service provision through top-down public sector management (MJ 1994:34). The new authority inherited both these traits, and one participant described the authority as 'very old guard style, run along territorial departmental lines' (BV 5:8). Both the internal relationships between authority staff and also the function of officers in the delivery of services to constituents were affected.

Although some parts of the authority were reactionary and backward looking, the new town thinking threw up contradictory currents. The new towns were sold to incoming families as 'constantly and eagerly looking in to the future' (Belford DC 1993) to achieve a better living environment and quality of life.

Belford has been one of the great success stories in recent times. It is much envied and copied throughout the world. By its very nature as a "new" town it is a dynamic modern community (ibid.).

In Belford DC the belief in success through innovation was pursued by a section of the Labour membership in terms of public service provision, for example Belford created the first health centres in the country in preference to individual family practitioners.

The process of democratisation and decentralisation which the authority undertook in the 1990s was the outcome of a struggle between those in the party who favoured the

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<sup>3</sup> The original Parish Councils of the four rural villages incorporated into the new town first provided the local government administration. In 1955, with a population of 24,000, Belford Urban District Council was created with 18 elected councillors. Belford District Council superseded this chamber following the re-organisation occasioned by the 1974 Local Government Act. It currently has 42 elected councillors and 16 wards and is responsible for housing, refuse, parks, community health and



status quo and those who wanted to reconfigure the relationship between local constituents and government. This tension was also apparent among authority staff, many of whom were card holding Labour Party members (BV 3:1). The Labour party has held majority control of the chamber since the creation of the authority. It had been dominated by white men, with a small Women's Section which primarily made the tea and did some fund raising (IB 2:1). In the early 1980s, Belford's politicians were drawn into the oppositional stance of the Greater London Council (GLC) due to their personal contacts (BV 2:1). The GLC sought to enlarge the democratic legitimacy of local government by engaging with grass roots political agendas, in defiance of the newly elected government. The Assistant General Manager (with a London background) made a deliberate series of appointments of staff who shared his ideological commitment to community led governance (JM 3:1). The Women's Section of the Labour Party was also politicised, moving from a group who had previously made the tea and done some fund raising to a support mechanism for women wanting to stand for election. These members and officers could be described as the 'new urban left' (Halford 1988), a reforming element in the party, who capitalised on the new town ethos of innovation to drive changes through, to make the administration more responsive to the community.

In summary, the social assumptions of the Master Plan and the remit of the Corporation and the political and administrative structures that replaced it have had a profound impact on the governmental relationship between citizen and authority. The tension between local versus strategic objectives, centre and front line staff, reformers and traditionalists, all symbolise the power struggles which individuals have been engaged in. The equality agenda to which we now turn was framed by these struggles. The Women's Unit was staffed and supported by proponents of change. They inevitably brought it into conflict with the more traditional politicians and officers in the bureaucracy. It was a very visible target for their attack.

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leisure services. Education, social services, emergency services and libraries are provided at County level.

## Organisational structures and cultures

### *Territorialism*

Participants characterised the relationships between departmental colleagues as secretive and defensive.

‘There was the Greek Temple of Management in Belford, supported on separate columns. For example when I joined the authority if a Community Development Officer was seen talking to a Housing Officer they would be hung drawn and quartered and their head stuck up in the town hall car park,’ said one participant (IA 4:1).

The authority had no tradition of working on corporate issues, such as equality, in cross-departmental ways. The departmental ‘temples’ were most furiously protected by Chief Officers, who had been in post since the inauguration of the new authority. Participants described the way in which officers tried to put boundaries around their particular areas of power and expertise.

This *modus operandi* was sanctioned by a significant number of Labour members who regularly lunched with Chief Officers and allegedly colluded with them on committees to save them from the need to act on corporate instructions (WB 9:1).

It is much better if the responsibility for equal opportunities is taken up with the Chief Officers. But often you’d find that Chief Officers say yes to everything but did nothing (WB 7:1).

The autonomy of over-mighty departments, such as the Housing Department, from central control underpinned arguments for a process of decentralisation of services and a more democratic approach that gained credence in the 1990s (MJ 1994:34).

The Women’s Committee had a remit to deliberately intervene in the decisions of other committees and departments over issues such as internal employment policies and service delivery strategies.

‘There was a tremendous amount of tension ... about another committee making decisions about particular service areas... and a certain amount of resentment,’ recalled one participant (OA 3:1).



Resentment meant that certain departments did the minimum they had to, to comply with the Women Committee's recommendations and many departments simply ignored their instructions all together (IB 5:6).

If departmentalism set up boundaries between staff in different service areas, it also prevented communication between different roles within departments. Several participants differentiated between 'front line' and 'back line' staff. Front line staff were those exclusively in touch with the customer. Officers, who provided the policy framework for service delivery, were considered to be 'in the political mainstream' (IA 3:1) or at the back. The two roles were seen as distinct with instructions flowing from the back to the front. One participant, who had worked with customers in the voluntary sector in London prior to his appointment, described how this differentiation of roles prevented the views of customers being heard. Their concerns never penetrated further than the first point of contact;

I got a huge shock arriving here in 1989 to find a bunch of wallies, who had no idea of what they were doing. We'd sit round considering which projects to do and they'd say "I like this one" choosing what they'd rather work on, than what the community needed (IA 2:2).

This ethos reflects the Corporation's earlier conviction that public sector workers knew best how to create and manage an efficient modern environment in which people could secure a livelihood.

### *Traditionalism and old boys' networks*

One participant recalled how the Chief Officer of the Leisure Department had insisted on being addressed by all his staff as *Mr Williams*:

He was a nice old man but he was never going to change a thing. [The Chief Officers] were all steeped in professionalism, time serving ..[hoping] problems would solve themselves and things would go back to the stability they all liked (WB 4:1).

All participants referred to the existence of an old boys' network consisting of the Chief Officers and some politicians in the Labour group. This select group of white middle aged men strongly resisted changes to the status quo. Their authority appears to have been almost absolute. One participant remembers how the Chief Housing

Officer once refused to speak to the Leader of the Council because he had not made a prior appointment (WB 3:2).

The strength of the old boys' network was very evident when the possibility was raised of a woman joining their all-male group. Participants described a number of instances where women were denied promotion to Chief Officer grade. The experience of the Deputy Head of the Planning Department was one such example. This woman, who was the natural successor to the Chief Officer, was not accorded his title when he retired. She became Head of Planning; 'she was promoted in an honorary sense without his status,' commented one participant (WB 3:3). Against this backdrop, it is possible to understand why the suggestion of a Women's Committee was so contentious. The Women's Committee as a full standing committee therefore necessitated the appointment of a Chief Officer in the authority. A petition was raised protesting against such a high level appointment (TL 2:5). It was alleged that the Leader of the Council had attempted to mitigate the damage (of what was an inevitable development) by curtailing the chamber discussion. In this way he saved the public image of many colleagues, who would otherwise have spoken out against a woman's appointment. Participants agreed that the new Chief Women's Officer was in an extremely difficult position (TL 7:2). From the first round of the selection process, the chosen candidates (two women on job-share) pulled out. They turned it down on the grounds of 'the male, the sort of sexist comments and orientation of some of the principal positions' (IB 3:4)

The resistance of top management to change extended further than the equality agenda. Participants did not consider that Chief Officers were prepared to face up to the economic exigencies which the Council was put under in the late 1980s, due to central government's new funding criteria.

They were time serving, even with capping, they just saw it as a money problem which would solve itself and things would go back to the stability which they liked (WB 4:3).

It was their reticence and refusal to address economic difficulties, rather than the equality issue, that eventually provided grounds for their removal.



## Catalysts

### *Key political actors*

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2, indicates that the politicisation of local women in constituency Labour Parties was an important catalyst for the development of women's initiatives (Halford 1988, Edwards 1995<sup>a</sup>, Button 1984, Parkin 1992). In Belford a small number of women members were a significant driving force.

They had put up a real fight for a Women's Committee and some of the women stood as chair (TL 4:1).

These women were the pioneers. Some were knowing feminist campaigners, who planned a series of astute moves to achieve greater influence within the party as a way of politicising other women (IB 2:2). Other women initially became involved in the section for more innocuous reasons. One participant described how she became interested as a result of her activities with a local women's refuge, and how many women like her had been drawn into the arguments for greater representation of women and then to their surprise found themselves in local politics. A key objective that emerged was to provide a supported route for women into local government using the mechanism of a Women's Committee.

You need to give women that extra push. I was afraid myself to speak ... you think you're not going to be good enough for this work, it seems that men don't have that problem, they seem to think they're going to be great whatever ... I think I was two years on the Council before I opened my mouth, I can't stop talking now (OA 2:1).

These women were methodical in their approach. In the period of debate about the Equal Opportunities Committee they 'grounded the idea that there would be a Women's Unit and committee' to follow (WB 1:2). The recognition that an equal opportunities commitment was not enough was based on their perception of the Council as male dominated

They knew equal opportunities was never going to be adopted and done when all the departments were headed by men with no women heads and with no visible measure and method of progressing (WB 1:3).

Their own personal experience as women members in the Council strengthened their convictions. For example, one participant recalled how she never got used to the dominance of men in the local government sector:

After a few years I was Chair of Housing and I went to a housing conference and I walked into this hall and this mass of suited men hit you like a, it really did horrify me (OA 6:1).

In the two years between the Equal Opportunities Sub-committee and Women's Committee being set up these women kept up the pressure. They used the experience of other London Councils as a lever. They also appealed to socialist notions of social justice.

They didn't want to mix equal opportunities and women's initiatives. Women were a majority of the population not a sub group and therefore deserved their own unit (BV 2:3).

Without these women it appears unlikely that Belford Council would have committed resources and staff to address either women's issues or equal opportunities per se. Their sustained fight established the Women's Committee. They attended it regularly (BV 8:1) and used it to its maximum potential. At its best, the Women's Section, through the Committee, achieved several women Deputy Leaders, one third women members and a greater proportion of women as Chairs of Committees (OA 1:1). They supported the women in their administrative unit. Some participants were instrumental in the decentralisation and democratisation process that spread the methods of community consultation, developed with women constituents across all Council practice.

### *Key allies*

In the process of setting up the women's initiative, participants mentioned that there were several male allies who were gatekeepers. The most important of these was the Assistant General Manager, who in 1991 became General Manager. Participants did not consider that he was a feminist, but he did have a personal vision of public service that found parallels in the radical equality agenda. According to participants, who had worked closely with him, he wanted:

A flatter more responsive management ..a streamlined efficient authority providing quality services and therefore controlling a long-term Labour mandate (BV 10:1).

In delivering this agenda he faced greatest resistance from the Chief Officer's group. It is probably no coincidence that he selected one of the equality staff to set up hard



hitting training for the Chief Officers about the decentralisation process, she remarked:

I think you could say we plotted together because he recognised that to change anything you had to shift these Chief Officers, which was difficult for him as the new General Manager working among them and viewed as the young whippersnapper (WB 4:2).

Many of the Women's Unit staff were appointed by him, coming to Belford from parts of London with the same ideological commitment. The Chief Women's Officer described him as 'extremely supportive' in exercising his responsibility for the Resources and Policy Committee that allocated the authority's budget (BV 2:5). He also set up the Economic Development Unit and encouraged the two units to work together.

### *Women's networks*

The Women's Unit joint funded several of its biggest projects with the Economic Development Unit. These addressed issues of women's access to employment on a town-wide basis. The Chief Women's Officer explained how this relationship developed:

There was a very simple reason why the two units worked so closely together, it was because they were both all-women units. There was a shared understanding, it was easy to relate. We shared the same commitment (BV 1:3).

Participants identified several reasons why it was an advantage to be an all-women team. First was the shared feminist commitment that the Chief Women's Officer referred to above. This commitment to advance a feminist position was one of the points of tension with authority colleagues. The Unit therefore provided an invaluable refuge: 'we were able to support each other through some really horrible times' (WB 6:2), commented one officer. As well as being a place to which Women's Officers could withdraw, to debrief together, the unit also provided a strategic vantage point from which they could analyse the shortcomings of the authority's operations.

You needed a specialist unit, supporting each other in that hostile environment and focussed in heads from the start that you're looking for a chink in the armour of the bureaucracy (WB 7:2).

The shared values and experiences of officers meant that their individual relationship went beyond that of office colleagues in Belford. They were close friends. This intimacy was very important (TL 2:2). It enabled staff to continue to struggle on, as the job of equalities officer demanded enormous personal resources for very little thanks or concrete results. As one participant commented, 'I wouldn't be an equalities officer [again] for anything. It's extremely stressful' (TL 6:1).

### *Expertise and know how*

One participant described the women's staff as 'a pool of talent' (BV 7:1). The political know how possessed by these women contributed to the achievement of their objectives. They had developed a variety of personal styles, which they used according to the circumstances they found themselves in. Women's Officers thought that there was an expectation among the authority staff that they would be unconventional with alternative viewpoints. Some participants exploited this opportunity:

I was a Women's Development Officer. It was my job to say the unthinkable, and put myself in uncomfortable positions. Luckily as a person people don't find me hostile (WB 6:3).

In contrast to the Chief Women's Officer, who felt the status of her position keenly, some Women's Officers deliberately derided hierarchical authority. One participant described how she paid no attention to whether people were above or below her when she was trying to get a policy implemented. She implied that bending the rules to get the desired result was an important strategy for change.

The approach which officers assumed with other departments in the authority was similar to that underpinning community development. A development role was one with a limited life, its objective being to transfer responsibility for equality work to other colleagues:

The object is to work yourself out of a job, or so that job is in another form, otherwise the work gets marginalised (WB 6:4).

[Being a specialist] becomes an excuse for no one else to do it. They say - oh it's a women's issue leave it to so and so (TL 6:2).



The 'trap' which participants recognised was that in the short term Women's Officers do the work better and faster than other colleagues and so there is little incentive to hand it on. A similar illusion of success was created by the research work done within the unit itself. Participants had come to realise that proving the case for women's disadvantage is not an achievement until action is undertaken and monitored by departments themselves.

Equal opportunities has to be a bedrock to policy making not an optional subscription. We did start to establish this through an annual service plan approach where each department has to report to its committee on what it has done and what it plans to do in the future (TL 4:2).

Overall, participants had recognised that change could not be achieved simply by instructions from above, but relied on re-configuring the way officers thought and worked. They had no faith that hierarchical obedience was enough to compel people to act. One participant consciously avoided working with colleagues who she knew were not prepared to have their views challenged. She would 'seek out the 20 who were' (WB 6:5). As she remarked, this realisation is depressing since it implies that progress will inevitably be slow and laboured. The need for dogged persistence was a vital quality which all these participants possessed. This further emphasised their need for a Women's Unit as a place where they could relax and motivate each other to continue the struggle.

### **Institutional Support**

Provision for the women's initiative in Belford DC was, by the standards of other District Councils, extremely generous and attests to the determination and political ability of feminist councillors. A full standing committee was created. This status gave the women's initiative the power of veto and direction over all the service committees and their departments. Participants judged this to be extremely important, because it meant that although the unit did not have a front line workforce, it had the ability to command and sanction any worker across the authority.

In resource terms the Women's Committee had an exceptionally high revenue budget (see Halford 1988). By the last year of its operation the committee was administering a revenue budget of almost half a million pounds. £120,000 paid staff salaries and the rest was used to fund research, and develop project ideas. Projects included; grants to

the women's voluntary sector, women's annual events, childcare for women using authority services and attending authority meetings. The size of the budget gave the women's initiative a considerable degree of autonomy. The initiative was able to develop services in areas in which they had particular expertise or interest. One of the Councillors commented that:

[The Chief Women's Officer] would bring forward a lot of her own ideas. A lot of the time the committee was having to prioritise because there was a limit in the numbers of projects [that could be undertaken] (OA 7:1).

Participants held two opinions about the level of resourcing. The Chief Women's Officer thought it was indispensable, faced with such departmental indifference to women's inequality (BV 4:1). Participants, who had observed the battle for the women's initiative unfolding, were less sure that it was necessarily an advantage. They considered that it was the primary cause of much of the opposition to the work of the unit. The opposition undermined the quality and impact of the work that the unit was able to fund. One participant said that by separating women's provision from the Equal Opportunities Unit it became a target.

There was [the Chief Officer] with a team of ten earning the same as the other Chief Officers who were managing hundreds of people. She was on the edge of a precipice just waiting to be pushed off (JM 2:2).

### *Chief Women's Officer*

The appointment of the first woman Chief Officer was a significant break with tradition. Councillors acknowledged that it was a very necessary symbol of women's representation in the authority, but that in practice the role was extremely difficult to fulfil. The tension lay not only in the appointment of a woman but also arose from her remit to take a critical perspective on the work of all the other Chief Officers. To make the role meaningful, she was compelled to exercise the authority that was due to her position, to adhere to existing procedures and conventions and to accept responsibility for her team according to conditions already laid down.

At that time there were 11 men and [BV]. It must have been very difficult for her not to join in as one of the boys' said one of her staff (TL 5:1).

There were clear differences in the approach of the Chief Women's Officer, and that of the staff under her, who did not have to play a title role. Her own background,



working for the national Labour Party executive, appears to have predisposed her to a management role.

My brief was a clean sheet, I sat down and wrote the strategy, I was used to writing strategy coming from an academic and policy background (BV 4:1).

She clearly saw herself as a back line policy maker, and admitted that she did not have any involvement with community groups and their events. (BV 3:2). Her particular passion was the strategic town-wide projects, run in conjunction with the Economic Development Unit, which aimed to involve private sector employers in several initiatives to increase women's access to the labour market. This interest was in keeping with expectations of the Chief Officer's role, developed under the Development Corporation.

The constraints of her position often meant that the activities of the Women's Committee and the unit put her in a difficult position. On a personal level she supported any work which aimed to improve women's lives, but as a Chief Officer she explained how she sometimes found it hard to approve certain projects because she was unable to defend them in front of the management team. She described several instances when she had intervened to rescue an initiative from sensational press coverage. One particularly memorable example concerned a witch-craft course which a local women's group was running under the Council's banner for International Women's Day. The Sun began investigating the story with the intention of sensationalising the purpose of the course, which was to prompt people to think about the different resources, and knowledge that women possess (BV 5:3). Her antithetical stance meant as Chief Women's Officer she was criticised by Councillors and officers, on one hand for not being rigorous and on the other for not wholeheartedly supporting all activities. 'I think that the unit was a bit free floating and could have been tougher on monitoring' (IB 9:2), commented one Councillor.

The work they did remained on the edge, there was a lack of understanding about what community development is ...that it works with rather than for people, (IA 6:5) said a Community Development Officer.

However the success and continuity of the Unit's work depended on her to take up a difficult position and to hold it until the end.

## **Project and approaches**

The projects undertaken by the Women's Unit in Belford DC were typical, in many ways, of those used by initiatives in the neighbouring London boroughs. Although Belford DC followed the trend and 'did the units' (DG 2:5) it is important to emphasise how innovative and forward looking these approaches were for the mid eighties. They pre-figured authority practice to democratise and to improve local government's record as an employer and service provider. The methods fall into three areas each with different participants: the private sector, and the community and authority employees.

### ***Private Sector Initiatives***

The unit's work with the town's private businesses has already been mentioned. These projects aimed to tackle the structural disadvantages identified by KF in her 1988 report into women's employment prospects in the new town context (KF 1988). The unit invited representatives from the town's major employers to form an action committee, to establish which measures they were willing to get involved in which were pragmatic and beneficial for all parties. In this work, the unit drew on the business case for equal opportunities. The Head of the Unit described the motivation of companies as 'wanting to be seen to be part of the "caring" community' (BV 7:3) and hence to be perceived as good employers. Likewise, she mentioned the lever of the 'demographic time-bomb' which was based on falling numbers of school leavers and hence the need to retain and recruit new sections of the population to enter the paid workforce (BV 6:4). Projects such as the Childcare Trust were only possible because the unit had a very significant budget and hence the scope to offer companies financial incentives to participate (JM 2:1). Led by the Economic Development Unit many very useful baseline studies were completed and the companies provided statistics on female workers themselves that informed Council debate. Nothing concrete was achieved in terms of facilities, however, owing to the short time the unit operated and the shift in the economic fortunes of businesses in the late 1980s which lessened the importance they gave to equality work (BV 6:3).



### ***Community Consultation***

The Women's Committee's methods in respect of the community were quite new to the Council. It co-opted local women from the voluntary sector to represent local women's interests.

It was always part of what we were arguing, to bring people in [to decision making] who were directly concerned (IB 7:1).

Co-optees were elected at a public meeting. The women nominated came from many different areas, not only from what would be called organisations from the women's movement (IA 2:2). Initially, some of the more radical feminist organisations made very strong criticisms of the pace of change, but after expectations came to match real opportunities 'it became less difficult to move along' (OA 2:3). While the general reaction from women constituents was supportive (OA 5:1) some Councillors 'disagreed profoundly' (IB 7:2) with the concept of co-optees and considered it was their role to take the decisions. Thus, when the 1988 Local Government Act made the voting rights of committee co-optees conditional on Council discussion, a majority of members voted it down. This ruling did not adversely affect the relationship of the co-optees to the committee, because as one Councillor commented 'usually there was consensus around the issues so it wasn't a real problem...we found ways round it' (IB 8:1).

Many of the women, who joined the committee, had no experience of how the Council worked or of speaking at meetings. The staff of the Women's Unit worked closely with individual women to help them develop the skills they needed (OA 7:2). To reach as wide a cross-section of the community as possible, women committee members were proactive, holding committee meetings in local venues rather than the town hall, and attending local fairs and women's groups of all kinds, both to talk to women about how they could get involved and to listen to what was important to them (OA 7:3). International Women's Day was an annual focus for these types of activities.

As is the general case, women's initiatives were not credited for the methods they pioneered, many of which were adopted by the authority more widely. One participant summed up their contribution in Belford:

In a sense, we introduced the neighbourhood set up because we had our meetings ... in various parts of the town ... I think we initiated the opening up of the committees in allowing members of the public to come and speak at committees and I think that has now spilled over to the neighbourhood committees (OA 5:2).

### *Internal Policy and Procedures*

One of the unit's most effective tools to change the internal circumstances for women employees in the bureaucracy was positive action. It ran women only training.

It is a very useful tool with which to supplement core programmes if women want it. It builds confidence and aids networking which women don't do as effectively as men (WB 5:1).

This type of training was offered to women who were potential managers, women in frontline supervisory posts and also to women wishing to enter non traditional manual trades. Women's Officers had to argue the case to use positive action, especially to the Personnel Department. They were fearful that targeted training would lead to resentment from men who were not eligible to join the programmes, fuelled by a lack of understanding of why they were needed (WB 5:2). This training was put in place by the Women's Officer in the Equal Opportunities Unit and it therefore ran continuously over a long period of time. This officer claimed that as a result many women have continued to work in the authority, often moving from their original position to greater responsibility in the hierarchy.

Taking a long term view, the benefit in Belford has been a lasting one ...you have to accept that many women will move on so you have to train a lot to shift the centre of gravity upwards so that each strata has a good representation of women (WB3:2).

Positive action was also used in 'one off' initiatives. The training initiative supporting democratisation and decentralisation (which included the deliberate selection of second tier managers) is an example of an initiative that significantly motivated individual women. It was no coincidence that of the three new neighbourhood service Corporate Directors appointed in 1993, two were women. One of the women who attended the training day remarked 'that's how I ended up becoming a Chief Officer really, because it makes you see yourself as part of the senior management team' (DG 7:1). Another use of positive action was in the annual action plans in which



Departments laid out what their equality achievements had been and what they were planning for the following year. This idea was carried forward to the decentralised authority. Every report has a section for comments on equality implications. But as participants in Belford DC had discovered already, paper commitments are worth very little without action and can consequently become token gestures.

The easy part of the job is changing policy and reports. The hard thing is to implement the changes, you have a lag between paper and reality (WB 6:6).

## **Barriers**

### ***Resistance to changes to the status quo***

Democratisation and decentralisation introduced a period of great uncertainty: as one participant put it, 'perpetual change' (WB 4:5). Fear was rooted in concerns about the implications of democratisation and decentralisation for individuals' own power bases. The new arrangements called for investment in negotiating new power relationships. It devalued individual expertise, as new skills were required, and fundamentally, it meant that officers had to give up their absolute monopoly on knowledge and to accept that different groups of the community had ideas that were equally valid. Examples of all these fears arose throughout this case study. The following quotations summarise, particularly succinctly, what greater democracy meant for administrative staff:

The officers have a real difficulty with the implications of proper community consultation, that working class people would really be making decisions and that these decisions take precedence (IA 4:2).

It's about wanting people to be involved, and not being afraid of the decisions those people take once they are engaged (IA 5:1).

In this situation staff were fearful for their future employment. They assigned equality issues a very low position on their list of priorities. The lack of awareness about equality meant that staff did not interpret the structural changes as an opportunity to ensure that more equitable working relationships were established. The leadership was too stretched to ensure that this message was forcefully communicated.

### ***Policy vacuum***

The work of the unit suffered from a lack of political direction and conflicting views among participants about its central purpose. The literature has described the absence of a clear strategic framework as a vacuum. It was a problem that befell many initiatives in Wilson's view. No other type of authority structure in her view has ever been created with so little direction (Wilson 1986). The lack of direction arose due to the controversial nature of this type of provision and the fact that many Women's Units were achieved by 'seizing the political moment', and hence they were not fully thought through. In Belford's case ambiguity over the remit of the unit gave rise to three sorts of difficulties. First, it meant that the unit and the committee did not always agree on what their priorities should be. Second, the lack of political direction meant that the Women's Unit had to fight to establish the legitimacy of its activities and third, the authority and other politicians remained in the dark about the Women's Unit's purpose and hence its usefulness.

Disagreement over the purpose of the unit relates back to the new town context and its interpretation. The Chief Women's Officer's background gave her skills in tackling large-scale strategic issues. As already mentioned, she put a large amount of her energy into forming an action committee with personnel officers from the town's major employers in order to try to influence employment practice and women's access to paid work in general.

The long term idea was to set up a childcare trust in which local employers made annual contributions to childcare places in doing so securing their workforce a certain percentage (BV 6:1).

The need for childcare as a priority for local women had been established by a series of large-scale surveys of the local population managed in conjunction with the Economic Development Unit.

Many women Councillors, however, wanted an agenda which promised more immediate and local results. The first of these had been the establishment of the Women's Committee to act as a supportive mechanism for achieving a greater number of women in the Council. In one sense the committee was an end goal in



itself. This partly explains the observation by several Women's Officers that support from Councillors for their work began to peter out as soon as the women's initiative was up and running (TL 4:3). The second priority that Councillors are reported to have expressed, concerned the development of local neighbourhood services for women in the form of a women's centre. The Chief Officer judged this to be 'a real white elephant' (BV 4:2), because the same facilities could be provided in the town hall without the expense, building difficulties and media attention which such a project would involve. She argued against the project and later judged that some councillors had never forgiven her (BV 7:2).

One difference of opinion between officers and politicians was in terms of 'strategic thinking'. Officers identified some Councillors as 'thinkers' and others as just 'well-intentioned' in their feminist demands. One participant explained the implications this had for Women's Unit:

[Councillors'] motives were completely genuine, although this was significant because they had no remit in mind. The remit was uncertain and therefore the political support and understanding were lacking for the unit (TL 2:6).

Because politicians failed to make demands of the unit, its work appeared illegitimate in the eyes of the bureaucracy. Also, by not saying clearly what they wanted, politicians side stepped accountability for the outcome of the projects that were undertaken (TL 2:4). It fell to the Chief Women's Officer to fight her corner alone. As one of the Councillors commented in retrospect:

She went into that position which was very difficult, a women's officer amongst many other male dominated services ... I know she didn't have enough support internally or probably externally (IB 3:3).

Due to the personal intervention of the Labour Leader of the Council, and the 'cloak and dagger' nature of the political negotiations, there was a lack of political debate about the establishment of the women's initiative, which was never remedied. The Committee remained 'a mystery' to officers and Councillors who had no connection with its work (TL 4:4). The absence of political engagement was significant. It meant that Councillors had no reasons with which to defend the women's initiative when mainstreaming was proposed. One participant recalled how a sympathetic Councillor

had remarked to her that 'he found it hard to justify on constituency doorsteps why they were spending taxpayers' money in this way' (WB 9:2).

### *Ignorance and complacency about equality*

The level of understanding about gender inequality, in a male dominated bureaucracy, was, inevitably, low. The authority had always recruited in its own image (CO 1:1) commented one participant from Personnel. Another recalled that during the induction programmes that she used to run for new recruits, male participants would always ask what the Women's Unit did (TL 4:5). The ignorance which individuals in the bureaucracy displayed about women's relative social, political and economic disadvantage was a fundamental barrier. Consequently sexist language and stereotypes about women were tolerated in the authority. The unit itself was the butt of many jokes about women policing men's behaviour (CO 4:6). Programmes to promote women's health, including breast screening, were challenged on the grounds that men weren't offered similar services (TL 4:7).

Ignorance bred complacency. Officers saw the Women's Unit as wholly responsible for any women's issues. They did not reflect on their part in the maintenance of unequal relationships. The annual action plan imposed on each department was a way of trying to get individuals to think more deeply. Yet despite this enforcement mechanism, some (vigilant) chairs of committees repeatedly found themselves sending back department submissions because the equality implications had been missed off or filled in as 'none' (WB 8:4).

### *Political and economic climate*

The financial situation of the authority was a major factor in every participants' explanation of why the Women's Unit came under attack and was finally closed. In 1991 the Conservative Government imposed a cap on Belford DC's block grant. Central government's action was part of a larger campaign to discredit and penalise high spending Labour Councils (Stewart & Stoker 1995). One Councillor commented that 'the men were forced to defend [the unit] through gritted teeth' (IB 5:2) not because they supported the unit, but because it represented an anti-conservative stance. The greater need to manage the budget finally removed this compulsion 'we could see it going' commented the same Councillor (IB 5:3). By 1992, the authority



was running on its reserves and could no longer afford the size of its administration while maintaining the same level of services. The leadership were able to make the argument that all resources should be channelled into the provision of statutory services. As one participant put it 'equal opportunities was seen as a luxury'. Consequently, it was an obvious source for immediate savings. (TL 6:3).

In 1992 they [central government] changed the regulations and even small authorities were capped ... you could cut a fair bit of [the services] but it was just impossible to argue to keep the Women's Committee. It wasn't seen as part of the main core services (OA 6:2).

Between 1992-3 the workforce was reduced from 2,100 to 1,300 employees to meet the £11 million reduction in revenue over five years. In 1993 amongst the staff made redundant was the Chief Women's Officer.

The Chief Women's Officer emphasised the importance of factors occurring in the wider political situation. In late 1980s the right-wing tabloid press began to sensationalise the equality work of Labour administrations in order to discredit them. 'It wasn't just closed down because of cuts and decentralisation' she said. 'It came down to electorability' (BV 11:1). She recalled how some Councillors explained a local defeat at the polls in terms of the Council's 'loony' left image. There were keen to distance themselves from this sort of work (CO 7:2), and closing the unit signalled this step. 'The loony left image was completely fabricated' commented another participant. 'Equal opportunities is not a vote winner, the press can get a juicy story of equal opps any time' (CO 7:3). In Belford DC's case The Sun newspaper in particular, vigilantly tracked any equality development aiming to ridicule it.

## **Results and Outcomes**

Participants held mixed views about how useful and significant the women's initiative had been in terms of achieving greater equality of women employees and women in the constituency. It was difficult to evaluate the discrete impact of the initiative, in a context where many changes were occurring simultaneously. However, participants

recognised that the initiative's work had run parallel to the most important project of the period, the process of democratisation and decentralisation<sup>4</sup>.

This process was pushed forward by a small number of left wing Labour Councillors (IB 4:1), some of whom had also been instrumental in fighting for the Women's Unit. In 1988 alongside the creation of the Women's Unit a Democratisation and Decentralisation Unit (first called the Local Government Unit) was established under the Assistant General Manager to prepare the detailed plans for re-organisation (Belford DC 1993). The shared objective of these two units was described by one of the Councillors.

[The Women's Committee] had been addressing the whole question of democratisation and decentralisation of services. [The women's initiative] was part of the same movement in a way. You had male heads of services who were clinging onto their positions with two sorts of threats, on the one hand D&D which they saw as a threat on the whole, and rightly so! And on the other hand, sort of women, pressure from the women's movement and the Women's Unit which was looking critically, and they knew it would, at all their services (IB 3:2).

By 1989 Democratisation and Decentralisation became irreversible, as the Labour group voted to establish neighbourhood-based service committees in three parts of the town as one year pilots, which were not experimental. Significantly, the former Women's Officer in the Equal Opportunities Unit was appointed by the Assistant General Manager to oversee and smooth the transition of the authority to neighbourhood structures. In a deliberately designed training programme she matched Chief Officers with their second tier managers to impress upon them the competence of those rising through the ranks below them.

They were confronted with managers who they looked down on [many of whom] were assertive confident women (WB 4:4).

The effect on the second tier managers was quite the opposite. They were encouraged to consider their abilities and capability fulfil senior roles (DG 7:1).

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<sup>4</sup> A members' Working Party had been established in 1984. In 1986 it reported to the constituency Labour Party. Its proposals were carried and the Party passed a resolution accepting, in principle, that structural re-organisation should take place.



What the Chief Officers learnt was that decentralisation wasn't something that would go away (WB 4:5).

In the participants' view this realisation caused a large number of Chief Officers to retire, or to resign. The voluntary removal of a large number of senior staff, coupled with a programme of redundancies forced on the administration by financial pressures, meant that not only did the structure of the bureaucracy dramatically change, but so too did its personnel.

Participants recognised that decentralisation had achieved the unintended result of opening women's access to a greater proportion of senior jobs and bringing their influence to bear on the culture of the emerging authority.

There are now many senior women and women in supervisory positions [neighbourhood services] which had been a lasting [cause] and effect of the training programme (WB 5:4).

Two out of the three newly appointed Corporate Directors in the central management team were women.

Several participants reported that the culture of the organisation has permanently changed. The old boys' network has been dispelled and officers have developed a new understanding of their role in respect to the community.

To survive officers have had to change their behaviour ... The belief that officers know best has gone. It's the people living in the town who know what they need (WB 4:6).

Interestingly the participants who held this view were those who had been promoted during the reorganisation to central management positions. One participant who had worked in community development throughout the whole period, described a different picture:

The problem with decentralisation is that there is still a lack of understanding about the 'enabling' authority. So now we've got a set of small 'Greek temples' operating (IA 4:4).

He gave no indication about whether these new power struggles were gendered, although informally one of the councillors suggested that although women are able to

use their personal communication skills to good effect in the neighbourhood offices, the supervisory positions are not accorded a high status (WB 9:5).

The issue of how far women's equality had progressed under the new structures was taken up by Women's Officers in their discussion of the corporate approach to equality. The Chief Women's Officer had fundamentally disagreed with the vision for the authority of the Democratisation & Decentralisation Unit. (A clash of personalities further impeded communication). She said:

Their assumption was that just by bringing in neighbourhoods democracy would automatically follow (BV 10:3).

Applying this theory of evolutionary change to equality delivery had produced an expectation that equality work would also naturally take place.

They thought that by splitting the Women's Unit and putting an officer in each of the neighbourhood offices equal opportunities would be sorted (BV 10:2).

Several participants agreed with the view that 'without people with vision and a dedicated post it is too easy for people to ignore equal opportunities' (JM 3:4). They argued that more named equality officers were needed throughout the decentralised structure to prevent complacency. As one Councillor put it:

I've always felt that you should have both a core that addresses the issues directly ...alongside a policy of permeation ... so that every single neighbourhood develops and promotes equality issues (IB 4:2).

The debate about the shortcomings of the decentralised solution to equality provision rested on the larger issue of the benefits of specialist women's provision. Women's Officers who had been in front line positions had a dynamic vision of how specialist officers should be used to deliver equality objectives.

A separate unit is no good it causes resentment. Integration is best. Initially though you need facilitating and empowering expertise and officers with vision (TL 6:6).

They drew a distinction between separate specialist provision at the beginning of an initiative to create suitable conditions, and integrated specialist provision, which could subsequently build on the opportunities. In their view, staying too long as a separate



structure increased the authority's hostility until it became debilitating for the whole project.

The Women's Officer in the Equal Opportunities Unit had discovered by trial and error that it was naïve to expect to expect unskilled officers to take on board new equality ideas and procedures based on a set of instructions. 'It's like David and Goliath' (WB 6:1) she said. They were unable to sustain a commitment to equality work when they were surrounded by indifferent colleagues. An approach which was lead by Women's Officers to facilitate staff to learn and take responsibility resulted in more permanent changes, as described in the section on catalysts. Participants considered that the neighbourhood structure offered a suitable environment for this type of integrated equality work to take place. As one Councillor commented:

I think [Women's Officers] could have worked well with the neighbourhood system because I think [the women's initiative] had actually initiated mechanisms [such as those for community consultation] which are now part of the main set up (OA 6:3).

The Chief Women's Officer perspective was that in a full decentralised structure it was necessary to have 'a nucleus of equal opportunity officers in the centrally based staff' (BV 12:4). Women's Officers did not see this as being as important as named officers in the neighbourhoods themselves, because they felt the issue was not to have more policy statements, but practical understanding.

People understand equal opportunities in policy statements, they lack knowledge of how it works in practice in day to day matters (TL 5:3).

All participants agreed that the mainstreaming approach, with neither named officers in the neighbourhood offices nor a central Women's Unit, was not working. Several participants, including the Chief Women's Officer, explained that too little thought had gone into how equality objectives would be implemented using a mainstreaming approach. One example of this was the initial omission from the original strategy of a symbol of the authority's continued commitment to equality.

I was the one who argued very strongly for having the word equalities [in the title of one of the new Corporate Directors] ... we were abandoning the

Women's Committee - what sort of message did this give out? ... equalities was incorporated into the title but not in the thinking of the structure (IB 6:3).

Participants believed that the corporate equality mechanism had failed to impact on the work of the majority of staff, who saw it as an another add-on, rather than an integrated part of the new service delivery targets. A survey of officers' perception of decentralisation, carried out by the Economic Development Unit shortly after the neighbourhood structure was in place, asked them a question about how they intended to incorporate equality into their work (JM 3:4). It was clear that because the authority staff had not been involved in a rigorous exercise to set new base lines and understanding about equality work, their attitude became one of 'Oh dear, this is just another thing I've got to do' (IB 10:1). The survey respondents suggested that those with an interest in equalities could bring forward proposals in the neighbourhood office, but that the successful adoption of their ideas depended on luck and the right combination of Councillors lending support (IB 6:3)

There is no strategic approach. 'Community Development & Equalities' [the title of the Corporate Director] is really a joke in the Council because equalities is so obviously an add-on. Particular officers remain very committed and are working in their own areas but overall equal opportunities work is very *ad hoc* (TL 4:6).

Several participants commented that the mainstreaming strategy had suffered from the problem of all equality work, it was hijacked by other priorities, such as maintaining statutory service delivery. Also, there were so many changes happening to staff at once that the mainstreaming message became confused. Participants pointed out that the Corporate Director with responsibility for Equalities and Community Development had left the authority soon after the decentralisation process was complete, hence depriving an already overworked core of a strong articulation of mainstreaming's goals (WB 8:5). Similarly, women Councillors acknowledged that they and their colleagues were burnt out, or too preoccupied with smoothing out administrative problems in their neighbourhood offices to reassert where equality was going (IB 6:1). This last observation relates to the issue of catalysts. It appears that the people whose work had provided the momentum for the women's initiative had gone or given up the fight. Participants agreed that people like them were needed if equality work was to be galvanised throughout the authority.



Belford's historical commitment to equal opportunities won't disappear easily ... there's residual commitment left and small bits of equal opportunities work being done. It just needs some resources to give it a spark (CO 5:2, 6:5).

To sum up, Belford's women's initiative has undergone three significant changes to its style of delivery. It started as a separate structure before being merged into an initiative, which combined the focus on women with that of other inequalities. Finally, it was closed in favour of a corporate approach which dispensed with specialist budgets and staff. The changes to the equality delivery closely mirrored shifts in the financial situation of the Council, and also the adoption of a new service user interface, which aimed to be more democratic.

The initiative faced two major challenges, both arising from the legacy of new town planning. First the political and administrative hierarchies continued to reflect the benevolent nature and patriarchal values of the former Development Corporation. Some members of the senior management of the local Labour Party and the administration had been in power since the creation of the District Council, in 1974. They used strong male dominated networks to uphold the status quo. The close relationship between politicians and Chief Officers meant that the majority of politicians did not challenge the high-handed attitude which characterised the administration's treatment of local constituents. The second challenge was more fundamental as it related to the town's infrastructure and spatial layout. The 'hatch' system of the residential neighbourhoods acted to reinforce the traditional white, nuclear family based on a sole male breadwinner.

The initiative was initially designed to confront both these obstacles head on. It had a considerable budget to spend on the development of women's services and on research into their town wide situation. It appointed the first woman Chief Officer to the senior management team. This appointment was a symbol of the initiative's commitment to women's participation in decision-making. As the Chief Women's Officer remarked, a separate, well-resourced approach was the only viable model in 1988. However, after three years working in a separate structure, several of the Women's Officers looked back and problematised their separation. In their view, it

had marginalised the initiative from the authority's main business. The initiative was the butt of many jokes, which made the job of women's officer extremely stressful and ultimately unsustainable. Women's officers emphasised that the women's initiative needed to be more integrated into department activity.

The participants considered that the initiative had raised individuals' awareness of women's inequality and set up pockets of good practice, especially around women's training. However, it was the process of democratisation and decentralisation that significantly altered the old hierarchy and its practices. The women's initiative practice had prefigured many of the approaches which the neighbourhood structures adopted. However, equality work was not an integral part of the decentralisation process. Participants thought it was an add-on. The version of mainstreaming introduced in Belford DC had assumed that a corporate message would be sufficient to encourage staff to take on new commitments to equality. Participants pointed out that this was a mistaken assumption, since staff were more reluctant to take on additional work in a situation where they were already working under pressure. The feminist Councillors who had been a catalyst throughout the early process were too exhausted or demoralised to champion the old message in the new system.

Belford DC has described the complete spectrum of equality delivery mechanisms, moving from specialist structured provision for women, to a combined focus on equal opportunities and finally to mainstreaming with generic responsibility. Caulder CC, which follows in Chapter 6, has not completed the progression to mainstreaming. It is still experimenting with different forms of specialist women's provision located at a corporate level. Its practice more closely describes the 'unofficial' version of mainstreaming suggested by Gurbux Singh in 1991 (Chapter 3).



## **Women's Equality Practice in Calder City Council**

This chapter has the same aims and format as the previous one, beginning with a description of the development of the women's initiative in Calder CC. The initiative has assumed a variety of different forms since its inception in 1986, all of which have been based on the delivery of equality work by specialist equality staff.

### **Description of the Women's Initiative**

The issue of a women's initiative in the Council was raised in general discussions around women's participation in the local labour market and the terms and conditions of their employment. Women's active membership in Calder's trade unions provided a sympathetic environment for this discussion. It was first raised in 1981, by a Women's Officer appointed by the Council's Department for Employment and Economic Development (DEED)<sup>1</sup>. She commissioned a Positive Action for Women Report into the Council's employment practice and looked for support to implement its recommendations. She found a natural forum for debate in a women's grass-roots group known as the Women's Employment Forum. The group was made up of women from the public and voluntary sectors. It met informally on Saturday mornings (FQ 2:3). As a result of this group's involvement, Council officers, with the support of a couple of women Councillors, set up a steering group to plan the structure of a women's provision. Hence, in contrast to the initiative in Belford DC, the demand to establish a Women's Panel and support unit in Calder CC was driven by pressure from the women's movement outside the Council. Although politicians in Calder CC had more sympathy for 'new urban left' politics than other northern metropolitan Councils, the entrenched nature of the traditional political culture meant that there was not as much 'room' for feminists to campaign from inside the party (EL & QT

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<sup>1</sup> Altering the shape of local labour market was a common goal pursued by radical Labour Councils at this time (Boddy & Fudge 1984).

1983:84-85). Because of its beginnings, the Council's record as an employer was a central issue on the equality agenda.

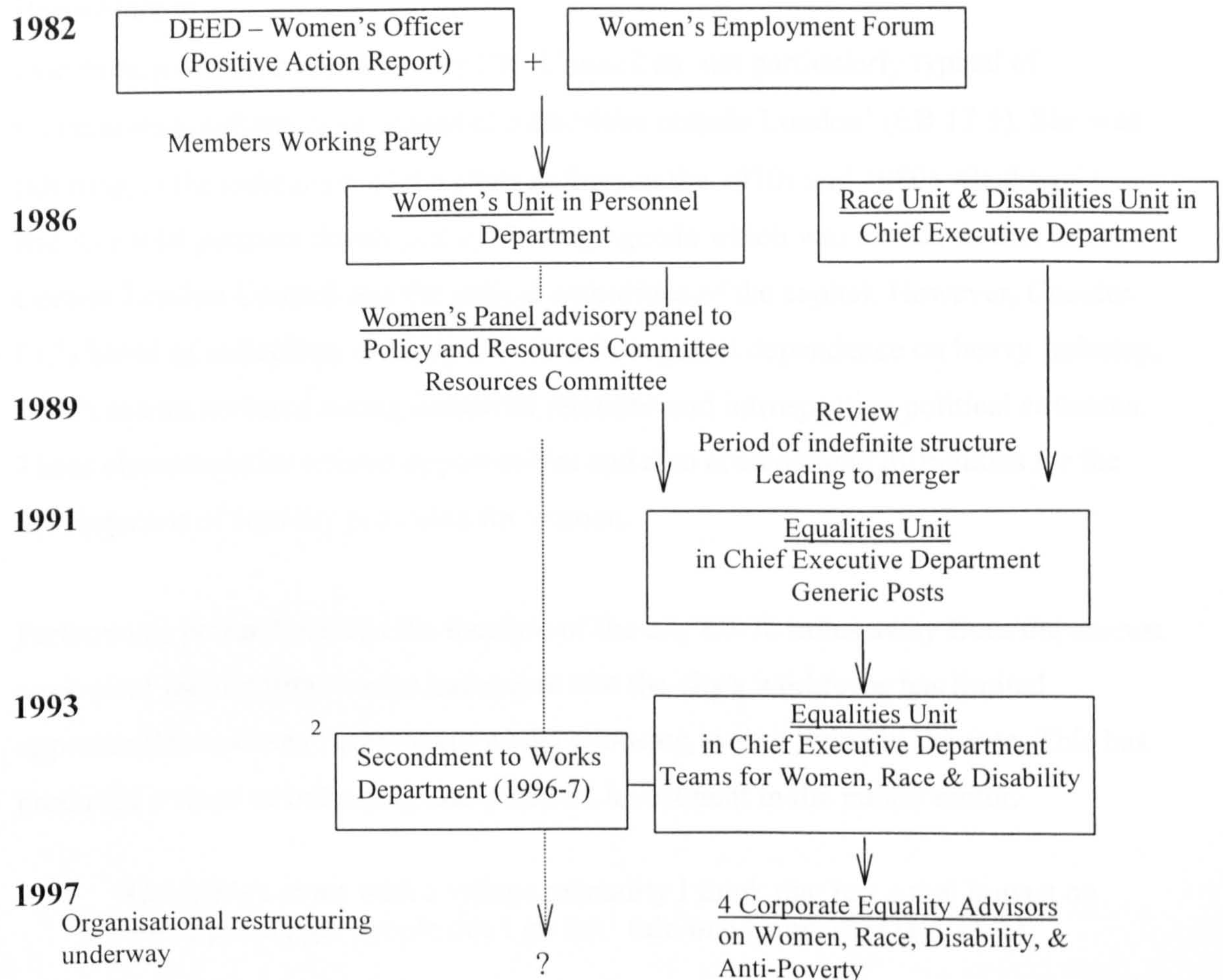
Unlike the other two case studies, Caulder CC's women's initiative has enjoyed a great degree of structural stability. The political structure has shown no variation; the Women's Panel is an advisory committee reporting to the Policy and Resources Committee. In the authority its administrative support has always been characterised by dedicated staff. However, there have been three changes to the staff grading and departmental location. Throughout these changes a specialist focus on women has been sustained, albeit at times operating in fits and starts.

The Women's Panel administrative support began as a discrete Women's Unit in the Personnel Department, mirrored by similar structures for race and disability, which were sub-sections of the Chief Executive's Department. Although its location could have been interpreted as inferior, the Head of the Personnel Department commanded considerable respect within the bureaucracy at a time when the Chief Executive was distracted by external relations (FQ 6:16). The lack of structural coherence in the overall equality provision was the reason given for a review of equality structures in 1989 (EV 2:5). However, many participants considered that the amalgamation of the three units which followed was a response to financial pressure. The corporate nature of the new initiative was symbolised by uniting all three areas of equality work in the Chief Executive's Department as an Equalities Unit. The unit continued to report to Women's, Race and Disabilities Advisory Panels separately. On paper this unit contained generic posts that focused on all areas of inequality. In practice participants indicated that they continued to work on projects which matched their particular expertise (LE 5:1). In 1993, the unit reverted back to named equality posts for race, women and disability, with three teams within the same unit. 'We always knew we'd be talking about further reduction' commented one participant. (LE 5:9) Work continued as before, but with fewer officers employed.

Also in 1997, there were discussions taking place to change the structure of the Equalities Unit yet again, but this time in conjunction with a much more significant change to the whole authority. Four generic Equality Advisors with lead roles in Race, Women, Disability and Social Exclusion were in the process of being appointed



to the Chief Executive's policy-making team, in keeping with the development of a 'networked organisation'. The remainder of the equality staff were to be made redundant.



**Figure 1: Development of the delivery of Equal Opportunities for Women in Calder DC 1986-1997.**

This attempt to bring equality into Calder CC's core business objectives is analogous to the project of mainstreaming. However, while the strength of top level support for women's equality has seemingly increased through the appointment of a central coordinator, the newly appointed Equality Advisor explained that she thought that the existing implementation strategies would continue to be needed.

<sup>2</sup> As I started my fieldwork, one of the Women's Officers was completing a year long secondment in the Works Department as a generic equal opportunities officer. This was a new undertaking for the unit. It had arisen as the result of a 'one-off' grant being offered by the Personnel Department to support a project that aimed to inform the authority about how to manage diversity.



I don't think major changes in the organisation necessarily affects the strategy, it might affect the time scale (LE 12:1).

## **Political Background**

### ***Parochialism***

One participant described Caulder City Council as 'not particularly typical of metropolitan authorities or indeed of authorities outside London' (EB 17:5). She was referring to the radicalism of the city's politics in the 1970s and 1980s. Caulder CC and its social partners developed a left wing agenda which was similar to that of the Greater London Council and the radical authorities of the capital. However, Caulder CC's blend of radicalism strongly reflected its regional dependence on heavy industry, which in turn nurtured strong industrial relations and introspective political concerns. These characteristics offered opportunities and also considerable difficulties for the development of equality provision for women.

Participants pointed out that the location of the city 60-70 miles away from the nearest equivalent metropolitan centre has meant that the city's workforce has limited opportunities to change employers whilst choosing to stay living in the area. This has produced a sense of belonging and personal investment in the public sector.

'Caulder's a town with a village mentality I think that has a real impact on where people go, people don't go far,' said one Councillor (EL 15:1).

The rootedness of the workforce produced an extremely difficult situation for the Council when the retraction of heavy industry and of the public sector began in the late 1970s. The inescapable loss of jobs and hence of families' livelihoods fuelled political radicalism into an oppositional stance against the Conservative Government, which was felt to have withdrawn its support from these two sectors.

'Caulder is heavy industry,' commented a local Councillor 'politically it's been dominated by trade unionism' (EL 4:1). The trade union and local Labour Council's stand against the Thatcher government's economic policies in 1980s was extensively reported in the national press. Caulder CC gained a reputation for its last ditch stand to maintain public sector services in a situation where it was targeted for



progressively heavy financial capping, and there was a growing need for those services as unemployment grew.

People will say this to you a lot but it really is true. Caulder has been hammered financially more than any other local authority in the country, apart from Merseyside and that's taken a real toll (EB 17:7).

Another participant described how the trade union movement like the Council had been 'decimated' in the process. This only served to further strengthen the parochial and stubborn nature of local politics.

Equal opportunities formed an important part of the oppositional stand against central government. The Caulder Trade Union Council and Labour movement actively supported provision for black people, women and people with disabilities. The close connection between the local Labour Party and trade unions to their national bodies meant that the Greater London Council's action in setting equal opportunity units was greeted positively by activists in Caulder.

'In my opinion it was a very privileged position,' said one participant. 'You could pay people to be political activists almost' (LE 2:2).

Up to that point the main focus of activity in respect of women's equality had been in the trades Council. Many women had been able to pursue a commitment to women's equality within its structures and to achieve concrete results. One participant thought that women's issues were put on the new political agenda via the trade union route.

We were very involved in things like Women Against Pit Closures and cervical cancer smear campaigns. I mean we had a caravan at the top of [the High Street] with petitions. These were things that were fought for and it was mainly trade unionists that fought for them. (LE 2:3)

### *Male breadwinner ideology*

Although the Labour Party made a commitment to women's equality, it did so on certain terms. Participants considered that there was a very traditional view of gender relations, nurtured by political parochialism. They described the labour movement as sexist and old fashioned (FQ 18:4). As other authors have documented elsewhere, there has been tension between labour and feminist objectives even in the context of the new labour agenda for participatory democracy (Coote & Campbell 1982). The

Labour Party has been willing to include women's activity under its banner where that activity did not upset the existing status quo. Issues that related to women's traditional domestic role were well received. This seems to have been the case in Caulder. The Council focused on supporting the traditional family, the man's job as the main breadwinner and women's access to welfare services to secure her family's health and wellbeing. Consequently, support for equal opportunities was strongest when it was directed at alleviating social inequality caused by low income and the lack of employment and educational development<sup>3</sup> (BD 2:3).

The reaction of Council members and staff to the creation of a Women's Panel and support unit highlights the deeply ingrained conception of women's roles and the Labour Party's reluctance to accept the wider agenda of the women's movement in Caulder. Women's Officers described how they were stereotyped as middle class, a label which in their view clearly demonstrated the Labour Party's order of priorities.

'I think this sounds a bit off the wall,' said one Women's Officer, 'but I think people were so prejudiced against the women's movement and feminism they saw us taking something away from men. They thought we were a load of middle class toss pots I think' (LE 17:2).

Another officer admitted that she used the term women's issues with reluctance with colleagues, because she felt it conjured up images of 'lipstick lesbians' (middle class women who were trying to further the interests of a minority of women) (BD 11:6). Much of the reaction was based on rumour and sensationalism fuelled by press coverage of the Greenham Common Campaign and the London equality initiatives. 'We were viewed with real suspicion when we arrived,' said the former Head of the Women's Unit (FQ 9:5).

The women's initiative in Caulder CC can be described as a 'token' gesture according to Halford's definition (1988). It lacked resources.

'Although there was rhetoric and some commitment to employ workers there wasn't the development budget to actually go alongside that. ... The delivery was therefore done around issues that could be addressed with minimum resources,' said one Councillor (EL 16:1).

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the Council's well resourced race initiative, the focus on welfare was also ethnocentric.



It also lacked status within the political and administrative hierarchies. The same Councillor went on:

The Women's Panel didn't have status because ... all it could do was actually make recommendations and see them through the system. ... It wasn't even a sub-committee, it was the next tier down (EL 2:2).

In her view the initiative lacked teeth, power and money (EL 2:3). One of the senior women managers attempted to put the situation of the women's initiative into the broader context of the situation for women in the decision making process of the authority as a whole. From her own perspective, as one of 12 of the authority's most senior women in a workforce of 22,000, she said:

I think we had very much a paternal system whereby it was tokenism. I think women have proved themselves to some people, not to others. They'll never prove themselves to some people they're too embodied in traditional thinking (KS 4:3).

The initiative for women's equality was established in the context of a political battle, between Caulder CC and central government. Conditions were difficult for all new developments, not only the women's initiative. The local Labour Party recognised the feminist agenda in principle but in practice did not desire the changes to gender relations that it was suggesting. It supported a liberal agenda of improvements, which enhanced women's traditional role. Because of the misfit between socialist and feminist intentions the provision of the women's initiative was inadequate and in spite of its meagre size prompted considerable objection from Council members and staff.

## **Organisational structures and culture**

### ***Women's vertical and horizontal segregation***

The organisational structures of Caulder CC reflect a traditional understanding of men and women's different work roles.

You just have to look at the managerial structures to see how few women there are in senior positions, how few women there are in traditionally male areas of work, how many women are in low paid jobs (LE 10:6).

Women and men have been segregated into very different parts of the authority's occupational hierarchy. Women have been mainly employed in low paid occupations that reinforce stereotypes of women's caring, nurturing and supportive domestic role.

This has been particularly apparent in departments, whose service delivery relies on skilled manual labour, for example construction, incineration, and maintenance. In these departments women are marginal workers. 'Women are very much the minority like black workers are' (LE 9:7) commented one participant. She gave the example of the Works Department in which there were only 105 women out of a total workforce of over two and a half thousand employees. The majority of these women were engaged in administrative work. Only fourteen women held manual trades positions (LE 9:2).

This department had tried, with little success, to recruit women into non-traditional roles on the manual trades' side. The drop-out rate of women from these jobs was very high. The problem, said one of the women's equality team, was the homocentric culture that is associated with male dominated work environments.

'Women actually find it very difficult to work in an all male environment for all the obvious reasons, sexist comments ... discrimination all the rest of it', she said. I think the problem was that women in Works didn't feel supported, there weren't [women's] support networks to help them get on, and I just think a lot of them couldn't hack it' (LE 7:5).

Harassment became an issue in this department where women provided a diversion to the normal male company.

Women's exclusion from certain occupations has extended vertically too. There have been very few women in Caulder CC, who have held senior positions. One participant explained that there were two factors, which she had observed, that held women back. Many women were limited by their personal domestic circumstances and level of education (KS 6:2). Others, who were qualified for senior promotion, came up against the 'boys club' (KS 12:3) - groups of senior managers who networked exclusively to benefit their own interest. She described the attitude of male managers to her promotion to Assistant Director:

'People didn't actively go out of their way to make it difficult but I don't think people actively went out of their way to say -is there anything you need?' (KS 7:5).

Significantly several participants highlighted that the 'boys club' was not only made up of men. They considered that women commonly responded to the exclusive male



culture by 'adopting the traditional society's methods of getting there' (EL10:3). 'It's very subtly done,' said another participant. 'I don't think people realise how much it is done'. Once in a position of power women have defended their position as vehemently as some of their male colleagues.

I've worked for a woman who because she's made it, that's it, the ladder comes up, and [her attitude is] - I don't want anybody following me (KS2:2).

Members of the women's equality team stressed that because of the different circumstances and cultures, women demanded different forms of support. However, their demands were often for support that reinforced traditional gender stereotypes of women's role, or did nothing to challenge the male status quo. Women in the 'welfare camp' were those on low grades with few career prospects. They were centrally concerned with personnel issues such as pay, benefits and their leave entitlement to care for dependants. These demands reinforced the perception that women were primarily domestic carers. Women who had more opportunity to progress were in the 'developmental camp'. They required support for their career development and skill acquisition to follow career trajectories which aped those of male colleagues.

To sum up, participants had identified that the old boy's club contained women too. They highlighted the differences between women. They rejected the common assumption that women have a natural affinity for women's issues (KS 7:2) and hence the argument for promoting women on those grounds, or leaving responsibility for women's equality only in their hands.

### *Patronage*

The sexual division of the labour force gave rise to dominant male cultures. Many participants mentioned a paternal culture in which men assisted and instructed 'weaker' colleagues. Very often this culture expressed genuine concern on the part of the individuals. However, at times, concern slipped into patronising treatment, especially of women employees. Women's Officers described how patronising treatment included deliberate strategies and practices used by male colleagues to exclude women from certain areas of work and to attack the activities of the women's initiative. The former Head of the Women's Unit recalled that when the unit was

based in the Personnel Department its Chief Personnel Officer would 'offer us up as the first of his cuts every bloody year' (FQ 12:1). The subsequent re-organisation of the equality structures disguised other direct attacks. Participants alleged that the women's team was 'saved' by senior politicians and amalgamated with the other two equality units in the Chief Executive department on the understanding that it would cost nothing in development resources.

They eradicated all the budget ... and said you can carry on with these staff but we won't give you any money for it (EV 3:4).

These and other corporate actions served to send out messages to the authority in general that they did not intend the unit to be effective (FQ 14:8).

Participants seemed to be arguing that individual men were not to blame for the culture: many of them were allies (KS 4:4). Instead they saw senior management as culpable. The corporate management notionally promoted women's equality but did not support changes that would upset the status quo. This in turn discouraged members of staff from questioning women's difference and the way it was artificially created by structures and procedures. Participants had sympathy with male officers who were struggling to get to grips with the changes which the women's initiative had introduced in the absence of a clear corporate message.

It's not about [literal] equality. It's about creating equality, but in order to do that you have to use positive action so you've got your level playing field ... I think that's the fault of the title - equal opportunities ... and the difficulty is explaining to [male officers] that having a workforce like we do [that is segregated by gender] is utterly unequal (LE 10:2).

### *Departmental differences*

Participants drew their examples of good and bad practice from their work in different departments. The culture in Caulder CC is not unitary, it reflects the particular gender balance of the different departments and also the approach of its top management to equality issues. Alvesson and Billing (1997) support this finding from their research. The example of the Works Department serves as a good example. As a result of the findings in the Positive Action Report, top management had put their collective will behind developing an equality framework for the department. At the end of the



secondment period the department was keen to create a permanent post 'where equal opportunities becomes part of the main function' (LE 13:1). The attitude of these managers stands in contrast to that of the workforce as a whole.

'The problem with equal opportunities in an authority of this size is making it meaningful,' one officer commented (KS 2:5).

Caulder CC is significantly larger than the other two case study authorities. It was a very difficult working environment in which to deliver equal opportunities policies, because employees were 'quite often working in sites far away from the central areas' (KS 6:6) which operated according to their own informal sets of rules and cultures.

## **Catalysts**

### ***Union membership***

Many participants in Caulder CC have strong links with the local unions. The pressure on the Council to establish a formal equality provision appears to have been led by union members working inside and outside the Council. Union activists, particularly those working in the Education and Employment Department (DEED), were connected to women in the women's voluntary sector. As the first section outlined, they came together in the Women's Employment Forum. These women had gained experience of fighting political battles in union bureaucracies. They were not naïve about the tasks ahead, and knew about the hard graft and attention to detail that was required to achieve lasting results from the system. One participant described this way of working in terms of being a political animal (FQ 12:6).

Women's Officers in DEED used legislative tools to advance the equality agenda in the face of management opposition. The Positive Action for Women Report compiled in 1984 is one important example of their strategic approach. This report was 'pretty devastating' (FQ 2:4). It had looked at the Council's internal employment policy by raising different issues in each of its departments. For example, it examined women's career progress, their experience of non-traditional work and horizontal and vertical segregation. In some departments the report identified practice which was in breach of the Sex Discrimination Act (1975).

One department was actually running a system of promotions that was structured around Masonic [activity]. They were nurturing certain people. It was direct discrimination (FQ 20:2).

On the basis of this report Women's Officers negotiated a compulsory system of Equality Action Plans, which required every department to address its shortcomings, as listed in the report. Although the follow-up of the Equality Action Plans was unsatisfactory due to changes in the Women's Officers' staffing, the plans created an important corporate monitoring tool that is still nominally in operation today.

One participant described that legislation on contract compliance had provided a fruitful avenue for the development of understanding about equality and better practice. She used it as a means of raising staff awareness:

Works said to me - now look here, this has nothing to do with equal opportunities it's about cutting grass - but of course the park layouts are a safety issue for women. I didn't know anything about the operations but you question - what's this about? - and that gets them thinking (BD 4:7).

This officer and her colleagues were keen to ensure that the new contracting arrangements which were introduced by the 1988 Local Government Act did not down-grade the terms and conditions of employment of women and ethnic minority staff. She described how she would ring potential contractors to check their equality record, by pretending to be on benefit looking for work, to find out if they had a practice of using non-contracted women on a cash in hand basis (BD 4:6).

In contrast to Belford DC, the Councillors in Calder CC had a mixed commitment and interest in women's issues. Rather than leading the push for the women's initiative, women Councillors were approached afterwards to make up the Women's Panel. One Councillor described how she was drawn into the Women's Panel by accident:

The Women's Panel was new and they tried to get a balance of people on it. [R...] who became the chair and me were approached, partly because we were new, and partly because of our politics [the party whip knew me already] and knew I had an interest (EL 11:5).

EL & QT (1983:84) explain that, in their view, feminism followed a different course in local government in the north of England. The Bennite agenda for greater local



democracy for all, including those traditionally marginalised, appealed most strongly to the unions. The local labour parties continued to be influenced by 'Labourism' the belief that fighting for socialism is best achieved through the parliamentary election of working class members. Consequently, their effort was directed towards getting local candidates elected to central government. Women in these parties did not see any significant opportunities to campaign for women's rights from inside the state. The former Head of the Women's Unit described how her unit had tended to lead the strategic planning of the committee, involving only the most able Councillors in the preparation (FQ 12:6).

### ***Feminist commitment and networks***

The Women's Officers in Caulder CC have shown ingenuity and commitment to sustain the women's initiative for almost 15 years. There are many examples where women have clearly worked beyond what would normally be expected of an authority officer. In particular, the Link Officer System, described in the next section, depends on the motivation and personal dedication of the officers involved. Link Officers volunteered to be departmental representatives for women's equality issues. On top of their existing workloads they act as a point of contact and information for all the women employees of their department. As the Link Officer in the Facilities Department said:

99 percent of the time it doesn't bother you, but 1 percent of the time you think through the battle, and you just don't want it (KS 12:1).

Several participants remarked on the support that the women's voluntary sector has given to the women's initiative over the years of its operation. In the absence of resources or political will from inside the Council, women on the outside have stepped in as new recruits to the women's team, provided ideas and political pressure at crucial moments when the future of the initiative appeared to be threatened (FQ 11:1).

Caulder's equality initiative needs money, but more than money it needs innovation and graft [on the part of politicians and management]. This is the difference between Caulder and [the neighbouring town's] equality unit. Caulder [politicians] rely on community activists to go and do the work (LE 26:2).

The wider women's movement has provided personal support for individual officers in a defensive authority where as one participant put it 'you're nobody's friend' (BD 1:2). The women's team of officers have formalised their contact with other Women's Officers in the region's authorities to provide a forum to exchange ideas and consider joint strategies. All the participants recognised that in the past five years the women's networks in Caulder have been fragmenting. They felt that it has made a difference to the ability of women on the outside to continue to lobby in support of the women's initiative's activities (FQ 18:5, LE 17:1).

### **Institutional Support**

Participants judged that the level of institution support given to the women's initiative was tokenistic and symbolised the ambivalent nature of political support for women's equality. The Women's Panel has never been given a grant aid budget. Its revenue budget has fluctuated in size, paying for a small team of officers which never rose above five people. This small number appears woefully inadequate faced with an authority workforce of 37,000 in the mid 1980s and a population of approximately half a million constituents spread across a wide geographic area. Another indication that participants were correct in their assessment, is the consistency of staff provision and management, which can only be described as erratic. Inappropriate candidates were appointed (FQ 13:9) who had little understanding of inequality. Participants saw this as an intentional move on the part of the politicians and top management to ensure that the administration was ineffective (FQ 14:8). The process of recruitment and selection was ring-fenced, preventing better qualified people with a proven track record from applying (FQ 14:5). Also long lengths of time were allowed to elapse before vacancies were filled.

The lack of a grant aid budget, coupled with sequential cuts to the revenue budget (FQ 5:7) was seen by some participants as a significant limitation to the effectiveness of the women's initiative.

'What needed to happen,' said one Councillor, 'was that a proper budget was given to actually ensure that the recommendations that came out of the Positive Action Report were properly taken forward' (EL 16:3).



The analysis of several of the Women's Officers was different. They considered that having no money was a backhanded advantage. Their contact with the neighbouring city's Women's Unit, which had very large grant aid and revenue budgets, had demonstrated that it was easy for the need to spend funding to become all-absorbing.

In those days [neighbouring authorities] had big budgets, recalled one officer, and they just spent all their time spending the budget and doing nice things for women, but they had no impact on the main service departments (FQ 5:2).

All participants recognised that there was a tendency for departments to see equality as the exclusive responsibility of the specialist unit (EL 16:2). However, with no development budget of their own Women's Officers could more effectively argue for departments to fund and hence manage equality projects themselves. 'If you have a budget the departments chuck women's issues at you' (FQ 5:8). Officers considered that longer lasting changes could be made to the culture and outputs of the organisation if the departments did the work in house. They reasoned that, first, no single women's grant aid budget could ever match the combined spending power of the service departments (FQ 5:9). Second, that getting mainstream departments to do the job involved a learning process for their staff, which could lead to equality considerations becoming the norm (LE 19:3, 20:1).

Officers thought strategically about how to maximise their involvement with departments. They did not passively wait for departments to respond to their open invitation. As one participant said:

I think there has to be something more tangible than [a desire for departmental ownership]. ... There has to be some mechanism ... so that if nothing gets done then you have a set of actions you're going to follow (EL 16:4).

The Link Officer System which Women's Officers put in place is still valued and in operation today. It was achieved due to the corporate clout of the Personnel Department in which the women's initiative support unit was first located.

## *Networks*

The women's initiative created a system of Link Officers that was a high status<sup>4</sup> positive action initiative focusing on internal employment and service delivery planning (FQ 5:11). The system's central aim has been to assist departments to design and implement their own equality work (FQ 6:11). Departments were asked to nominate a female member of staff to join a network of officers from all the departments who were co-ordinated by Women's Officers. The Women's Panel issued a recommendation that Link Officers should be members of the departments' management teams, in order that there were clear channels for information to flow into decision making (FQ 6:12). Link Officers had a clear remit to advise and co-ordinate the creation of the departmental Equality Action Plans. These plans set targets, which are reviewed by the department's committee each year. The Women's Panel made a further recommendation that departments should set up an Equality Task Team, led by the Link Officer, which could consult with the trade unions and women employees before deciding on the finer detail of the plan (LE 7:1). Some departments complied.

The system was standardised slowly over a number of years. The women's initiative did not have sufficient political standing to implement it outright. One participant judged that departments accepted the idea in time because they incurred no costs.

As time went on more Link Officers got it as a recognised chunk of their work. ... It wasn't like new money. It gradually got legitimacy, so that they were then allowed to spend more time on [it] (FQ 6:9).

One Link Officer described that in the Facilities Department where she worked, the link had addressed two different needs. First, it had helped to make the department's Equal Action Plan more relevant to the experience of women employees (KS 2:6). The second benefit was that it acted as a very good feeder system for information. The women's initiative did not have sufficient corporate status to reach out across the authority to women who often worked in locations at a distance from the main site (KS 2:5). The Link Officer was able to tailor information to fit women's different working pattern. For example she sent information out on paper to the department's part-time workforce of women school cleaners, and gave oral presentations herself in



department meetings to reach women who had administrative or management roles. She commented:

It did make a difference people knowing there was a contact point (KS 7:1).

The flow of information was never very big. It was a drip. However, as time went on people felt [more] able to express their thoughts and issues they wanted to discuss (KS 7:4).

Participants recognise that there has been considerable variety in the effectiveness of the link between departments. Women's Officers described how they had attempted to set common denominators across departments. They created a Link Officer logo and held regular meetings. However, because of its voluntary nature, the grade and hence the effectiveness of officers could not be standardised:

Women who became Link Officers were women who were interested in women's issues rather than women who had a key role in the organisation and could influence the departmental management team (LE 6:6).

Some management teams did treat the network seriously from the beginning, and approached a senior woman to represent them (LE 6:7). Several participants thought that this support made a crucial difference to the level of resources which these departments subsequently put into their equality work.

The uncertain fortunes of the women's initiative affected the Link Officer System. Although the work the Link Officers did was for the department's benefit, its legitimacy rested on the continuance of a corporate commitment, symbolised by the Women's Officers and Women's Panel which ultimately evaluated the success of the Equality Action Plans.

## **Projects and approaches**

### ***Community Initiatives***

The ability of the women's initiative in Caulder CC to develop services for constituents has been limited by the lack of a grant aid budget and a limited revenue account. In 1991, even this account was curtailed so that it only covered staff salaries.

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<sup>4</sup> Women's Officers from Caulder CC have been requested by other authorities to explain the model to them, with a view to setting up similar systems in their own administrations (BD 9:8).

It could no longer fund campaigns and small events. One participant described how as the financial situation of the Council worsened, the Women's Officers focused solely on internal policies (BD 2:3). Prior to this the initiative had undertaken modest projects which were mainly aimed at publicising the women's voluntary sector activities. It had produced a handbook of specialist services and a leaflet advertising the different women's events coming up around the region. The former Head of the Unit remembered that to maximise the impact of their limited mail-out budget, women's groups were encouraged to include their own information along with the unit's bulletin. Any group could do this 'as long as they didn't conflict with council policy and they helped stuff the envelopes' (FQ10:8).

Some Councillors were very eager that the Women's Panel should be an open forum for all women in the city to attend (EL 8:3). However, the panel did not go as far as developing a system of co-optees. It held open meetings in community venues. One participant explained that this was due to the huge diversity and the loose nature of the links between the women's voluntary sector.

There wasn't a network that we could link in just lots and lots of different groups ... generally the voluntary sector in Caulder is very like that. ... It's a strength because it's a richness but it's a pain if you ever want to work on something [collectively] (FQ 11:4).

The panel shied away from creating a great bureaucratic structure. It is also unclear whether there would have been consensus among panel members to achieve this. One Councillor described how some of its members absolutely 'hated' having to discuss panel affairs with the public (FQ 10:4).

### ***Internal Policy and Procedures***

As the previous sections have described, the Women's Officers majored on joint work with the Council's departments. They took a certain set of skills and tools with them into departments to assist departmental staff in designing an appropriate project to address a particular gap in their service provision or employee relations. Participants considered that a particularly good example of collaborative working had occurred when an officer was seconded to work in one of the departments, while her post in the women's team was covered for the period of a year. The officer described how the first part of her task had been to write a timetable for the objectives that the



department's management had already set (LE 8:6). Her previous experience enabled her to amend the order of tasks to ensure a more successful delivery (LE 9:1).

'I see myself as a resource not just a monitor or a police person,' (LE 20:5) she said. As a facilitator she was careful not to be the lead actor on equality issues but to help other managers find ways of building tasks into their workloads. She thought that her presence boosted the management's commitment and enthusiasm for equality work:

People were finding it difficult before in terms of their own work raft to act on the decision they'd taken (LE 8:5).

She was able to speed up the process by setting up the preparatory documentation and administrative structures.

There's some great people here she said who really are keen on promoting equal opportunities but never felt able to. I think by having me in this post ... it's helped them to do their jobs better or to speak about things more (LE 22:4).

The type of projects which the Women's Officers have facilitated can be grouped under two headings: those that focus on meeting women's specific needs as Council employees or constituents, and those that have attempted to simultaneously address the gendered stereotypes of men and women's roles that are carried over from the domestic sphere. The first type of projects have included women-only training courses, most notably in the area of manual trades. One participant described these courses as making permanent gains for women, as the courses are accepted as a necessary space for women (BD 5:4). Other spaces for women in the authority include a number of women support groups co-ordinated by Link Officers. The purpose of these groups is to provide an opportunity for women to discuss their problems together and also to formulate recommendations for management about possible changes that could be made. The Link Officer that I interviewed, felt that her group was important because it represented an opportunity for women's different concerns to be recognised. In practice she was less satisfied. It was impossible in a department containing more than 2000 part-time women (KS2:1) for any more than a small number to participate. It was also difficult to get manual and part-time women to

attend since they could not easily escape the timetable of their work, and if they did, they risked losing pay (KS 8:4). However, the officer recalled:

We did meet periodically as a steering group to say - what's the common threads that we need to make sure we're adhering to? - and - what's the difference [between women's situations]? (KS 2:2).

The second type of projects has deliberately aimed to involve women and men 'hitting two birds with one stone' (LE 21:2). The childcare project in the Work's Department is one example. The Women's Officer pointed out that childcare is traditionally seen as women's responsibility. By offering an interest free payment scheme for childcare<sup>5</sup> in a department that was dominated by men, the management gave out the message that fathers should also play a role.

It gives the men the responsibility for sorting out childcare [on behalf of their partners] they have got to come to our personnel section and say well I've booked Tommy or Teresa into such and such a play scheme and this is what its about. It gets them to take on responsibility in a sort of backhanded way (LE 21:3)

Simultaneously the scheme is of use to women employees who may struggle on low incomes to balance work and childcare needs.

The type and variety of projects undertaken by the women's initiative has depended on the circumstance and particular needs of the many departments. A common thread throughout has been the role of the Women's Officer as facilitator and advisor with department staff taking the responsibility for the outcome of the work and also the credit. The achievement of a larger number of concrete outputs following the secondment had encouraged the department in question to look for a way of financing a permanent equality post. As in Belford DC, the achievement of tangible results is an important motivator for staff to assume ownership for equality work themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> A wage deduction scheme for childcare over the summer holidays had been set up, in which employees were advanced an interest free loan to pay for registered childcare which they repaid over a number of months until the end of the financial year.



## Barriers

### *Resilient male cultures*

Participants recounted that there was a very negative perception of the women's initiative among some authority staff. From its inception the initiative had been labelled as a policing outfit (FQ 4:4). One participant remembered that the reaction of Department Heads to the Positive Action Report had verged on paranoia.

‘There was a lot of jumpiness about the report,’ she recalled. ‘Everyone I met whose department had been part of the report immediately said ‘it wasn't true’ before I'd even said anything!’ (FQ 9:6).

The approach of the other equality units had served to heighten resistance and mistrust. Colleagues in the race unit in particular had a very confrontational style of working<sup>6</sup>. Women's Officers described how they had faced an uphill task to reassure Department Heads and convince them that their work could produce useful results. ‘I have to say I think we spent a year convincing people that we weren't lunatics’ (FQ 9:9) commented the former Head of the Women's Unit. Several participants argued that the stereotype of feminism was as potent as ever. They admitted that much more could be achieved if they did not use the words ‘women's issues’ (FQ 14:7). The resistance to the Women's Officers underlines the greater problem of a resilient male culture which was grounded in the authority's hierarchical structures and in the Labour Party's disapproval, neither of which the women's initiative could challenge.

### *Financial situation*

One participant described the authority's economic situation in terms of ‘an endemic problem of finances’ (EV 3:3). Government restrictions on the authority's finances began as early as 1979 and intensified in the mid 1980s as its block grant was successively cut.

When I started working there were 37,000 workers, it's 17,000 now and that's in like 10 or 11 years. ...People don't realise the kind of constant impact of that kind of erosion, it makes any sort of developmental work very very very difficult. You're lucky if you hold the line (FQ 18:1).

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<sup>6</sup>With statutory authority for race relations work, the approach of the Race Officers was extremely ‘heavy handed’ (FQ 7:7) amounting to ‘ritual bollocking’ of departments’ lack of progress at committee meetings (FQ 7:5).

The financial squeeze has affected the work of the women's initiative in two ways. First, Women's Officers were compelled to develop a method of working which relied on accessing departmental budgets, working in ways that required no costs. These methods have been effective, but only to the extent of the resources which the departments themselves could spare (KS 9:5).

The second impact relates to the Women's Officers' own functional effectiveness. 'Every year we were distracted for three months fighting the battle to get rid of us' (FQ 6:14) said the former Head of the Women's Unit. The lack of funds and a policy of compulsory redundancies were the main reason participants gave to explain the repeated restructuring of the equalities provision in Calder CC. For long periods, up to a year in some cases, posts remained unfilled, while a debate about structural form took place or the authority simply put off the expense of an appointment (EV 3:6). The current Head of the Equalities Unit said that one of his main concerns during the process of reorganisation in 1993, was not the vision of equality delivery in Calder CC, but to keep as many people in work as he could (EV 3:7). The patchy nature of the staffing and financial resource provision can be said to have had a profound affect on the effectiveness of the Women's Officers and the delivery of the equality agenda *per se*<sup>7</sup>. Officers have worked in fits and starts. As one participant replied in answer to my question about where she saw women's equality work developing in the next five years: 'I don't think that far ahead I'm thinking as far ahead as March 31<sup>st</sup>' (BD 8:3).

### *Lack of corporate status*

The size of the bureaucracy arguably presented the biggest challenge to the women's initiative. Participants gave very diverse accounts of their practice because it had covered such a wide set of locations and different problems of different degrees of seriousness. The lack of corporate status crucially limited the impact of their work because they were unable, with the staff and resources they were given, to reach out to the 'disparate' fringes of the authority (KS 11:2).

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<sup>7</sup> The lack of coherence of location, funding and function of equality officers hampered their ability to achieve concrete outcomes. For example, the policy on 'Harassment Discrimination and Victimisation' took a staggering eight years to write and agree with the relevant authority staff, politicians and the social partners (EV 7:2).



Some participants flagged up the trial and tribulation<sup>8</sup> that the authority had experienced in the two decades of oppositional politics. They argued that rather than being an intentional ploy, the Labour Party leadership was not in a position to deliver a corporate agenda:

I would say definitely in the last 10 years we've had a Labour group running the Council who've really not known what direction they want to go in. ... They've been very directionless and very reactive and part of that is the result of the constant erosion of funding, but part of that is the calibre of the average Councillor. ... Most people [with a bit of brains] don't want to spend their time dismantling services (FQ 18:2).

## **Results and Outcomes**

Participants could not easily separate the barriers for the future equality initiative from the contextual barriers that affected the organisation as a whole. The lack of political leadership, financial constraints and a reactive inward looking culture made it hard for any corporate agenda, including equality, to be delivered.

Participants were reserving their judgement about the changes that were underway at the time of the case study fieldwork. The newly appointed Chief Executive from a London Borough is attempting to decentralise the authority's departments. He aims to bring the authority into line with current Labour Party thinking that local government's role should be to facilitate economic and social partnerships aimed at regenerating local labour markets (LE 18:5). In a decentralised set-up the equality unit of over ten authority staff will be reduced to four generic equality advisor posts at principal officer grade, who will operate in the centre of corporate policy making each with a specialist area of expertise. This move represents a mainstreaming approach to equality delivery similar to that suggested by Gurbux Singh (Chapter 3). Departments will run their own patch with their local knowledge, in reference to a set of central objectives determined by the core. The specialist equality functions appear to have

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<sup>8</sup> Caulder CC's oppositional stance to the public policy intentions of the Conservative Government has already been mentioned. Caulder CC not only side-stepped spending restrictions running up considerable debt, it also ensured that all services, which were subject to competitive compulsory tendering, were kept in house. As part of the contractual arrangements, the Council included positive action employment quotas for racial equality. Consequently, the authority had experienced an enormous amount of 'trial and tribulation' particularly in terms of press coverage (BD 7:2). The lack of room for manoeuvre in terms of money and recruitment made it hard for any department to work effectively to refute its critics (KS 15:4).

been maintained to develop equality objectives and to symbolise top level commitment to their attainment.

Participants thought that the masculine culture of the organisation had not changed despite the efforts of the women's initiative (LE 10:5). They considered this was partly due to the segregated nature of the labour force which the initiative had not had the resources or the political remit to attack.

'[Women] are marginalised by the greater number of white males who don't see the distinction between being paternal and being patronising,' said the Link Officer (KS 12:4).

It is a diagnosis that the new Chief Executive apparently shared. 'He also sees it as a boys club'... but he doesn't think a lot of it is intentional' (KS 12:3). To tackle the boys club and encourage a more inclusive culture, the new leadership has indicated that it wants to see a better balanced culture through a greater mix of women and ethnic minority staff at senior levels in the authority. Participants agreed that organisational change could bring cultural change over time, however, they questioned its chances of success. They considered that the financial emphasis of the process meant that decentralisation would more likely encourage macho and cut throat attitudes in the workplace (LE 17:1). A culture which again is more suited to male progression.

Those participants who agreed with the Chief Executive's analysis, that sexism was unintentional and that staff were generally receptive to finding the right approach, spoke up in favour of the merits of a system based on corporate equality advisors. This analysis went hand in hand with the observation that staff were generally worried about being 'politically correct'.

Some male colleagues I work with, who I think are reasonable people in terms of gender issues don't know how to say things, because they're worried about self definition. They're worried about - are they saying things in the right way? (KS 17:1).

These participants argued for guidance; key statements from the leadership on the authority's strategies and approach. Interestingly the most fervent supporter was the Link Officer who held a senior management post. She felt that corporate endorsement



would empower her because she would know what was and was not possible, and would no longer feel uneasy about whether her actions were accountable (KS 20:1).

The officer who was about to take on the job of Equality Advisor with a lead role on women, disagreed that the authority had questioned its sexist attitude and was willing to change (LE 17:5). She considered that a corporate equality message was not enough, and believed that positive action methods which were necessarily people intensive were still valid. Another Women's Officer emphasised that the size of the organisation meant that an approach where different Women's Officers were assigned to different departments meant greater coverage and hence better results:

It's quite different to come from a very compact authority whose boundaries aren't that big to come here [and introduce change] we're all over the place (BD 21:1).

All Women's Officers argued that there should be no major changes to the strategic approach that the women's initiative had developed. The new appointee explained that she intended to rebuild and maintain intervention mechanisms such as the Link Officer system (LE 6:9), to explore the possibilities for future secondments (LE 5:8).

In evaluating the Link Officer strategy, participants recognised that the unsettled fortunes of the women's initiative had affected its robustness. Link Officers were not given adequate support from the centre. As a result the link had faded (LE 6:5). The future women's advisor confirmed that she would use her central position to secure the corporate endorsement it required. One participant commented that in a situation where the demand coming from departments is 'where is the added value?' the Link Officer System could play a role in adapting central equality commitments to each departments' specific needs, using the business language to meet departments on their own terms (BD 9:9). With the reduction of the central number of equality officers to four it would appear that the Link Officers could become an even more important implementation resource.

The debate about separate or integrated specialist provision was not mentioned directly by any participants. One Women's Officer made the point that the separateness did not automatically result in closeness and support. She likened her

experience in the women's team to being in a family that did not always get along (BD 4:1). The label of women's issues (as described in the opening section) was also problematic because of the negative stereotypes attached to it. Several participants suggested that the corporate generic title was useful in this respect since it would enable the post holder to introduce women's issues into other corporate issues such as anti poverty (where they would not attract criticism) and could gain legitimacy under its banner. (BD 10:4). However, underpinning all participant discussions of how to manipulate a corporate delivery strategy was an on going commitment to a focus on women and the need for specialist expertise.

Participants were in two minds about the changes which were about to take place. They felt that they could go two ways. The new Chief Executive could be the catalyst for a new organisational structure and culture or yet again token commitment could undermine the Women's Officer's efforts. The only surviving Women's Officer remaining after the changes remarked:

He maintains that equal opportunities is one of his priority areas, but people are saying - well if it is why are you cutting down the number of staff?...The argument back is well we're cutting back on all staff .. [equality] is just being trimmed down proportionally (LE 12:5).

To sum up, the women's initiative in Caulder CC has retained a style of delivery based on specialist equality staff. It has enjoyed greater structural stability than either of the other two case studies. However, the small number of staff and its vacillating resources and function have led some staff to believe that the Labour Party commitment to women's rights has been tokenistic. The initiative has faced two main difficulties, which relate to the size of the administration and its political and economic circumstances.

First, the size of the bureaucracy produced a huge variety of workplace arrangements and cultures. Many departments' workforces were sex segregated along traditional gender roles and their cultures were male dominated. The lack of proper resources meant that the initiative, from the beginning, was forced to look for ways to engage with the departments, to secure access to their funds and to their policy making processes. Mechanisms such as the link officer system and the women's officer's



secondment, gave the initiative greater influence over the development of new procedures but did little to tackle the underlying structural and cultural inequalities. Participants in Caulder CC were aware of the difficulties of defining a single equality programme for women across such a large bureaucracy, since their needs were so obviously different. They adopted both short and long change strategies (Cockburn 1990); trying to improve women's traditional position as well as to transform their dependence on men. This recognition of difference included the acknowledgement that men's views were also mixed. Participants considered that many men were genuinely concerned to assist women but their lack of gender awareness often meant that these actions were patronising rather than beneficial.

The second difficulty which the initiative faced, was the constrained political and economic climate which the authority was working in. This meant that it was a struggle for any development work to be sustained, not only equality work. The Council's national notoriety for radical politics impacted on the initiative in a negative way. The local Labour Party was discredited and began to lose popular support for its agenda. It also meant that women's issues became sensationalised in the media. Inside the bureaucracy this encouraged critics to brand key women actors as radical feminists and lesbians and to view the women's initiative as a policing unit. There was considerable fear around being seen to be politically correct, and this acted as a further obstacle which the women's officers had not managed to overcome.

The unit was mainly sustained by its links to the larger women's movement and by the determination and ingenuity of its women's officers. Women politicians had played a smaller role than in the other two case studies. Most participants were strongly in favour of specialist officers to be retained because the fundamental structural position of women in the authority's workforce and sexist attitudes had not been changed. They argued that owing to the size and dispersed nature of the authority a corporate presence would offer opportunities only if it could be combined with robust lines of authority, equality staff and budgets managed by departments

Caulder CC closely adheres to the version of mainstreaming developed by practitioners in the early 1990s, as described in Chapter 3. Portheld BC, in the final case study chapter, has critiqued this model of delivery as ineffective. Some

practitioners in Portheld argued that a strategy based on single corporate equality advisors was not an adequate mechanism for transferring responsibility for equality work to every member of the authority. There was still an overwhelming expectation that the corporate equal advisors would lead work, a task that as individuals they were unable to fulfil. The difference in size between Caulder CC and Portheld BC's workforces may explain why participants in Caulder have insisted that without specialist equality staff the equality commitment would be diluted and ineffective. As the next chapter shows, the leadership in Portheld BC was confident that with a workforce of under 2,000 people, they could effectively reach each member of the authority using a strong, corporate message and accompanying training.



## **Women's Equality Practice in Portheld Borough Council**

This final case study chapter begins with a description of the delivery of equality objectives for women in Portheld BC between 1989 and 1997, and follows the same format as the previous two chapters. The initiative in Portheld BC, on paper, represented the most advanced form of mainstreaming of all the case study authorities.

### **Description of the Women's Initiative**

The first form of equality provision in Portheld BC was installed in 1989. In the preceding elections a group of councillors representing local black and ethnic minority population were elected and pushed for structured provision. The equality initiative had an externally driven agenda. Provision was in the form of Community Development Officers and corporate and departmental equality staff, whose primary function was to provide opportunities for local residents to participate in decision-making and to gain employment in the Council. These officers were added into the central management tier, and the bureaucracy did not otherwise change in any way. It was a very traditional style bureaucracy, typified by regimented hierarchy and formal relationships.

In 1994, as a result of financial constraints and problems with the equality delivery system, the authority went into crisis. Departments were failing to cope with the new economic situation in which they were operating, and internal relations were at an all time low owing to two serious allegations of sexual harassment made by senior staff. The Labour leadership's commitment to equality and participative democracy was unshaken. They appointed a new woman Chief Executive to run the authority, who in turn appointed two more women to key senior posts. She came to the view that the

previous equality system had only been implemented superficially, without fundamental questions about the nature of discrimination first being asked.

It was like this conflict of message. There was this absolutely strong commitment to equalities but the reality hadn't changed (DG 3:4)

Her approach has been to mainstream equality through a newly created set of organisational structures, suspending the specialist equality posts and insisting that every member of the authority take on responsibility for equality delivery. Significantly, the mainstreaming approach is not only concerned with gender, but also discrimination in terms of race and disability.

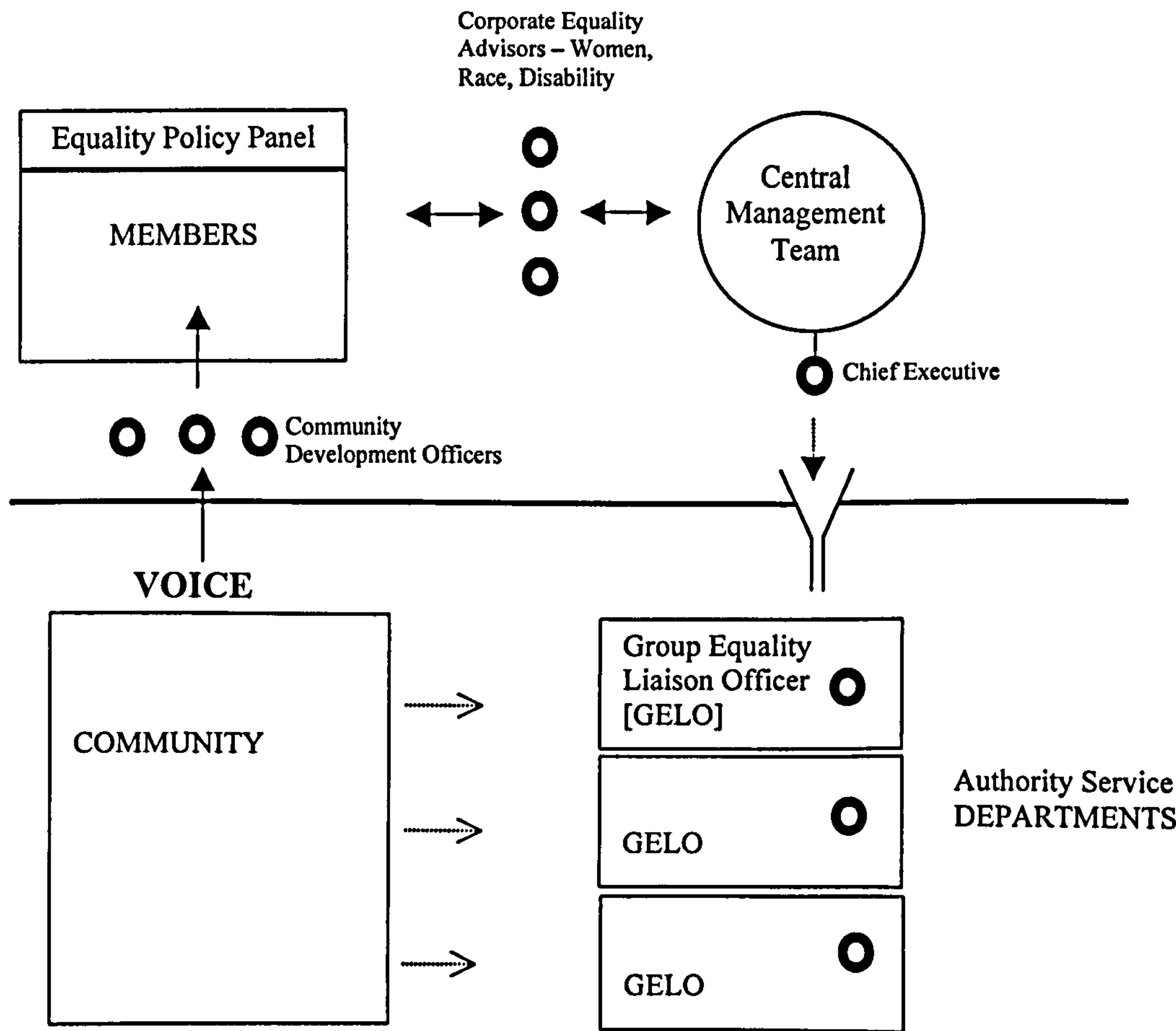
The approach to mainstream equality shares much in common with the methods and ideas of managing diversity (see Chapter 3). The corporate equality objective has been renamed 'Valuing the Rights, Dignity and Contribution of Everybody'. It requires staff to contribute their unique insights to the decision making process, and to be attentive and receptive to the different contributions others can make. The appreciation of people in all their diversity is seen to be the key to better internal and external relationships. Based on her personal conviction that people learn to appreciate difference through interaction, the Chief Executive's aim is to create, 'as many possibilities and opportunities in here for people to network and have contact with each other' (DG 11:4). The management team has transformed the structure of the organisation from one which was strictly delineated and rule-bound to a network where departments consult with each other on joint projects. The transformation of the organisation provides an opportunity to achieve a better representation of women, black and ethnic minority and disabled people.

The tools which the initiative relies on to 'build capacity' in staff to deliver equality work (DG 11:9) are innovatory. They include a management development programme structured into monthly meetings. These meetings are in the form of a workshop. They are facilitated by internal and outside trainers, to assist staff to reflect on the nature of inequality and to formulate policy to address it.

At the time of the fieldwork the initiative had only been running for a year. While there was optimism at senior management level about the progress being made,



participants in the ranks were less sure. There were concerns that staff would be unable to work as 'diversity workers' (AQ 2:6) and that without strong structures abuses would result.



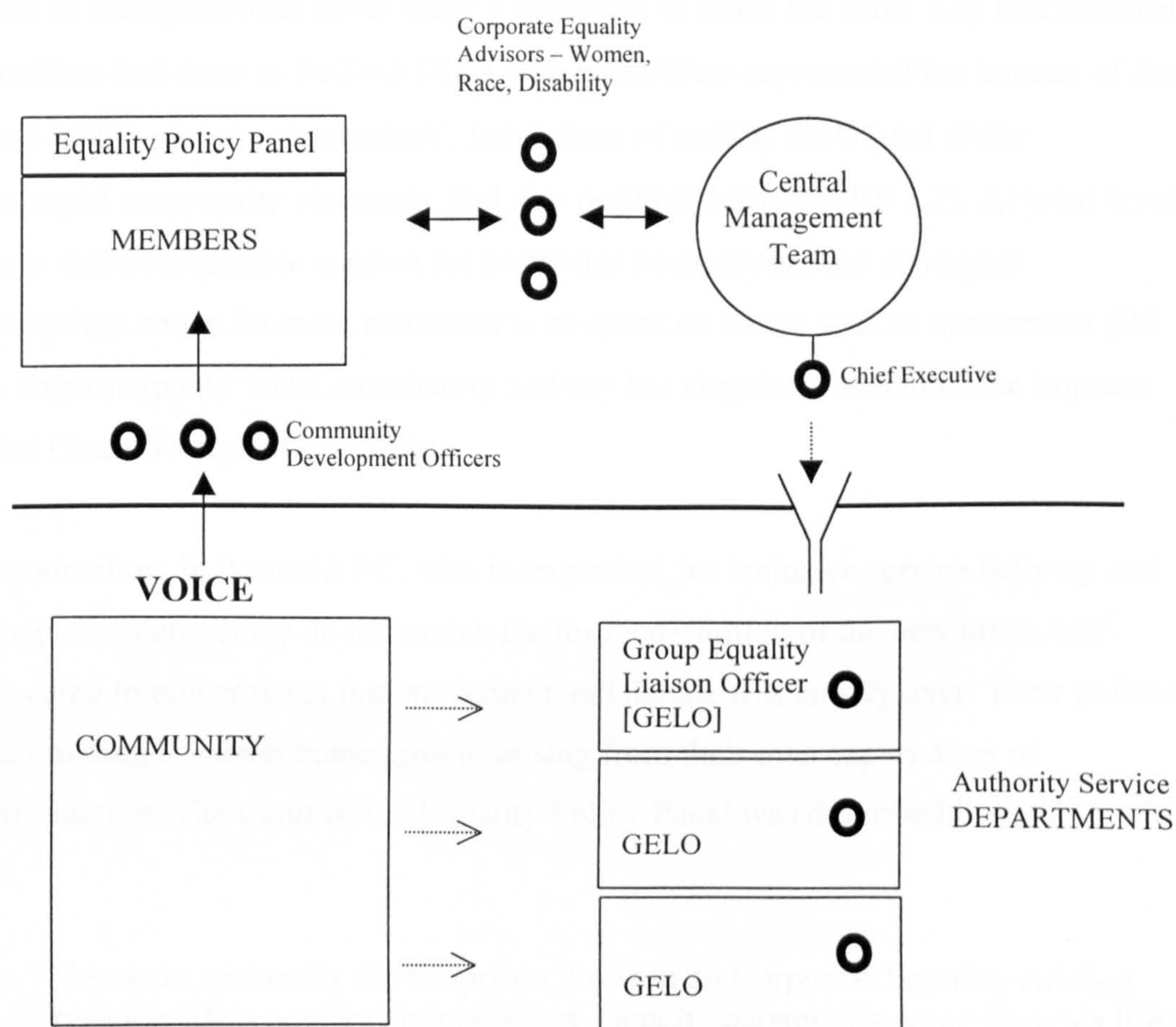
**Figure 1: Equality delivery structures and personnel under the old regime of control and command in Portheld BC (1989-1995).**

### Political context

#### *Local Labour Party Politics*

Unlike Caulder CC, the Labour Party in Portheld BC has not experienced an unbroken history of Council control. Labour only gained prominence in the late 1970s. Its members do not think in 'cradle to grave' terms, but have a keen appreciation that gaining a mandate to govern depends on the match between their policies and local needs (DG 1:2). The nature of the Labour Party relates to the town's social makeup. They appealed to marginalised communities:

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It's a very, very old established community. In some ways it was a market town with a real history, and it's also got a new diverse community as well (DG 1:2).

In the late 1980s a number of key community actors gained seats on the council and started to champion their community's demands, in much the same way that feminist councillors had done in Belford DC. These councillors represented the interest of the town's ethnic minority population<sup>1</sup>. Incidences of racially motivated crime encouraged community closeness, and also political activism (BS 3:2). At ward level there is still considerable support for particular councillors, who champion community's cause for more resources to be spent on issues such as harassment (BS 2:2). In participants' view, community activity has singularly sustained the impetus for the Council's equality provision.

The councillors in Portheld BC, who have pushed for inclusive service delivery and participative democracy do not match Halford's definition of the new urban left<sup>2</sup>. They came to power when that movement and debate was largely over. Their political understanding has been home grown, arising from their own experiences of discrimination. The Chair of the Equality Policy Panel was described in the following way:

He works nationally for the prison union in an Corporate Equality Advisor type job. He's not like an intellectual equality person, it's come from his life experiences as a Sikh and he's sort of responding and picking up what he can. (DG 5:3).

One participant explained that because the councillors had no past experience of equality provision to draw on they looked back to the models of equality delivery developed in London in the early 1980s for an example of how to proceed (DG 1:5). They appointed a new Chief Executive Officer, with previous experience of

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<sup>1</sup> The longest established of Portheld's communities is the African Caribbean community. There are also Sikh and Muslim communities, with the Pakistani Muslims being the largest single group. In total the black community represents approximately 15% of the town's total population. As a consequence of the long residence of some of these communities, Portheld has had a Race Equality Council, a multi-agency forum, since the sixties (DG 1:1). In addition to the black community the Irish make up a similar proportion of the total population (14%) with smaller Spanish and Italian communities forming more recently.

<sup>2</sup> Professionals who joined the Labour Party because they saw local government in the early 1980s as a key local player and who wanted to contribute to the oppositional stance of the Labour Party to the Thatcher government (Halford 1988).

democratisation in one of the London Boroughs. According to several participants there was determination at the highest level to really make a difference:

There was high member commitment ... and close involvement as well. It was like a team, it was the senior management, the new chief exec. The new chief exec and the leader both very committed, both going in the same direction with a lot of commitment and a willingness to switch resources into the process (DG 2:3).

The first attempt at equality delivery has produced a particular set of problems and also left many aspects of the authority unchanged. The following description details what its legacy has been, to establish the context for the current initiative, which started in 1994 and is the focus of this chapter.

### *Bureaucratic culture of command and control*

The authority was very traditional in its ways of working. The Labour leadership focused on the authority's service delivery, which was failing to address the community as a whole, as well as particular racial groups within it.

[In the absence of any previous work on equality] the new regime brought the agenda to the forefront. Portheld was conceptually the back of beyond, they hadn't grasped what was going on in the world and they needed to be dragged screaming into the new century. That was some of the feeling (OC 2:1).

The model of provision that was introduced appears to have recognised the shortcomings of the unitary form of delivery (see Figure 1). Marginalisation and resistance was minimised as the Chief Officer of each department was given responsibility for areas of service development<sup>3</sup>. Allocation of equality duties to Chief Officers was formalised by a system of service delivery targets or Action Points, monitored by equality audits. 'It was like a performance management approach to equality,' commented one participant (DG 2:6). Audits were carried out by Group Equality Liaison Officers (GELOs) appointed within each department. Community Development Officers working closely with community leaders and councillors fed information about the needs of local people into the system. They also helped local groups to apply for funding from the departments. Corporate Equality Advisors specialising in race, women and disabilities assisted at all points in the chain. In this

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<sup>3</sup> For example the Chief Housing Officer was in charge of implementing action on racial harassment. (DG 2:9).



way the system combined both a departmental and corporate level of responsibility for equality work. The emphasis was on improving the community's access to services, decision making and jobs within the authority.

[Equality] means providing for the highest standards of fairness in the provision of services, addressing the barriers that prevent certain groups in the community from participating fully in local democracy, from being heard and responded to by the local authority, and from receiving the services to which they are equally entitled. This also means providing access to employment to all levels within the Council for all sections of the community and for the fair application of employment conditions and policies. (Portheld BC undated<sup>d</sup>)

Participants agreed that the new equality requirements were a shock for the authority. Senior staff suddenly had to monitor their work and manage their departments differently (OC 1:1). However they took up the system rigorously. In the view of the participants' there were two reasons for this. First, the equality system did not require changes to be made to the existing 'command and control management structures' to deliver its agenda (DG 3:1). The capacity of the bureaucracy to deliver equality outcomes was not questioned. The equality system was added to the existing hierarchy, with the intention that it would enhance its performance. Second, the change was instigated from the centre outwards. The new regime insisted 'you-must-fit-in-with-the-new-culture, you have to be committed to equalities' said one participant (DG 2:8). The bureaucracy was designed to respond to this type of instruction. In this context the focus of internal change was to reform management systems to rid them of discriminatory practices.

'The focus was on discrimination,' said one participant, 'that there were a million and one reason why certain people didn't get into organisations. Why women don't get into management, why black people don't get into organisations to start with let alone at management level. [The question was] - What's happening here? Discrimination' (OC 1:2).

He explained how every member of the authority had been issued with a list of the authority's Core Values. Training was undertaken to raise staff awareness of the nature and practice of discrimination and a code of behaviour, the Harassment, Discrimination and Victimisation Policy (HDV) was established. The role of managers and GELOs was to police the new procedures. GELOs' skills focus for

example, was explicitly around advising people on what was right in equality terms (DG p3:3). Managers were given extra compulsory training on the authority's HDV<sup>4</sup>.

This systematic framework put equality very firmly on the authority's political agenda. Participants who had worked to implement the framework emphasised the need for strong policing systems (NH 2:2). They considered that the Core Values and HDV had raised awareness about the commonplace existence of unequal, bullying behaviour (OC 6:2). However, they admitted that on a day-to-day basis the bureaucratic structures were often cumbersome (BS 7:3). Part of the reason for this was that the Corporate Equality Advisors were left on their own to do the majority of the work.

Five years after the system was established the bureaucracy and equality work was in crisis.

The whole authority was in difficulty around its Department service operations [they were losing money]. It was like an organisation failing really because the command and control structure traps all your creativity at the bottom and the job of the people at the top is to keep [that creativity pinned down] (DG 6:5).

Councillors took the radical step of appointing a new central management team because of the serious failures of the old system. The crisis had partly arisen because of the Council's worsening financial position. One participant commented that 'we could not have continued [to provide services] the way we were' (BS 13:1). The authority was failing to meet quality and customer care standards. Like many Labour councils it faced targeted financial restrictions from central government. The requirement for cuts and competitive compulsory tendering of certain authority services had placed a new emphasis on departments to manage rather than provide services themselves. The bureaucracy was ill prepared for this role. Its hierarchical structures were protecting bad management (DG 9:3) and stifling the front line staffs' ability to deliver effective and equitable services. 'It was like going back to the fifties' commented one new member of staff.

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<sup>4</sup> This training was one of three core courses on a 13 unit NVQ for managers that the training department had devised (OC 5:1).



Another argument for radical change was the lack of progress in the area of equality delivery. Despite comprehensive equality structures, two serious complaints of sexual harassment were lodged by senior staff against their colleagues and councillors, which progressed to industrial tribunal. The new Chief Executive considered that these situations had arisen because beneath a very clear statement of commitment the reality for women and ethnic minorities in the authority had not changed (DG 3:4). One very clear demonstration of this was that the senior management team at the time of her arrival consisted of eight, white, middle-aged men. She described her first impression on joining the authority:

Like going back in time, but going back in time in a very rigorous way. They'd been like absolutely rigorous in the way [equality] had been approached. And for me the fundamental contradictions around actually dealing with women, race and so on had never been tackled (DG 5:6).

The lag between policy intention and concrete changes in Portheld BC not only contributed to the persistence of racist and sexist attitudes inside the authority, it disappointed community groups' expectations. The initiative appeared to be 'soft' in their eyes. One participant believed that they saw the authority implementing an out of date solution (BS 2:6), which deliberately aimed at not rocking the boat (BS 2:7). This scepticism increased members' frustration and put them under great pressure to act, which in turn they directed at staff completing a circle of blame. The industrial tribunals irreparably damaged the political leadership's confidence in the HDV. It also had repercussions for the morale of equality staff directly involved in giving evidence in the tribunals, as well as for the authority as a whole, because the story was sensationalised in the local press (DG 4:3).

In this context, the new female Chief Executive and her team have been developing a mainstreaming approach to equality. The ongoing commitment of members to change is perhaps one of the most significant positive legacies of the early equality experiment. In many ways members' determination has been strengthened in having to resolve the problems of the first attempt.

They could see what they wanted and yet they could have this huge organisation that was like an oil tanker, they couldn't turn it around (DG 9:2).

## **Organisational culture and structures**

### ***Rule-bound culture***

The bureaucratic structures of the authority produced a culture that was servile and rule-bound. Participants spoke of a 'paper culture' that prioritised correct execution of procedures above personal communication and co-operation (BS 9:2). Senior management communicated to the rest of the authority via memos: a practice exemplified by the previous Chief Executive who favoured coloured forms in triplicate:

He always wrote things, there was this culture of the pink, the blue and the yellow. ... They'd have instructions on them. Nobody talks to anybody. He never met anybody (DG 8:7).

The underlying assumption was that decision-making was the province of managers. The staff's role was to blindly follow instructions (DG 8:3). The form of the hierarchy reinforced staff's sense of powerlessness. Low skilled administrative staff had very few prospects for career development (DG 9:1). Even staff who were better qualified were constrained; one participant said:

There are people who are bright in all organisations. Either they don't have credibility because they're not in that bit of the hierarchy or nobody listens to them. (OC 8:1).

There was a visible lack of women and ethnic minority individuals in senior positions.

The rule-bound culture encouraged staff to view equality issues as having clear boundaries. The equality instruments were underpinned by the assumption that it was possible for staff to make absolute judgements about right and wrong forms of behaviour.

The old regime around equalities majored on policies. ... [It used the] rational model of if you tell people what to do then they'll do it, because - everybody can do it, can't they? (DG 7:2).

Participants expressed different views about the approach. A Community Development Officer felt that the command approach was necessary in certain circumstances. He considered that it could work if it was less ambiguous in its intentions.



There was all this nicely nicely pat-people-on-the-back training and what that was saying was we shouldn't be aggressive. But when we're dealing with the depot, there were people there who didn't think women should work there at all, and someone was allowed to wear a Nazi ribbon in the training [session] ... you have to think now hang on! (BS 3:5).

In his view the rules were not strong enough (BS 3:6). In contrast others argued that a system of absolute rights and wrongs missed the complexity of the issues involved in staff interaction:

What do you actually do when somebody [is a harasser]? How do you prove it? How do you disprove it? ... A woman could say I was in a lift and this man touched me, what do you do? ... There are informal and formal rules (OC 5:2).

The previous equality approach had not addressed the contradiction between the need to define and condemn discrimination and the need to recognise that 'bad' conduct between individuals is subjectively perceived and often governed by equivocal rules.

The Harassment Discrimination and Victimisation Policy or HDV, is a striking example of the rule-bound culture as it applied to equal opportunities. It aimed to highlight the issues around how staff treated each other at work (OC 5:3) and through a network of sympathetic friends to deal with each case individually. However, while on paper it looked impressive, in practice it was extremely difficult to implement (DG 11:1).

The Harassment, Discrimination and Victimisation Policy ..who's going to invoke that policy! It was absolutely entrenched in the victim perpetrator model. ... They wondered why all hell broke loose because .. anybody who is accused of being a perpetrator was immediately on the defensive. ... They absolutely had to fight it and could not listen to what the other person was saying (DG 5:7).

The punitive system of long-winded procedural judgements made individuals extremely wary of invoking the policy. One participant explained that it bred a kind of fear in managers in their relationships with the stereotyped victims of harassment.

A black person or a woman is not delivering so [managers] don't manage them for a long time and let it build up until it comes to a formal process. So instead of saying [to that person] - get your butt in gear - they go into some funny little arrangement which other people then challenge (BS 3:3).

HDV intimidated those members of staff who were suffering discriminatory treatment because to raise an issue meant escalating it to the level of harassment discrimination or victimisation and therefore labelling it as a major problem. 'Anybody who does use it has got to be extremely brave' (DG 6:1), commented one participant. It also caused those responsible for making judgements on cases to be fearful and hence ineffective.

You've got people on panels who are extremely nervous around race issues who don't feel confident judging whether there's been an equality or discrimination or what ever judging really difficult issues (DG 6:2).

### *Fear of Failure*

The bureaucratic approach produced a second type of culture around fear of failing. Staff preferred to depend on the Corporate Equality Advisors and the GELOs to mediate in their relationships with different groups of people. The Chief Executive recalled a manager at the swimming pool saying to her:

The staff are a bit worried about just going out and talking to the black groups because they feel they ought to go through somebody else (DG 8:4).

The specialist equality staff recognised that staff were fearful of doing something wrong (BS 3:7). But they also recognised that fear disguised an apathetic attitude. In some cases they believed that colleagues blamed them for creating extra work by encouraging communities to express their needs more clearly (BS 3:4). They were certain that without specialist provision, 'someone to prod them' their colleagues would ignore equality issues (BS 1:1).

The new leadership reversed this analysis to argue that rather than the general staff being the problem, the specialist equality staff were acting as a block (AQ 1:5). Their presence caused dependency. They considered that staff burdened individual advisors with their problems, not seeing the need to take any action or responsibility onto themselves. Speaking of the Corporate Equality Advisor on Race, her line-manager explained:

In the past [O...] has just carried the burden of everybody. All the black staff come to her and tell her what a nightmare it is. All the black community come to her to tell her what a nightmare it is. [O...] herself is an impressive worker but she's only one human being (AQ 4:1).



Even staff who did not have immediate need for equality advice could be described as dependent.

If there's some kind of equality that's special and different and you need a special advisor for it, nobody bothers to think about what that means ... and it gets more and more mysterious (AQ 4:10).

The same participant felt that the advisors themselves can encourage this attitude by making 'equality more and more a science unto themselves' (AQ 4:4). This tendency to defend specialist expertise increased when systems failed to show results.

What some people do if its not working is to do it more and more. ... It's just more commitment ... more resources ... more effort, more policies, more experts ... and then we could sort this lot out. (DG 17:3)

In the new leaderships' view the problem with the Corporate Equality Advisors went back to the organisational structure itself (see Figure 1). Their position as part of the central management team set up an unhelpful organisational dynamic. The close relationship between the Corporate Equality Advisors, individual councillors and the community leaders meant that wider channels of communication between other authority staff and these groups were not established. Consequently the department staff did not hear first hand the community's issues but instead waited for instructions to filter down from the top. An expectation was set up that equality specialists were there to provide the interface with the community.

The way this model works is the workers, the members and the chief executive get the picture and then the Chief Executive tries to impose that on the main service providers ... but it's a very narrow line of influence. ... The power base is so hierarchical all the learning takes place [at the top] . (DG 7:6)

### *Professionalism*

Several participants remarked on the importance that staff gave to professional expertise over community knowledge. There appeared to be a deep-seated disapproval of the community by the authority. 'People are addicted to that traditional council thing about the people out there, they're trouble makers,' complained one participant (BS 14:1). It is possible to suggest that the structures that kept staff apart from community contact reinforced these views. Community Development Officers, who liaised with the community, were reportedly seen as disruptive influences, part of the

'loony left going into communities and stirring up trouble' (BS 8:1 & 3:4). This participant concluded that Chief Officers had been prepared to assume responsibility for equality work, because they saw it as a way of gaining greater control over community demands. Ironically in practice it increased their reliance on equality specialists because they lacked the confidence to deal with the reality of community contact (DG 8:5).

I get it on the community liaison - oh this is a community group issue [B.....] where are you? We need you to read this - and it turns out to be a property issue, but because they're community organisations I have to be involved. Like if it's a black group, forget what the issue is, they want to invite a race speaker (BS 3:7).

This last point raises the issue of tokenism, the superficial adoption of a policy or an approach to placate those demanding reform. Participants identified that very often the rhetoric of the previous equality system served to hide prejudice, indifference and ignorance of the intended outcomes. The objectives of the Labour councillors were frustrated by the reticence and inertia of the bureaucracy that hid a lack of change behind the system. One participant compared Portheld DC to the previous authority where she had worked. It too had a similar paper bound culture. Despite elaborate systems of monitoring and ticking boxes the understanding and commitment to achieving equality did not change because 'everyone can look at the equality action plan and can write down three things' (AQ 1:8).

## **Catalysts for change**

### ***Political will***

The support from the Labour group is crucial for the process of change underway in Portheld BC. The Chief Executive recalled that after her interview, in which she had explained her vision for the authority, she thought:

I won't get that job, if they appoint me it'll be like jumping off a cliff and I don't know if they want to jump off a cliff yet (DG 9:4).

It appears that politicians did. Her appointment and the councillor's endorsement of significant structural change has given the Chief Executive Officer and her team confidence and the ability to create the conditions they see as necessary to achieve results. 'There wasn't any ambiguity about what I was going to do' (DG 9:8).



Importantly, political support was in the form of a 'meeting of minds' between leading politicians and the Chief Executive. Councillors recognise that their own practice must change along with that of the authority (AQ 5:3).

### *Charismatic, feminist leadership*

All participants commented on the importance of the new Chief Executive in building support for a radical programme of change. In contrast to the previous Chief Executive, 'who met nobody,' she spent the first few months of her appointment meeting staff in their offices (OC 14:2). She considered that this contact has given her a fuller picture of the problems that staff feel most keenly. Some of these problems she heard from staff themselves, others she gleaned just by looking (DG 14:3). A member of the central management team described how liberating it was to work with somebody who did not stick to convention and positioned themselves as a actor in the process rather than its director (AQ 7:3).

The Chief Executive described herself as a '*woman* Chief Executive'. 'The way I look at the world comes out of my history and my sort of oppression, or the way I've been treated' (DG 12:5). She acknowledged that her feminist perspective made her especially sensitive to the gender balance of the authority. She had used her authority to ensure the greater representation of women. Two out of three newly appointed Corporate Directors are women<sup>5</sup>. In the process of re-structuring the departments the Chief Executive has attempted to ensure that women deputies are promoted into new vacancies and not overlooked (DG 7:3). This intervention has potentially placed more gender-aware women in the authority's structures, who are receptive to the mainstreaming agenda. The central position of the Chief Executive ensures that a critical perspective of the authority's gendered practices is maintained. The methods being used to raise staff awareness about gender and to embed mainstreaming in the heart of the authority's practice aim to ensure that her commitment will not be the only safeguard of the feminist perspective.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 external appointment, 2 internal candidates appointed.

### ***Key actors with expertise***

The Chief Executive has assembled a group of senior managers around her who share a similar political background. They work together as a think-tank, to brainstorm ideas and methods of change (my own observation). Previous experience of implementing different models of mainstreaming appears to have given the team a vital advantage. The Chief Executive was one of the key policy advisors in a district authority which had attempted to mainstream its equality specialists (and hence equality responsibility) in a process of service department decentralisation. The Corporate Director I interviewed had developed a model which valued customers' diversity in Camden LB Social Services Department. Both women described how they had spent a number of years reflecting on the problem of how to make equality meaningful in mainstream services. The combined years of experience behind them means that the management team have considerable equality know-how, and the ability to analyse more adeptly where the most significant problems lie.

As well as expertise, participants described how the team had enthusiasm for the challenge ahead. 'We want to *really do* something' said one senior manager (AQ 3:5). This participant was motivated by the size of the authority that meant that mainstreaming seemed 'doable'(AQ 1:1).

We were talking about taking forward the corporate plan of which 'Valuing the Rights and Contribution and Dignity' is one of four elements, and really actually isn't it possible to work with all 800 staff in Portheld's social services? Because it's small enough that you can actually do a change programme and you know it's working at all levels (AQ 2:4).

Her previous experience in a more junior position, in one of the largest London metropolitan boroughs, was that equality initiatives tended to be swamped by other priorities. In contrast, Portheld BC offered an exciting opportunity. For all the members of this team, including the Chief Executive, this was their first opportunity to hold positions with top level structural power. 'There's enough drive between us to really want to take this on' (AQ 3:6).

### **Institutional supports**

Changing organisational structures and relationships has been one of the key objectives of the incoming Chief Executive Officer and her new team. Changes have

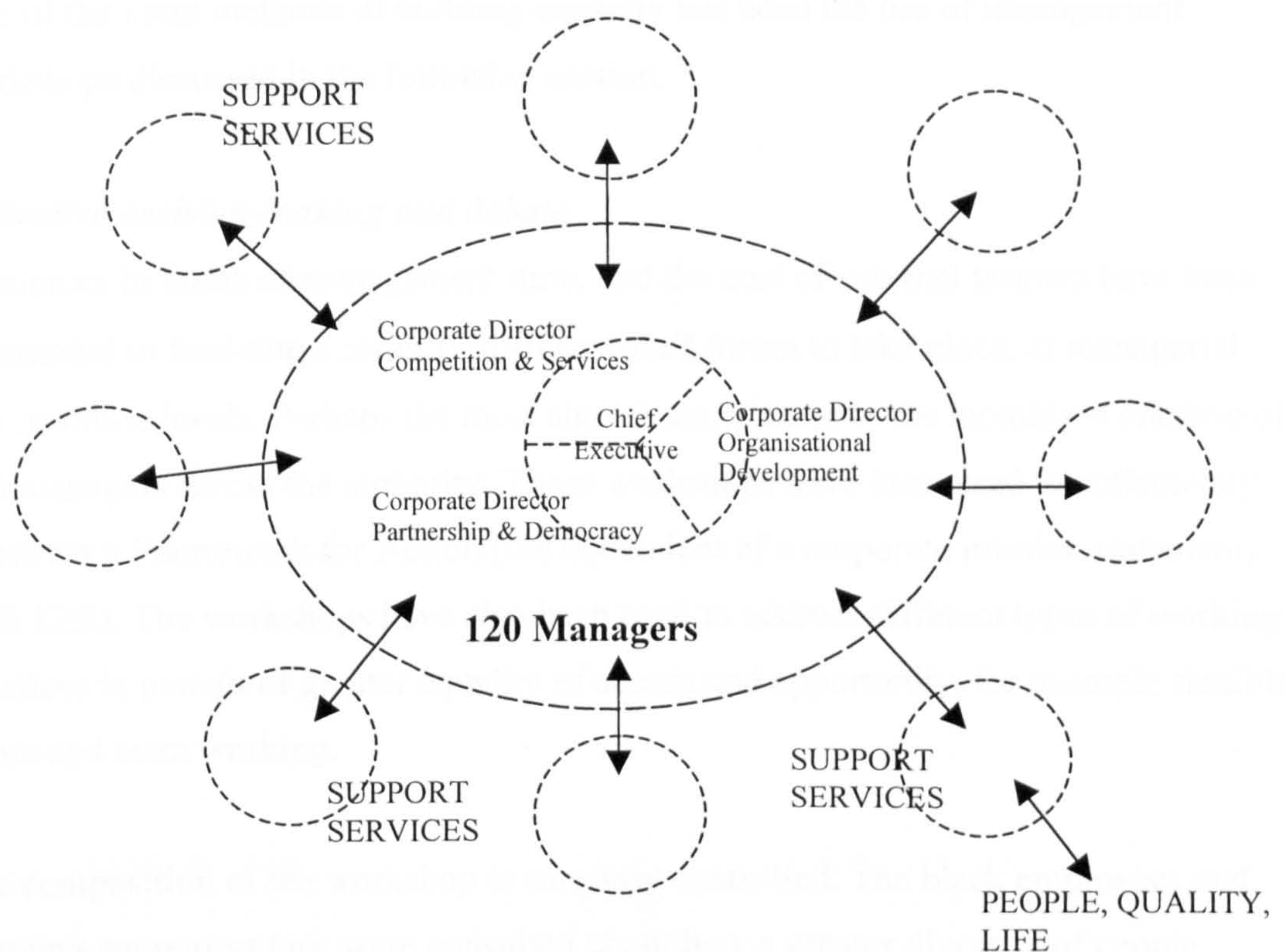


taken place on three different levels: on a conceptual level the team has attempted to redefine the organisation's equality goals to escape an absolute view of equality; on a personal level they have looked for mechanisms to help staff to contribute to this debate and to understand their own relationship to the organisation's equality goals; and lastly, on a structural level they have tried to ensure that the hierarchy allows this change to be reflected in the interpersonal relationships and daily practices within the bureaucracy. The team acknowledged that they had not resolved the issue of what to do with the specialist equality officers. The immediate way to start tackling the existing framework has been to include these officers in the decision-making process, and to see if a solution emerges through discussion.

### ***Structural reorganisation***

The leadership has restructured the authority's hierarchical structure to that of a networked organisation. Departments have been streamlined into a multi agency consultancy model, in which they work jointly on service delivery projects. This restructuring involved the retirement of many traditional senior officers who were unable or unwilling to adapt to the new status quo (DG 10:3). The new arrangements have also suspended the central specialist functions for Equality, Personnel and Environmental Protection. The intention behind the model is to secure the financial viability of the departments, to encourage innovatory working practices and arrangements and to escape the rigid control hierarchies of the previous regime (DG 9:5). Participants were very clear that the previous organisational structure had stifled personal input and development. (OC 8:1). The intention with the new structure is to support a more open dynamic, equitable team-based way of working





**Figure 2: Portheld BC authority post 1995 as a networked organisation. Equality objectives delivered through participative decision-making process.**

The Chief Executive Officer described the new arrangements as the opposite of the system approach in which one executive tells everybody what they should be doing in detail. This detail then gets written down in procedures that are subsequently difficult to up-date and amend. She was against defining problems absolutely, by putting boundaries around what was and was not possible. Instead she described how she wanted to create the capacity in people to learn and adapt. Her personal belief is that people learn through greater interaction. Hence she wanted an organisation with more learning edges 'to have as many possibilities and opportunities in here for people to network and have contact with each other' (DG 11:4). Many of her ideas had emerged from the innovative practice being advocated by the Local Government Management Board whose courses she has attended.

I have found out that what I have been doing for years without knowing is called emergence methodology (DG 11:8). ... In this methodology you don't have to write the detail down, you just deal with the situations that arise, using particular tools and approaches. So I've concentrated on approaches and tools and learning and methodology rather than the process bit. (DG 12:6)



One of the main methods of building capacity has been the use of management workshops discussed in the following section.

### ***Collective decision-making and debate***

Resources in terms of management time, and the cost of external trainers have been committed to facilitate a series of different staff forum to take place, at managerial and frontline levels. Perhaps the most significant of these is the monthly workshop of 120 managers across the authority. These workshops have been used to collectively construct a Framework for Action (the equivalent of a corporate mission statement) (DG 12:8). The workshops have also been used to address different types of working practices in pursuit of greater equality of access and opportunity, for example flexible hours and team working.

The composition of the workshop is carefully controlled. The black employees and women's support groups were consulted about how a greater diversity of people including those on lower tiers could be involved.

We deliberately constructed the programme so there was an equivalence, if not a majority of women and black managers in it, so that the programme itself would reflect diversity (DG 6:10).

The Chief Executive explained that in her view the workshop has a positive effect on the consciousness of its many participants. Women and ethnic minority members are encouraged to see themselves as part of the polity and aspire further. All participants are prompted to recognise the validity of many different people's contributions (DG 6:11).

### ***Theoretical models, practical guides and new concepts***

The difficulties that the HDV have caused have already been described. The leadership suspended this policy. It has attempted to change the way the organisation's equality objectives are phrased and conceptualised. In doing so they aim to overcome the simplistic understanding based on victims and perpetrators that was perpetuated by the previous regime. The Chief Executive Officer described how she had drawn tools and models used in the private sector to help staff understand the complexity of a harassment situation. One example of a model that has been used in management

workshop is the 'Cycle of Prejudice and Discrimination' (Brennan 1996), which describes how discriminated groups emphasise their difference until it feeds prejudice. The new concepts have been targeted at different groups of staff. For example this model aims to help those who had championed the old system, particularly the equality staff, who were described by one participant as 'still locked in' to actively embellishing their position of discrimination (DG 17:3).

As one participant in the management team commented, 'language is important' (AQ 13:3). Staff knew the Core Values of the old system off by heart (Portheld BC undated<sup>d</sup>), but nobody knew how to apply them to their day-to-day job (DG 15:2). In the management workshops participants have been involved in re-wording the values to replace technical jargon for descriptions in everyday 'plain' language (AQ 3:2).

If you say equality everybody goes de de de de that's what equality is, but if you say what does that mean? Nobody knows. For example Sustainability is [rephrased as] Resources in Regard of our Children's Future, this helps people to understand (DG 15:4).

Equality in the new version of the authority's objectives has been renamed 'Valuing the Rights Dignity and Contribution of Everybody'. This definition appears to reflect the idea enshrined in the HDV, of treating people with respect, although no participant confirmed that this was a deliberate intention. Participants did stress however that the new definition aims to escape the debate about why inequality exists, and instead to provide a way of acting against the causes.

On the equalities objective, it's about helping people secure their rights, listening to people. So that's the thing around respect because if you respect people then you're tackling inequality (DG 16:3).

Lastly the management team has tackled the issue of prioritisation; to consider how the commitment to 'Value the Rights Dignity and Contribution of Everybody' relates to the authority's other key goals such as those around customer care, service targets and environmental considerations. The hierarchical position of the former Corporate Equality Advisors gave a clear signal that equality had status in the organisation. As the authority moves to an organisational structure where these figureheads are removed, and replaced by mainstream responsibility, there is a need to explain how equality is part of everybody's job. The new Chief Executive Officer considered that a new list of organisational priorities was not the answer.



Everybody's confused about the old Core Values - it's like which came first, environmental issues or equality? There was no sense of how they fit together (DG 15:5)

The Core Values have been transformed into the Framework for Action (Figure 2 below). Four key areas of work (including equality) are presented as the control gauges of a plane. For the plane to fly effectively each one needs to be optimised. This model recognises that at different times during a policy process, one of the four objectives might be at a lower ebb than the others. Staff should check to ensure that as the policy continues each objective is balanced alongside the rest. The model was adapted by the Chief Executive Officer from the accountancy model of a balanced scorecard (DG 15:5). She discovered it after reading one of her husband's accountancy text books. As she said:

We've adapted it to describe a balanced score card of what our priorities as an authority really are. This is the new language for equality ... it's unpicking the words so you can rethink it (DG 15:3).



**Figure 3: Portheld BC 'Framework For Action', with elaboration of the criteria under the equality commitment**



## **Projects and approaches**

At the time when the case studies were conducted the new leadership had only been in position for just over a year. The Chief Executive explained that most of their effort had been directed at talking to staff in an attempt to change their ideas as a prerequisite to action. This section mainly comments on the process of discussion as no new equality projects had been designed under the new approach.

### ***Valuing Diversity***

Participants talked about the operationalisation of equality delivery in terms of valuing diversity. Participants considered that the new definition for equality 'Valuing the Rights, Dignity and Contribution of Everybody' required two sets of actions. First, positive action was needed to change the composition of the workforce so that there were more women, black and ethnic minority and disabled members of staff in all vertical grades of the hierarchy. Participants thought that a better mix of people would increase the diversity of contributions to the authority's decision-making systems and hence improve their relevance and applicability.

I'm not saying it is inevitable, but it is certain that if you broaden the picture wide enough then these other factors get brought in. If you only have eight white men sitting trying to think about equality, or whatever, they're never going to come up with what those others are going to come up with (DG 11:3).

The second sets of action aimed to enable staff to interact effectively with people inside the authority and with service users.

'I carry in my mind a picture of ... an ideal diversity worker,' commented one senior manager. 'They can go in and out of different places but also they can engage with human beings of all different types in all their diversity and make them feel comfortable' (AQ 2:5).

Participants saw the two sets of actions as mutually reinforcing. The problem that managers foresaw was how to convince staff of the benefit of the system and to get them to change their personal relationships. One manager pointed out that this kind of change would not come about through issuing guidelines, it relied on finding a more effective mechanism for raising consciousness.



The only problem in my mind is the hearts and minds of the individual staff, ... [People have said] at the end of the day you'll just have to instruct, but I don't think you can really because if you've got workers who won't bite, then they're fundamentally discriminatory in their practice and you instructing them won't change their mode of truth (AQ 3:4).

The Chief Executive was tackling the issue of winning hearts and minds by using the management workshops to raise awareness. She also considered that by changing the physical environment and working arrangements, greater tolerance would naturally evolve. However, the same manager emphasised that it was not enough to assume change was passively taking place. In her view, monitoring was a vital tool to prevent the worse misdemeanours slipping through. The opportunity meaningfully to participate in corporate decision-making laid down certain conditions with which staff had to comply.

[The staff] have all got to be plugged in. But you've got to take it all the way .. you've got to be really getting down to look at their practice and seeing what they're like, and listening to the feedback and not tolerating it if it's not ok (AQ 3:6).

## **Barriers**

### ***Insecurity***

The insecurity caused by rapid change has been well documented in management literature (Holtermann 1995). In Portheld BC's case, insecurity has arisen from the contrast between a systematic approach and a networked approach. The absence of detailed written guidelines increased the possibility in staff's eyes that they could act inappropriately towards each other and towards service users. One senior manager recalled a recent conversation with a member of her staff:

He ended up saying to me - it feels scary because at least there were all the procedures even though they were completely pointless because it didn't stop discrimination ... but at least you felt you had the security of that. What have we got now? (AQ 4:2).

The Chief Executive Officer described the problem in terms of the staff's lack of faith in themselves caused by the command and control style of management that disempowered them from acting on their own initiative (DG 15:6). Her whole approach centred on encouraging staff to see themselves as active resources rather

then as passive implementers of instructions (DG 14:4). Despite management training, however, participants suggested that they were not convinced:

I mean hierarchy is sneered at, but it's got its stabilities. ... Project working and dynamic and flexible working has the competitive edge in sound and practice, so people go for it, but making it work in practice is quite challenging. Dynamic force is a lot harder to contain and to maintain than a hierarchical structure where everybody knows their place. They fit in neatly and it goes down the line and that's all there is to it (OC 7:1).

This participant identified that dynamic ways of working made reaching a decision more difficult, and in his view sometimes impossible (OC 7:2). Comments such as these underlined the second problem facing the new approach, that change of this nature requires a long term commitment of time, resources and political will.

### *Time and resources*

The process of effecting a paradigmatic shift in the thinking of every member of authority staff is resource intensive. As the Chief Executive Officer admitted:

We spent six months talking about - what's the vision for Portheld? ... What should we be working on? And that discussion involved the [time of] core of managers, the members and lots of other people (DG 12:8).

One senior manager added that the emphasis placed on valuing every staff members' contribution had to be substantiated if it was to be seen to be genuine. The resource demands would need to be increased to allow all grades of staff to participate in the workshop programmes.

If you're really going to have new ways of working, where you value [every staff members'] contribution then you have to ... provide substitute temps to cover them (AQ 4:5).

At the time of conducting the case study these resources were available. However, as Halford's work has shown, a change in the economic and statutory duties of local government, which is out of authorities' individual control, has in the past impacted on a leadership's ability to continue to fund equality work (Halford 1988). Resources for the process appeared to be secure in the short term. What was less clear was whether politicians' patience would last. Participants described how frustration with the lack of concrete outputs from the previous system had been one of the primary reasons why the Labour leadership selected a new Chief Executive. Her position and



her whole project is premised on the promise of results. The Chief Executive Officer acknowledged the difficult position this presented for her and the approach. Her methodology relied on time to talk, 'the tension is, to make things happen you have to have the right understanding' (DG 13:3). To enhance the impression of change, and to bring action to the forefront of managers' minds in preparation for when the discussions were reaching their conclusion, the Chief Executive Officer used language very deliberately:

I'm trying to do this thing where we keep saying we're focusing on action, but a lot of what we're doing isn't focusing on action, it's talking about how things should be, relationship building, all of that (DG 13:2).

Meeting members' high expectations, and ensuring that the process does not become totally internally absorbing are both difficulties which require careful management. The leadership in one sense can also be seen as a necessary resource in any transformational project. 'Culturally the three corporate directors are crucial' explained the Chief Executive Officer 'they're all really committed to not creating the previous structures and problem' (DG 9:10). The necessity for the right people with commitment, power and understanding goes back to the issue of relying on equality champions. These champions can become indispensable to the change process, which is then left in a very precarious position should they choose to leave the authority.

### **Results and outcomes**

It was difficult, given the brevity of the Portheld initiative to gain the participants' perception of the outcomes of the mainstreaming approach. There was a difference of opinion between the incoming leadership and that of existing members of staff whose jobs and roles were in the process of being changed. The latter were experiencing changes happening at first hand and were backward looking in their assessments. The leadership was less circumspect. Its description was too tied up with the vision of what the authority would look like, rather than the situation on the ground.

Participants who had been employed under the previous regime discussed the diversity approach at length. The use of diversity as a way of describing the complexity of the needs of service users and employees appears to have given rise to a confusion of terms. One participant described the authority's strategy to 'Value the

Rights, Dignity and Contribution of Everybody' interchangeably with 'managing diversity' (OC 6:3 & 7:3 ).

'Managing diversity', as discussed in Chapter 3, is a distinct set of methods that draw on a business case for equal opportunities<sup>6</sup>. Rees has described managing diversity as 'ideologically loaded' (1999:3). Using her typology of the key elements of a managing diversity approach, drawn from a study of private sector organisations, it is possible to understand why participants in Portheld are confused. The key elements are:

- consultative mechanisms to engender a listening culture, which allows individuals to discuss barriers to equality.
- emphasis on the dignity due to employees, by demonstrating that stereotyping and harassment will not be tolerated.
- team-working, embodying a principle of inclusiveness, based on mutual respect between employees.
- measures to assist employees to reconcile work and family responsibilities, accompanied by a culture which values productivity rather than long hours.

(adapted from Rees 1999:4-5)

All these other features aptly describe the principle of 'Valuing the Rights, Dignity and Contribution of Everybody'. However, based on the Chief Executive Officer's description, the initiative in Portheld will go beyond 'managing diversity'. A managing diversity approach is oriented towards securing economic benefits, and acknowledges certain differences between employees on an individual basis. In contrast, the diversity approach in Portheld is focused on achieving social justice for different groups of participants, based on their holistic experience. The management workshops aim to prompt individuals to consider their own contribution to group power relationships. The emphasis is not merely for participants to reflect and discuss the barriers they face, but also the barriers their actions perpetuate. The leadership has recognised the way in which working arrangements sustain dominant white male cultures. They have not only put in policies to support employees' domestic roles,

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<sup>6</sup> 'Managing diversity' refers to techniques first developed in the US to cope with the organisational dynamic of multi-national workforces. It also includes a focus on opening new markets and reaching



they have also fundamentally reshaped the authority's bureaucratic arrangements so that members of staff come to understand the nature of 'work' in a different way.

Managers and officers need to see themselves as resources to people and not experts, and that's a subtle difference (DG 14:4).

The Chief Executive Officer described how she wants officers to offer their knowledge, but not to be worried if that advice is rejected on the strength of other people's experience. The workshop forum requires officers to talk to each other, but also to be prepared to engage in a reciprocal debate. This form of engagement demands the expression of personal opinions, which may or may not be accepted by the group. It asks individuals to give of themselves and not to be equivocal about what they believe and how they identify themselves. 'They have to hear there's another valid approach to the technical' (DG 15:7). The understanding of diversity which the Chief Executive Officer is promoting requires individuals to change their self-identity as officers, managers or members.

We've got a classic councillor. ... He said - I've told the town hall before that why won't they do this thing - and I said well you *are* the town hall. ... They don't feel powerful and they don't think - I'm in the middle of this - ... They feel on the outside shouting in (AQ 5:4).

Although the Chief Executive Officer is unambiguous in her definition of valuing diversity, other participants, including a member of her management team still appear to be held back by the association of diversity arguments with service efficiency. One of the Corporate Managers summarised the diversity approach as follows:

I mean fundamentally all we want is a bloody respectful workforce that listens to what the customer needs and gives it to them, and if they can't deliver it themselves they say - sorry but I'll take it up with my line manager (AQ 4:6).

And an officer in the Training Department said:

Hard and soft HRM [human resource management] both believe that people are central to any competitive advantage. ... and then hard HRM says that people are valuable assets but they are like capital and land, employed and deployed as needed. ... Where as the soft approach will say that these are people who are valuable because that can add something to it, not because

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new customers, through effectively relating the development and sale of services to all sections of the population.

they can be deployed ... soft HRM is the desired one. This is what we are selling in diversity and dignity at work (OC 8:2)

Putting aside the issue of economic motivations, one participant, who had worked in Community Development, reflected on the opportunities of valuing diversity and the new structures in place to support it. He welcomed the more open and fluid nature of bureaucratic relationships, because his attempts to work inclusively with colleagues under the previous regime had been stifled by administrative attitudes and structures. His approach had been to 'prioritise people over paper' to avoid the stifling effect of 'setting the bureaucratic wheels churning' (BS 1:2). However, he was unsure that staff without a similar background to his own would take up the possibilities offered by the new structure, to network with people in context. He described the attitude of his colleagues as follows:

It's not officers genuinely saying - oh we don't want to talk. It's more like them saying - what an inconvenience it is. What's the relevance of it? What will it add to the thing? - and sometime I've had to say - it's not going to add anything you haven't already thought about, but it's going to add a quality to it and a thickness that will actually hold it up (BS 10:2).

He questioned the assumption that the majority of the staff had the ability and motivation to value each others' contributions.

The Chief Executive Officer is saying - open everything up - and that's OK, but for me you've got some people who haven't got the skills to be involved in that (BS 13:2).

He suggested that this lack of skills was not an easy deficit to repair:

I worry for the ability to deliver [equality] in terms of the personnel here, but I think that it can obviously be learnt so it's not an impossible situation (BS 9:1).

He recognised that some of his colleagues saw the new administration as 'getting them off the hook' (BS 13:3) for past failures under the old system. He thought they had little intention of embracing the new approach with any more sincerity than the last. He also feared what he called the 'gang mentality', which in his view has a greater opportunity to assert itself against disadvantaged groups in a situation where organisational authority is devolved (BS 13:4). Lastly, he thought that even those who were willing to learn could be overcome by the sheer complexity of the changes



taking place, rendering them ineffective. 'You're left with what appears to be chaos to the average person who can't get their head round it,' he said (BS 13:5).

For this participant community development was an exemplar of an approach in which staff respect people and deal with the diverse requests of constituents and colleagues. He did not think that the new diversity approach went far enough to stress the centrality of equality expertise. He claimed that he had already seen the results of this lack of understanding. Colleagues were not getting good responses from their efforts to engage with the community and hence were becoming put-off. He recounted how a colleague had said to him: 'We've been to talk to them and they're not interested' (BS 10:3). He was concerned that failures would also result from departmental attempts to recruit a greater diversity of people to fill vacancies. With only a superficial understanding of inequality, he was concerned that managers would leave new staff without adequate support, and then question why they were failing to do the job.

Some of our managers are going to be saying ... we want a black person in that position or maybe a woman ... and with no support, and expect them to clear up all this stuff [around valuing diversity] and then say well we're doing the right thing how come it's not working? (BS 14:4).

The two participants who had held equality roles under the previous regime were concerned by the emphasis on difference rather than on group perspectives. The former Race Equality Advisor defended the need for equality specialists, because in her view only they had the skills to ensure that consultation meaningfully addressed group discrimination (OG 2:9). The example she gave was that of working with the Muslim Community where men prioritised and expressed the community's problems and women's views could easily go unheard if officers were not alert to women's disadvantaged situation. (OG 2:9).

The leadership was not insensitive to the need for equality know how. However, rather than using officers with lead roles in equality (for the reasons discussed in the section - Organisational structures and cultures, Fear of failing) they were trying to achieve commitment to address group discrimination in the management forum. The mechanism of consensual decision making aimed to compel managers to put their pen

to paper to reflect on, design, and agree to the Framework for Action. 'The corporate management [and hence its objectives] is the responsibility of all of them,' said the Chief Executive (DG 10:5).

While overcoming the shortcomings of the previous system, the fluid working arrangements being promoted by the leadership have the potential to duplicate many of its problems. Participants felt that there remains scope for hierarchies to reform, perhaps on a more informal and hence exclusive basis. In their view, it also cannot easily avoid an element of tokenism underlying staff's performance. As the senior manager said capturing peoples' hearts and minds to the process is crucial to the new approach. She put her faith in continued internal communication to create a new mode of thinking and a new knowledge base (AQ 3:9).

To sum up, the leadership in Portheld BC was following an ambitious project of mainstreaming responsibility for gender equality outcomes. It aimed to transform the consciousness and commitment of senior and middle managers into achievable equality objectives and issues. Using a mechanism of participative decision-making, alongside positive action measures to promote women, it was attempting to build the capacity in staff to deliver the equality agenda themselves. At the time when the fieldwork was being carried out, the leadership was still unsure whether specialist equality staff, with named responsibility for equality work, would be necessary. It had however critiqued the former equality structure, which consisted of corporate and departmental equality officers, claiming that it had produced a dependency culture: Staff appeared to be fearful of failure and of overstepping professional boundaries, hence they had left equality work to the equality staff.

As with the other two case studies, the main barrier which the new initiative in Portheld BC faced was the authority's structure and culture of command and control. Hence, the mainstreaming equality initiative was being implemented as part of a larger initiative to transform the internal and external relationships of the authority. The key catalysts driving the transformation to a 'networked' organisation were Councillors and their constituencies who were determined to achieve concrete outcomes. They worked together with the Chief Executive and her hand picked team of experienced change agents. This team contained a number of people who



understood and supported the end goal of women's equality. Unlike the mainstreaming initiative in Belford DC, they embedded the discussion of the new equality objective of 'Valuing the dignity, rights and contribution of everyone' into the process of structural reorganisation.

Language and capacity building was at the centre of the mainstreaming initiative. A great number of new models had been introduced, in collaboration with external trainers. These models aimed to help staff to re-think the commitments they had made to equality under the old regime, which they blindly pursued without adequately understanding the complexity of the issues. Participants acknowledged that this re-thinking process was not straightforward. This was most apparent in the discussions about 'valuing diversity'. In the accounts they gave, staff appeared to have confused valuing diversity with the popular debate about managing diversity which had negative, economic overtones. Insecurity was compounded by the pace of the changes taking place. The wholesale criticism and reorganisation of the old ways of doing things had left staff feeling bereft of landmarks and unsure of how to act. Participants who had worked under the old regime were not convinced that participative decision making would be enough to empower the majority of authority staff to act on the equality agenda. They stressed the importance of specialist intervention.

Portheld describes the most theorised example of mainstreaming, and one which comes closest to developing a gender perspective, through its emphasis on diversity. Although the ideas appear to be well thought through, the data available gives little indication of the extent to which practice has followed theory. In the interim evaluation, summarising what the authority had achieved by February 1996, participants indicated that in terms of the culture of the organisation they were 'four years on – light years on' (Portheld BC 16/2/1996). However the report goes on to suggest that there were still contradictions and confusion about how equality commitments related to day to day service delivery and professional relationships.

## **Theorising Equality Practice in the Case Study Authorities**

This chapter aims to analyse the changes to equality practice in the three case study authorities. Using Connell's concept of the 'gender order' the mainstreaming solution in each authority is contrasted with the practice that went before it (Connell 1987). His framework makes it possible to identify the strength and weaknesses of the new approach. One weakness that is implicit in all three case studies, is the absence of officers with gender know how to take advantage of the opportunities which the new structural arrangements have provided. The importance of individual actors has been largely ignored in previous explanations of feminist practice, which has tended to mainly focus on the nature of the constraints imposed by structures and systems. Putting a premium on actors, the chapter goes on to reconceptualise women's equality practice as a strategy of gendered embodiment. This draws on Acker's work on the lived body experience in organisational life (Acker 1992). Using her idea of the 'gendered substructure' the chapter argues that changing the accepted form of workplace embodiment appears to be crucial to the success of a mainstreaming project, which relies on winning the heart and mind of every member of the organisation.

The opening section briefly summarises the assessment of the case study participants of delivering equality programmes through specialist structures versus mainstream responsibility. It describes the mainstreaming solutions of the case study authorities, before going on to apply Connell and Acker's theoretical frameworks in each case.

### **Perceptions of the mainstreaming solution**

The participants in all three case studies considered that specialist expertise and named responsibility for equality work provides the following benefits:



- Expertise: maintains knowledge of how to deliver equal opportunities in practice.
- Symbol of commitment: acts as a constant reminder of equality goals to guard against complacency.
- Positive action mechanism: provides a point of entry and support for women in the authority and the Council.
- Concrete results: places responsibility for reaching equality targets with named individuals.
- New action: inspires, co-ordinates and facilitates new initiatives occurring within the departments.
- Alternative perspective: evaluates practice from a critical viewpoint to establish where work still needs to be done.

All participants recognised the shortcomings of delivering gender equality through a single dedicated unit or group of individuals. A separate provision caused resentment among authority staff. They resisted its arbitrary authority. A separate provision also gave out the signal that equality was a discrete area of expertise that had no bearing on other types of service delivery. Service departments tended to leave equality to the 'experts' or if they did get involved in joint projects they often viewed them as optional extras to their statutory duties. The association of equality work with 'experts' also made it seem mysterious and beyond the scope of ordinary officers.

Participants recognised that an approach of mainstreaming equality as a core corporate objective provides a way round these difficulties. As an organisational objective equality becomes applicable to all service departments in the same way as quality and efficiency standards apply across the board. It is no longer a set of actions performed by experts, but a principle which any employee can pursue. It shifts the compulsion from a single structure that struggles alone to overcome resistance by making it every employees' responsibility to sanction and uphold.

In Belford DC the authority abolished its women's initiative. Mainstreaming equality was implemented alongside a process of decentralisation of service departments into neighbourhood based groups. A brief was given to one of the three Corporate Directors of Neighbourhood Services (newly appointed) in the central management team, whose position was entitled Director of Community Development and

Equalities. The procedures of assessing equality implications were standardised on all reports and policy documents. Equality became one of the authority's business objectives.

Caulder CC was the only one of the case studies that did not explicitly describe its approach as mainstreaming. Its entire experience conformed to a specialist approach to equality delivery. At the time the case study was conducted the authority was planning to streamline its service departments into larger directorates. The Equalities Unit, containing a team of three women's officers, was to be reduced to one women's equality post. This post was to be situated in the Chief Executive's policy team to advise the corporate management team at the highest level. These changes had not yet come into effect.

In Portheld BC the authority was in the process of reworking the position of the Equality Policy Panel, the Corporate Equality Advisor on Women and the GELOs. It was unclear whether specialist equality posts would be retained. The authority had undergone internal reorganisation from traditional departments into a networked organisation of independent cost centres. One of the three (newly appointed) Corporate Directors held a position with named responsibility for internal relations. Equality was one of four new guiding principles of the corporate Framework for Action that had been negotiated in conjunction with all the second and third tier managers. Consideration was being given to creating monitoring and support procedures.

All case study participants argued for an arrangement that retained the advantages of both a structural delivery mechanism to provide the impetus for change, and a corporate mechanism to transfer responsibility for equality across all authority staff. A majority of them accepted that women's officers were more effective if they were integrated rather than separated from the mainstream authority activity. However, they differentiated between integrated structures and generic responsibility, which dispensed with their specialist expertise altogether. Generic responsibility was the approach taken in Belford DC and Portheld DC. Participants here were worried about the future of equality work. Generic responsibility was a backward step in their view because it made no one accountable and lost sight of the lessons of past experience.



None of the participants described what had happened in their respective authorities with absolute certainty. Change has been complex and dynamic. None of the authorities had carried out a comprehensive equality audit to establish a starting point to record what had been achieved. Many of the outcomes of these initiatives were not intended, nor clearly conceptualised from the outset. The inability to prove that women's initiatives had been beneficial added to the general feeling of frustration and concern that some participants expressed about the introduction of a mainstreaming approach. In order to evaluate their mainstreaming solutions it is necessary to contrast past achievements with the new situations. Connell's concept of the 'gender order' will be used to provide a framework for this analysis because the authorities' own criteria for successful delivery are vague or non-existent<sup>1</sup>. The activities of the women's initiatives will be arranged according to the different elements of the gender order at work in the authority. In this way it is possible to identify where change has occurred, and what opportunities a mainstreaming approach creates.

### **Using the 'Gender Order' to explain organisational interaction**

Connell describes the gender relations operating in a social organisation as a 'gender order' constituted by interacting social structures. These social structures are not only visible physical arrangements but refer to unspoken cultural and emotional rules as well. They cause human agents to limit their behaviour and actions, while providing them with a framework through which they can produce results beyond their individual capacity. Agency (practice) and structures in Connell's gender order are inseparable. The influence of structures is present in everyday actions, consequently structures are vulnerable to change in the event of major shifts in practice. By giving practice a role in constituting structure, Connell moves away from a systematic view of male power, where every structure is determined by male authority. Individual actions, motivated by other power interests can change

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<sup>1</sup> It does not seem useful to contrast each authorities' mainstreaming solution against the practice criteria laid down by the European Commission. These criteria were not available to authorities as they formulated their strategies, they were established only after the case study fieldwork was complete. Mainstreaming equality in British local government has been developed in a different context to that of the European Union and holds a different set of insights (as discussed in Chapter 3). It is an objective of this thesis to determine if there are any lessons from the UK experience that can inform the development of the broader mainstreaming agenda.



structures over time<sup>2</sup>. A duality of agency and structure suggests that piecemeal action can affect and reverse underlying social structures over time. Connell emphasises the historicity of this interaction. Unlike Giddens (1984), he considers that the context in which agency takes place does not derive from the alternatives offered by the underlying structures. Instead he sees a situation (a historical period of time) providing the context for agency which references underlying social structures in framing its precise action. Connell recognises that society can exist apart from people's understandings and motivations.

Since the consequence of practice is a transformed situation which is the object of new practice, 'structure' specifies the way practice (over time) constrains practice (Connell 1987:95).

Connell's gender order is made up of three discrete sets of social structures. These structures have been identified in recent academic research<sup>3</sup>. They are structures concerned with the *sexual division of labour*, those concerned with *power through control and coercion* and those which fashion *emotional or personal interaction* (cathexis). More specifically the structure of the sexual division of labour includes elements such as the gendered segregation of the labour market, the tradition of labelling jobs as 'women's' and 'men's' work and the gendered design of machinery, hours of work and career paths. Power structures serve to legitimise male authority, and consist of the effort and resources needed to maintain men's privileged position, the hierarchical arrangement of men and women within the male hegemony and its demonstration through organisational cultures. Cathexis details the many levels of emotional behaviour, both visible, covert and frequently ambivalent, that are expressed and experienced by members of the gender order, and the cultural fashioning of these behaviours into acceptable relationship patterns.

A gender order seems an apt way of describing the large social organisation of a local authority. Women's officers have identified the hidden and overt social structures in the bureaucracy that limited their agency, but they have failed to

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<sup>2</sup> An extreme revolution of gender relations is not the only way to reverse discrimination.

<sup>3</sup> This framework is useful for viewing *contemporary* gender relations, however as Connell stresses, it can not be seen as exhaustive since research progressively identifies new conceptual gendered structures.



link them into one whole. Their perception of themselves as facilitators to encourage ownership for equality policies acknowledges the duality of agency and structure. Their practice over time, with varying momentum, in different milieu, has changed the way things have been done and perceived. Historicity is represented by the external events initiated by central government (e.g. rate capping, compulsory competitive tendering, media campaigns) and internal decisions (e.g. decentralisation) which have fundamentally changed the context in which the dynamic of agency and structures operate.

### **Applying Connell's gender order to case study equality practice**

#### ***Sexual Division of Labour***

The social structure of the sexual division of labour is rooted in the organisational hierarchy. Figure 1, below outlines the common situation that the women's initiatives faced when they were set up and the actions they took to remedy it.

In each authority women were segregated into the lowest paid sectors and junior positions in the hierarchy. As the feminist literature discusses, vertical and horizontal segregation is perpetuated by women's greater responsibility for domestic and caring tasks (Crompton & Sanderson 1990), their own socialisation into these roles (Oakley 1982, Pringle 1989), and a lack of social expectations, resources and role models to contradict this situation (Davidson & Burke 1994). In Caulder CC vertical and horizontal segregation of women in the authority's workforce (described in the Positive Action Report) provided the rationale for the women's initiative to be set up. Similarly, in Belford DC the Women's Committee was preceded by an equal opportunities initiative that had a remit to target discriminatory recruitment practices, that were typified by male service heads 'picking who they wanted' (TL 1:2). The form of employment offered in each authority reinforced discrimination against women. For example, contracts in Belford DC made no maternity leave allowance (WB 1:4), and the standard working day expected of employees in Portheld BC forced working mothers to make very complicated after-school childcare arrangements (DG 11:2). The sexual division of labour

has been the starting point for many women initiatives (Goss 1989). It is the most visible of the social structures of the gender order.

The women's initiatives in both Belford DC and Caulder CC were set up with a remit to tackle internal procedures and practices. In Portheld BC the responsibility of the Corporate Equality Advisor on Women was to address the authority's external relationships with women in the community. Internal equality issues for women employees was not prioritised until the arrival of the new Chief Executive in 1994. She identified it as an important part of the preparations for a mainstreaming approach. Women's initiatives have used a range of methods to change the sexual hierarchy. Job-share arrangements and written guidelines on maternity and parental leave have been devised to relieve the tensions between work and domestic responsibilities. Women's training and career development has been delivered to equip women for senior positions and to open up opportunities into non-traditional areas of work. In Portheld BC the leadership has actively sought out women for promotion to vacant or newly created posts (DG 9:7). More participants in Belford DC and Portheld BC considered that these measures had brought significant changes to the authority's internal structure. This may be due to the relative size of Belford DC and Portheld BC's work forces which are approximately one tenth the size of Caulder CC's. In Belford DC, one participant claimed that the effect of this work has been a very high retention rate among women employees in the authority and their subsequent promotion due to their sustained length of service and experience (WB 3:2). In her view employment policies have visibly altered this social structure of the gender order by catering for women's family role and beginning a tradition of women in senior managerial roles.



Structure	Elements of Structure (adapted from Connell)	Situation	Equality Practice – Specialist Unit
<b>Sexual Division of Labour</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gendered segregation of labour market</li> <li>• Labelling jobs as women's and men's</li> <li>• Gendered design of machinery, hours, career paths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service heads all men – controlling recruitment</li> <li>• Gendered jobs with women at the bottom</li> <li>• No inclusive policies to account for women's domestic responsibilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personnel procedures re-drawn</li> <li>• Women trained/retained in manual trades and management</li> <li>• Procedures for maternity, adoption leave and job share</li> </ul>

**Figure 1 : Sexual Division of Labour**

### ***Power***

‘Control and command’ (DG 2:8), ‘Greek temples’ (IA 4:3) ‘old boys’ network’ (KS 12:3). These phrases were used by participants in each of the authorities to describe their departmental relations. The traditional power structure in local government has been dominated by men because of their position in the most senior positions in the hierarchy:

Each male bureaucrat, whatever his style or his location in the hierarchy, had a tradition of ten thousand years of bureaucratic power behind him, stretching back to Babylon (Eisenstein 1990).

Studies like that of Cockburn (1991) describe how dominant groups of men consciously and unconsciously set up working arrangements and expectations that protect their own interests. Participants in Belford DC and Portheld BC had observed many examples of male power in practice. In Belford DC participants described how Chief Officers demanded absolute loyalty from departmental members, discouraging communication between the service ‘pillars’, labelling it as treacherous (IA 4:3). In Portheld BC the independence of different departments was established by professional qualifications. The deference accorded to expert officers served to divide staff and keep them at arms’ length from the community. The credibility of those staff who worked with the community and championed their views, was belittled (BS 10:4).

Women's officers had clear strategies to infiltrate departments' decision-making processes (Figure 2). Empowered by its internal remit, the women's initiative in Caulder CC (and the Equal Opportunities Unit in Belford BC) had attempted to extend its influence using a system of link officers. These were women officers nominated by departments to meet with the women's officer to discuss their department's equality initiatives. The strategy of pulling managers out of their departmental context, in order to get them to commit to corporate equality goals has been implemented by the leadership in Portheld BC in preparation for mainstreaming. In Caulder CC and Belford DC the systems had struggled to be effective. One participant in Belford DC explained that it expected too much of the link officers. They were unable to act on their new commitments because it was too uncomfortable to pursue unpopular policies with the colleagues they worked alongside on a daily basis (WB 7:4).

All three women's initiatives have experimented with annual equality action plans, endorsed by the political leadership, as another way of compelling reticent departments to act. The bureaucratic rationale of local government has been built on systematic paper based approaches, however, participants in Caulder CC explained that the culture of 'paper pushing' did not necessarily result in effective outputs. The lack of understanding and commitment from staff meant that their Equality Action Plans had a one off impact. Once the initial effort of designing them was over, they were filled with the same answers each year, with no noticeable changes being made to service delivery. In Belford DC participants described how collusion between male politicians and the Chief Officers meant that departments were let off 'doing their homework' (WB 9:1). In Portheld BC Action Plans became the equality output. They were a symbol of the authority's equality pledge, but obscured the fact that real change was not occurring.

The women's initiatives in each authority mounted a direct challenge to professional knowledge and its power structures. They questioned departmental decisions by demonstrating that the ideas and opinions of women in the constituency were at odds with those of the administration. In all three authorities women's officers and councillors invested time to train ordinary



women to participate in the women's political committee so that this input was formalised. Departmental staff fought to retain the high ground. In Portheld BC a Community Development Officer commented that his colleagues were reluctant and fearful of engaging with the general public. They told him that they did not consider that it could improve the decision making process. He considered that they were resistant because their individual self esteem was rooted in their professional qualification. In Belford DC another Community Development Officer felt that class prejudices were to blame. He believed that 'educated' officers would not accept that working class populations could add anything useful to a discussion (IA 4:2). Participants concluded that departments were successful, in most cases, in rebuffing new models of community consultation. However, the women's initiatives had pioneered important consultation mechanisms that were more widely adopted in the 1990s as the sector as a whole began to focus more on customers' needs (OA 6:3).

All these practices were direct attacks on the power structure of the gender order. The threat it posed to both to the status quo and powerful individuals was at the root of authority resistance to women's initiatives.

Structure	Elements of Structure (adapted from Connell)	Situation	Equality Practice - Specialist Unit
<b>Power / Authority</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masculine authority is legitimated power</li> <li>• Effort and resources needed to maintain male hegemony</li> <li>• Hierarchies of men / women within male hegemony</li> <li>• Power enacted via the medium of culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male networks</li> <li>• Endemic professionalism, 'expert' culture</li> <li>• Territorialisation, empire-building between Chief Officers</li> <li>• Collusion between male councillors &amp; officers against women's issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Link officers from depts. work with women's unit</li> <li>• Action plans for equality progress – monitoring</li> <li>• Alternative ideology - officers as facilitators not experts, community knowledge valued</li> </ul>

**Figure 2: Power and authority**

### *Cathexis*

Acknowledgement of the impact of single actors on organisational arrangements has been missing from previous analysis of feminist practice in local state. Cathexis is a particular strength of Connell's framework for this analysis. It allows the contribution of key actors to be effectively evaluated and credited. The key actors in this case study were the women's officers, their allies and women councillors. In the management of their personal relationships each individual contributed to the pace of change (Figure 3).

Participants' accounts reveal that in Belford DC and Caulder CC the women's initiatives became a target of attack because they had a remit to change the bureaucratic status quo. Women's officers recall that their personal authority was undermined by jokes and innuendoes that the women's initiative was a 'policing unit' (TL2:4). Dominant male homo-sociability appears to have been at the root of this abuse. Parkin and Maddock's (1992) typology of different organisational cultures can be applied to the situations that these women's officers describe. The behaviour of male Chief Officers conforms quite closely to their description of the 'gentleman's club' culture, based on traditional gender roles, in which men treat women in a paternal and courteous way, but in turn expect them to be demure and supportive.

Women's equality officers in all the authorities were resourceful individuals. They appear to have read the culture of their environment, and astutely managed their personal relationships accordingly. One participant in Belford DC described how she would question the relevance to existing conventions while maintaining an engaging and warm relationship with the person she was challenging. This approach lessened officers' resistance, either because they enjoyed the jovial sparring or because they were flummoxed and felt unable to use their accustomed put-downs. This strategy did not always work with everyone. Participants recognised that knowledge of when not to be confrontational was also important.

The ability of some women successfully to challenge and to win round colleagues made them 'equality champions'. This was particularly the case in



Portheld BC, where the woman Chief Executive inspired the staff around her. They all commented on how important her individual motivation and enthusiasm was to the change process. In Belford DC and Caulder CC women appear to have drawn inspiration from each other. They developed friendships that overstepped the formal distance characterising relationships between authority colleagues. This partly arose out of the combination of their personalities. In Caulder CC the former Head of the Women's Unit described how she had developed a close relationship with a one of the Chairs of the Women's Committee which made their work together more enjoyable and effective. Intimacy also developed as a result of participants' shared political commitments (JM 3:1). The hostile atmosphere in which women's officers worked meant that many participants had placed great value on the opportunity to retreat back to an all-women structure in which to debrief. As one officer in Belford DC put it they supported each other 'through some really horrible times' (WB 6:2).

Structure	Elements of Structure (adapted from Connell)	Situation	Equality Practice – Specialist Unit
<b>Cathexis / Emotions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many levels of emotional behaviour – visible and shadow</li> <li>• Emotional experience characterised by ambivalence</li> <li>• Patterning of acceptable social relationships can change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gendered culture determines appropriate behaviour</li> <li>• Resistance on a personal level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignoring grades, saying the unthinkable</li> <li>• 'Femalestream' - mutual support of all-women units</li> <li>• Importance of personal attributes to success of strategy – equality champions</li> </ul>

**Figure 3: Cathexis**

In summary, the effects of the activity of the women's initiatives as a specialist provision, are as follows: women's officers have been successful in altering the sexual division of labour for women employees in their authority. This social structure is the most visible of the three structures of the gender order and the easiest to counter. Changes to the employment practices can be effectively implemented via existing personnel training mechanisms. The

effect of women's agency on the departmental power structures has been less effective and provoked a defensive reaction. The fiefdom arrangement of service departments made it relatively easy for them to resist. In attempting to alter cathectic structures, pockets of good practice have been established in departments where individuals were allies of the women's initiative. Those women's officers who were adept at managing their personal relationships achieved considerable results. The question, which the next section addresses, is to what extent has the movement away from specialist provision to a corporate mainstream commitment enhanced or negated gender equality in the social structures of the gender order?

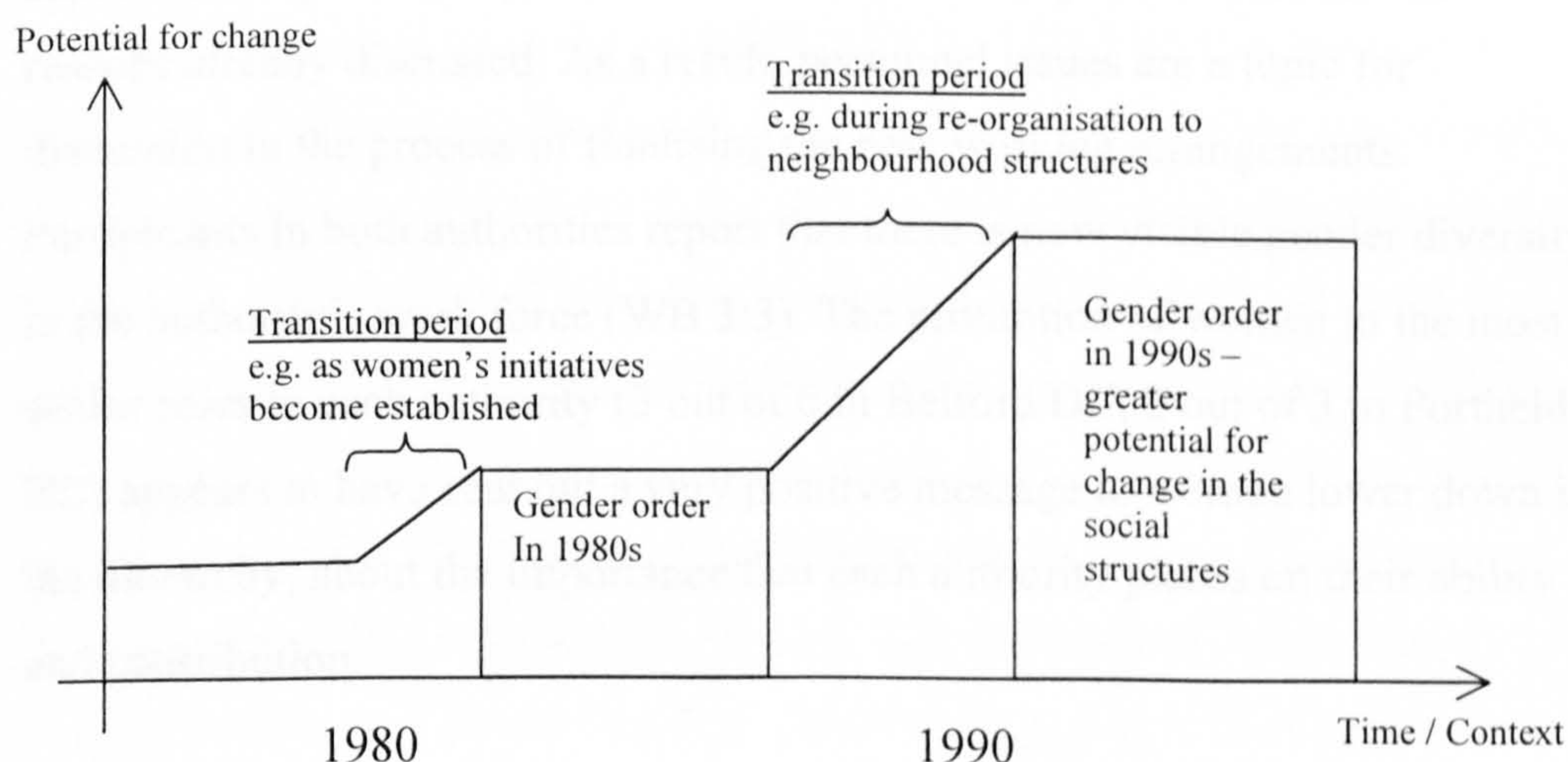
### **The gender order following the implementation of mainstreaming**

As Chapter 3 described, mainstreaming ideas have been developed partly in response to the problems of specialist provision but also in response to the changing circumstances and role of local government. In all three case studies participants suggested that the re-organisation of the women's initiative has not been designed as a discrete policy, justified on its own merits alone. It is part of two larger overlapping projects; downsizing employee numbers and reorganising service delivery to be more accessible and applicable to the needs of the constituencies it serves. From the perspective of the participants, mainstreaming equality is indistinguishable from these other strategies for financial quality and efficiency improvements.

Some case study participants identified that the barriers to equality delivery are the same as the barriers to a decentralising process. Both processes demand changes to the status quo and the creation of more democratic power relationships. A Women's officer in Belford DC commented that during the process of decentralisation, it was necessary for the new Gender Manager to remove the 'dead-wood', those Chief Officers whose 'cradle to grave' mentality made them unable to accept the new financial and political environment. These officers were the main opponents of the women's initiatives (IB 3:2).



Connell's framework emphasises the significance of shifts in the contextual situation in bringing about change in the gender order. It is possible to argue that the authorities have faced two different contextual situations. In each 'period' the scope for change in the gender order of each authority, has been different and different strategies have been required to maximise the equality opportunities in each of the order's social structures. The external context of socialist radicalism in the 1980s changed the gender order of the case study authorities: new women's structures and remits were created, that then went to work on the gender order's different social structures. In the 1990s an emphasis on customer-led delivery and financial efficiency has changed the gender orders again. They have a greater scope for change, because not only have corporate commitments to equality been made but the structures of the authority are more gender diverse and receptive. The task ahead in adopting a mainstreaming approach is to ensure that the new opportunities are identified in each of the order's structures and that appropriate strategies are employed to secure them effectively. Women's officers have already been rehearsing strategies which now, under the new order, have a greater chance of being successful.



**Figure 4: Consecutive gender orders in local government. The latest one holding the most potential for change within its structural elements (sexual division of labour, power structures and cathexis)**



Internal restructuring took place in Portheld BC and Belford DC before the fieldwork was carried out. New gender orders have been established in these authorities. The following description explores the opportunities and constraints that women's officers have identified in the pursuit of greater equality in this new context, using the new mainstreaming approach available to them. In Caulder CC reorganisation was still in the planning stage in 1996. Their gender order was in transition. It is still possible to take a few examples from this case study as participants expressed their opinion of what problems they might face after reorganisation.

### *Sexual division of labour*

Changes to the sexual division of labour in Belford DC and Portheld BC are summarised in Figure 5. Decentralisation has removed the former service heads and replaced them with a greater proportion of women, in a flatter management hierarchy. In Belford DC the personnel practices and training for women have been carried over to the new structures (WB 3:2). Female participants who gained senior appointments during the restructuring process, and who personally benefited from this training, say that they now actively promote training opportunities for women. Portheld BC had not developed sophisticated personnel practice under the previous gender order for the reasons already discussed. As a result, personnel issues are a topic for discussion in the process of finalising the new working arrangements. Participants in both authorities report that there is now visible gender diversity in the authority's work force (WB 3:3). The promotion of women to the most senior roles in each authority (3 out of 6 in Belford DC, 2 out of 3 in Portheld BC) appears to have sent out a very positive message to women lower down in the hierarchy, about the importance that each authority places on their ability and contribution.



Structure	Elements of Structure (adapted from Connell)	Situation	Equality Practice – Mainstreaming
<b>Sexual Division of Labour</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gendered segregation of labour market</li> <li>• Labelling jobs as women's and men's</li> <li>• Gendered design of machinery, hours, career paths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male service heads ejected, women recruited to replace them</li> <li>• Networked departments, opportunities for women's skills</li> <li>• Visible gender diversity in top management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career progression and training for women formalised / continued</li> <li>• Women role models</li> </ul>

**Figure 5: Sexual Division of Labour**

Although restructuring has produced new opportunities for women it is not automatic that they will succeed in achieving them without targeted support. Participants in all three authorities agreed that positive action in the area of sexual division of labour needed to continue as part of a mainstreaming approach to consolidate and safeguard the achievements.

### ***Power***

The process of fragmenting the service departments into neighbourhood offices in Belford DC, and into a networked 'consultancy-style' structure in Portheld BC has reformed the power structures of the former departments (Figure 6). Participants thought that the stranglehold of male dominated power structures has been minimised by the flatter management arrangements and the retirement of 'old cronies'. However they conceded that although these changes have transformed the gender balance in the authority, the tendency still existed for smaller empires to form (IA 4:4). In Portheld BC one of the new Corporate Directors emphasised that the new leadership was determined to ensure this would not happen (AQ 5:3). The implication of her admission is that even in the new gender order an understanding of how men's collective interest operates is still relevant. The women's perspective (described in Chapter 3) is needed to ensure that the new structures remain inclusive.

The emphasis on customer-led service delivery has given greater authority and credence to ordinary women's and men's knowledge. Qualified officers are

expected to work with rather than for local communities and to compromise professional orthodoxies in favour of the customers' wishes. In all three authorities, community consultation, which women's initiatives pioneered, is being implemented as standardised best practice. One participant in Belford DC commented:

Attitudes have really changed. The belief that officers know best has gone. It's the people living in the town who know best what they need. To survive officers have had to change their behaviour.' (WB 4:6)

Power sharing, by respecting and upholding the different, excluded knowledge of ordinary local people, is one of the most exciting opportunities of the new gender order. As Chapter 2 outlined, empowerment was one of the key objectives that prompted women to engage in local politics in the early 1980s. However, participants threw doubt on the ability of a mainstreaming approach to achieve this potential. In Belford DC participants recognised that the survival tactic of some staff had been to adopt a community approach in a tokenistic way (IA 4:4). In Portheld BC the Corporate Director with responsibility for community development predicted that staff's first impulse would be to shy away from the full implications of meaningful community consultation, because it was so much easier to deliver services to a population that was pigeon-holed into different categories (AQ 3:8). These concerns suggest that a mainstreaming approach needs to provide mechanisms to deepen staffs' understanding of power relationships, and to provide skills training and good practice models on how to manage and evaluate people's diverse contributions<sup>4</sup>. In Portheld BC the Chief Executive referred to this process as 'capacity building' (DG 11:6).

In Belford DC and Portheld BC the creation of corporate commitments to gender equality will potentially act as permanent mechanisms with sanctions, to prevent and outlaw non-egalitarian relationships forming in the future. For example, the commitment in Portheld BC to 'Value the Rights, Dignity and Contribution of Everybody' sets a minimum standard on how to conduct

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<sup>4</sup> In Portheld BC, the Corporate Director considered that the management workshop could be extended to all authority staff to aid their learning and that a system of monitoring staff actions, with the threat of penalties, might be needed to push the principle home (AQ 3:9)



administrative interaction. In Belford DC, there was considerable scepticism that the corporate commitment did enable individuals to question power relationships. The lack of leadership from the central management team meant that participants were not inclined to enact the principle themselves in case their actions were not seen as legitimate. In Portheld BC staff were unequivocal about their need to act. Their management team had acted unambiguously to uphold the commitment in their own working arrangements<sup>5</sup>. The contrast in the opinions of participants in Belford DC and Portheld BC serves to demonstrate the importance of ‘the mainstream’ actively taking up its responsibilities to deliver the new mainstreaming approach.

Structure	Elements of Structure (adapted from Connell)	Situation	Equality Practice – Mainstreaming
<b>Power / Authority</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masculine authority is legitimated power</li> <li>• Effort and resources needed to maintain male hegemony</li> <li>• Hierarchies of men / women within male hegemony</li> <li>• Power enacted via the medium of culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer – provider model promoted</li> <li>• Empires deconstructed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure meaningful community consultation widely used</li> <li>• Maintain women’s perspective</li> <li>• Example by leadership to legitimate individuals’ actions</li> </ul>

**Figure 6: Power**

### *Cathexis*

The new managerial structures of the authorities (as networked or neighbourhood organisations) based on cross-departmental working, has necessitated greater staff interaction. The new personal relations (cathexis structures) are summarised in Figure 7. One participant in Portheld BC described how in the new gender order she no longer found people sitting behind their desks for all of the working day, they were freely moving around to communicate (DG 8:2). In her view the authority has many more ‘learning

<sup>5</sup> For example the Chief Executive had paid a personal visit to every departmental section to listen to their views. This had included meeting refuse collectors on their early morning shift. It was the first

edges’. This potentially allows for a more imaginative, sensitive localised development of equality initiatives, by different groups of women and men on the inside and the outside of the Council.

While the scope for meaningful relations has increased, some participants pointed out that there are not enough gender-aware women to secure concrete gains. They themselves are unwilling or unready to fight again. They had observed similar ‘exhaustion’ in the women they worked with though the 1980s (IB 6:1). Many participants in Portheld BC, Belford DC and Caulder CC commented that the majority of staff in their authority were not yet sufficiently aware of equality issues, or the intentions of community development to be in a position to act effectively.

Structure	Elements of Structure (adapted from Connell)	Situation	Equality Practice – Mainstreaming
Cathexis / Emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many levels of emotional behaviour - visible and shadow</li> <li>Emotional experience characterised by ambivalence</li> <li>Social patterning of acceptable relationships can change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women officers and cllrs. Burnt out</li> <li>Unit staff dispersed / made redundant</li> <li>Networked organisation encourages communication</li> <li>Authority has many more learning edges / interfaces with community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women within the authority have scope to act creatively around equality issues</li> </ul>

**Figure 7: Cathexis**

time a Chief Executive had engaged in this degree of contact. The management workshops are another example of open discussion and decision-making.



Structure	Equality practice – mainstreaming
Sexual Division of Labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive action methods needed in order to achieve potential offered by new structural organisation to promote gender balance at all levels of the hierarchy</li> </ul>
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women's perspective needed to provide critical vantage point to prevent new power elites from forming</li> <li>• Leadership must take responsibility for implementation and outcomes</li> </ul>
Cathexis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training, support and models needed for staff so that they can manage many diverse contributions to the decision making process</li> <li>• Gender aware actors with expertise</li> </ul>

**Figure 8: Summary of elements identified by participants that are required to achieve the potential of the gender order of 1990s**

### **Theorising cathexis**

Participants have emphasised the crucial role that specialist equality officers – gender aware actors - play in the implementation of any equality approach. They not only uphold the women's perspective and its positive action methods, they also are some of the very few officers with practical experience of implementing an equality strategy. In the context of the gender order, these actors effect the potential level of gender equality that can be reached in any one of its elements in any one period. Before authorities attempt to build up the numbers of 'gender aware' actors there is a need to conceptualise exactly what this quality describes. This section introduces the work of organisational theorists, which pays particular attention to the way in which individuals are able to act to change structures. It explores the meaning of 'gender awareness' by drawing on the work of Colgan and Ledwith (1996) and finally it relates this back to the work of women's officers as gender aware actors to begin to explain their affect on the cathexis structure of the authority organisation.

### **Organisational theory**

Other theorists (apart from Connell) have explored the usefulness of using a multi-layered model to understand organisational interaction. These theories describing different social domains attempt to find a balance between previous explanations which have focused exclusively on the macro constraints of systems or structures or

micro concerns of the individual<sup>6</sup>. Specifically, in the feminist literature the macro and micro split is typified by the focus on either gender or sexuality.

The so called 'gender paradigm' (Savage & Witz 1992) is based on a feminist structuralist viewpoint which seeks to explain women's unequal position in public organisations in terms of the existence of a corporate patriarchy.

Corporate patriarchy systematically advances men's interest by upholding certain sets of gender relationships in an organisation in which men dominate and women are subordinated. These relationships reflect the imbalance in external power systems, such as the labour market, welfare structures and domestic sphere. They are reinforced internally in the design of organisational hierarchies and the processes for operating and progressing within them.

In response to the development of the gender paradigm, Hearn *et al* (1989), most notably, demanded that the explanation for women's relative disadvantage should be shifted from the general to the specific, following a post structuralist critique. They argued that thinking in terms of economic and social structures missed the subtleties of the localised interaction that was the nuts and bolts of dominant male power. In their view the strategic deployment of male power on a day to day basis is exercised through sexuality. The 'sexuality paradigm' recognises the diffuse and dynamic nature of men's authority and its rapid adaptation to changed circumstances. It has demonstrated the importance of individual subjectivity, expressed through culture, discourses and images. It has brought to academic attention issues such as workplace harassment, sexual relationships, sexualised verbal exchanges, dress codes and hence the importance of considering individual agents, and their bodies.

Connell's 'gender order' bridges the paradigms by emphasising the duality of structure and agency, the symbiotic relationship between the two. Acker is another scholar who has attempted to break down the dichotomy that has developed between these two paradigms; she argues that we should study organisational relationships through the medium of the 'lived body'. This requires researchers to look through the

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<sup>6</sup> Prominent theorists include Habermas (1987) and Goffman (1983).



eyes of the organisational participants to try to understand how the gender and sexuality paradigms affect their whole experience. Emotions, power relations and societal structures then are not different levels of analysis, from which we start with the individual and move to the contextual, but instead are mutually reinforcing, indivisible parts of an overall experience.

The recursive nature of the structural context and the interactional content of organisations works through participants' knowledge and understanding of organisational rules, procedures and injunctions. Because these participants do not 'leave their bodies behind' when they 'go' to work, part of this understanding is an embodied one (Witz, Halford & Savage 1996:176).

Acker (1992) argues that members of an organisation are actively involved in sustaining and attempting to conform to a common notion of what it is to be an organisational participant. This set of assumptions about what their lived experience should be constitutes a gendered substructure. The gendered substructure describes what is expected of a worker – an ideal worker profile that is commonly understood by all organisational members. Each individual after a short time of working in the organisation adds an understanding of the features of this profile to their stock of knowledge. Indeed, without this knowledge they could not operate as an accepted organisational member (Alvesson & Billing 1997).

This substructure is gendered because the features of the ideal worker correspond to characteristics which we have come to associate with men. This is a contentious notion. Management literature has devoted much energy to delineating the desirable characteristics and qualities of different types of workers. Acker questions the objectivity of this work by trying to identify the lived body underneath popular notions of managers, bureaucrats and operatives. The body she identifies is male, heterosexual, with minimal involvement in procreation and exhibiting very controlled emotional expression. This embodiment has been normalised (seen as neutral). It is subsumed in organisation design and demanded of participants. Other commentators have expanded on Acker's characteristics: Witz, Halford and Savage (1996) argue that it is not the male body *per se* but rather a specific male type that has been

institutionalised - the male disciplined body - which lacks sexual desire, is isolated in concerns about its performance and accepts regimentation through disassociation of its work from knowledge of itself. While many people would probably recognise the workplace expectation for 'professionalism' (the 'face they wear at work') the importance is that this seemingly asexual body is male. Societal structures, such as domestic care of dependants by women make the disciplined body's level of absorption and self unawareness very difficult for women to achieve.

As a consequence [of the gendered substructure] ... there are two types of workers, those, mostly men, who, it is assumed, can adhere to organisational rules, arrangements and assumptions, and those, mostly women, who, it is assumed, cannot, because of other obligations to family and reproduction. Organisations depend upon this division, for in a free market economy ... they could not exist without some outside organisation of reproduction to take care of supplying workers. (Acker1992:255)<sup>7</sup>

How is this the gendered substructure expressed and how is it perpetuated ? Acker suggests that it is generated by four gendered processes that occur simultaneously (Figure 9). Acker only separates them for the purposes of analysis.

<b>Production of gender divisions:</b> Organisational practices produce gender patterning of jobs, wages, hierarchy, and authority	<b>Interactions between individuals:</b> Enacting the gender divisions, creating symbols
<b>Production of images and symbols:</b> Association of gender descriptions to inanimate processes and roles, infused with sexuality	<b>Internal mental work of individuals:</b> Conscious construction of gender-appropriate behaviour

**Figure 9: Gendered Processes adapted from Acker (1992)**

<sup>7</sup> In her last comment Acker indicates the way in which external values impinge on organisational culture. Her way of explaining this effect is to suggest that organisations use meanings of gender and sexuality as resources to enable them to compete better in a capitalist and patriarchal context. For example, the symbol of women's 'weaker' bodies and 'caring' natures is used to justify their segregation into low paid sectors of the labour market, which benefits the process of capital accumulation and individual men.



As the descriptions above suggest, these processes produce and re-produce concrete practices; they emanate from tangible objects, such as procedures, guidelines, logos, office layouts, organigrams, grading systems.

As researchers, we can observe these sites and by deconstructing the interaction that they give rise to we can identify the gendered processes at work. By suggesting that all the processes take place at the same time, Acker provides a seamless description of how the meanings that arise from these sites come to be internalised by individuals. For example, the morning interaction between a male manager and a female cleaner is governed by certain protocols depending on their relative hierarchical status (production of gender divisions), the stereotypes which are attached to their jobs (production of images), the circumstances in which they meet (interaction between individuals), in accordance with their own personalities and identity (internal mental work). Their interaction has common, consistent features, which makes it recognisable as typical organisational interaction. Each individual performs the expected profile of their role, hence sustaining the understanding of how things are done 'properly'. This performance represents the gendered substructure.

Participants in each of the case study examples gave many examples to illustrate the ways in which bureaucratic relationships mirrored traditional gender roles in the community at large. They were inadvertently describing the gendered substructure. As one participant in Caulder CC said:

[There is] a concentration of women in a very narrowly defined range of jobs ... low paid manual jobs like cleaning and catering. If they ever get on the management teams in those departments it is because they've come up through the admin route, so they are head of admin (FQ 9:3).

This participant comment supports Acker's point that you do not find many women in professional managerial positions because they are unable, or are perceived to be unable, to fit their lives to the expected masculine profile. Managerial positions in administration are an exception in this case because they require 'housekeeping' skills that are a particular characteristic associated with women. Women participants who had broken through all stereotypes to hold a senior position were all aware of their difference. One participant commented that she stands out like a sore thumb as a woman in a male organisation (KS 11:3). Her presence, which is at odds with the

prevailing expectations of the gender substructure, appears to make her male colleagues uncomfortable. Another participant in Caulder CC observed that male colleagues toned down their normal 'boyish' behaviour in the office when she was around.

How have women reacted to the domination of the male 'lived body' in organisations? Colgan and Ledwith (1996) have explored the path women follow as they become aware of the gendered expectations that surround their bodies, behaviour and career development. They describe this path as a trajectory of increasing awareness. The conclusion of this journey for an individual is 'a clear sense of themselves as a woman' or in other words, a clear sense of their own embodiment in contrast to that of the organisation's dominant form. A woman's level of gender awareness determines her ability to control gendered relationships for her own advantage and for the advantage of other women in the organisation.

Colgan and Ledwith describe four stages of awareness of female embodiment. 'Traditional women' tolerate the gender role and sexual treatment they receive, although they may not agree with it in every instance. Many women at this stage are 'muting their own awareness' of being an embodied woman, and therefore their difference from men. Becoming 'one of the lads' is a typical response. In Caulder CC older women councillors held this perspective. Their experience was more similar to that of male councillors than female councillors with children. This made them unsympathetic to arguments for the need to provide child care facilities in recognition of women's different lived experiences.

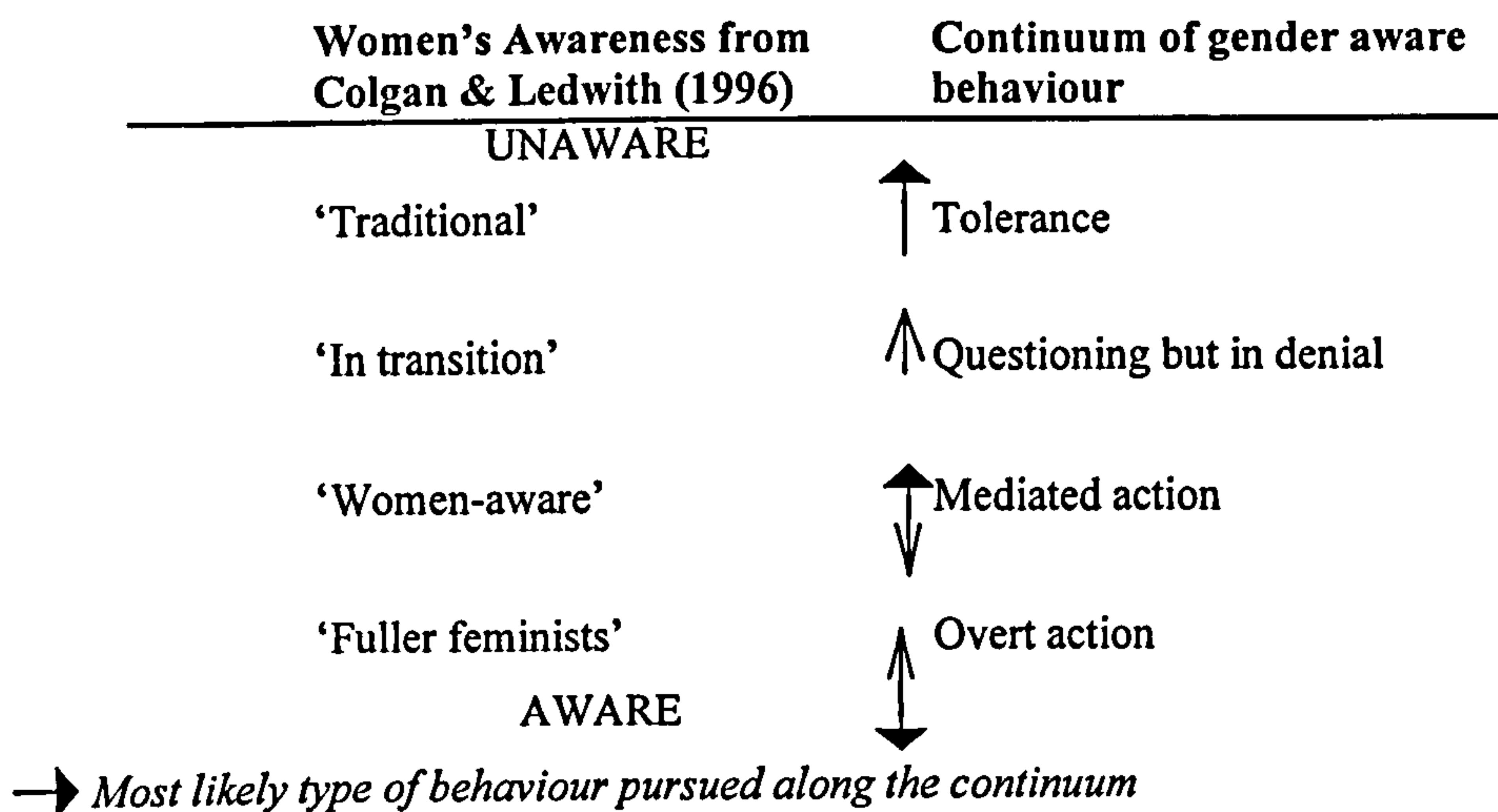
The older women had a very different view of women's issues ...A lot of them had actually already brought up children and never worked ... and this was like a career for them, being a councillor was a career (EL 3:7).

Women gain a different perspective when the male ideal they are striving for becomes too different from their personal knowledge of themselves. These women are then 'in transition'. Colgan and Ledwith describe them as being in 'painful turmoil' as they have not resolved on a new set of values and therefore on how to behave. Women in this state are often fearful of the implications of



their new awareness and reject the label 'feminist'. By moving through this uncertainty to acknowledge their female embodiment, women can be described as feminists. Among this group of women are those who are 'women-aware' but mediate their expression of this awareness in the strategies they enact. Short term specificity is at the heart of any action they take to advance themselves or other women. These are the 'safe' feminists who push the differences of their embodiment no further than outcomes they are able to anticipate. They will work both individually and collectively with, and separately from, men. In contrast 'fuller feminists' allow their knowledge and gender awareness to explicitly inform all their actions. They pursue long term strategies for change. They may prefer to work only with other women as many share 'an altruistic sense of reciprocity and sisterhood' which implicitly enables them to sustain an oppositional stance. These explicit forms of embodiment provoke most hostility from traditional members of the status quo. Therefore on some occasions 'fuller feminists' may mute their gendered performance to lessen counter-productive resistance.

Hostility to a fuller feminist position can be due to a preconceived idea of this type of embodiment rather than to its actual manifestation. As one participant in Caulder CC described, the creation of the post of Head of the Women's Unit meant that staff had already stereotyped her behaviour before she had even been appointed. 'They thought I'd walk in the door breathing fire' (FQ 9:5). She described how one Chief Officer was so nervous of meeting her in person that without explanation he left his office and was seen driving off in his car a few minutes before their first scheduled meeting was due to start (FQ 9:10). This participant was very clear that she did not adopt a 'fuller feminist' position in any of her relationships. She assumed a 'woman aware' approach because it was less threatening.



**Figure 10: Colgan and Ledwith's (1996) typology of gender awareness and the resulting behaviour**

Women potentially are more able to recognise the gendered substructure of an organisation than most men since, as Colgan and Ledwith (1996) describe, their own sense of themselves as a woman stands in contrast to the expectations made of them by the dominant masculinised role. But as comments from participants in each of the case studies demonstrate, not all women in male dominated positions become gender aware.

There's an assumption that if you've a woman in place, that woman is a role model for women, and it does not work, because I've worked for a woman who because she'd made it, that's it! The ladder comes up and [the attitude is] - I don't want anybody following me (KS 2:5).

The women who do attain this embodied awareness however are potential change agents, as they can use this knowledge to manipulate and surprise organisational relationships to their own and other women's advantage. Women's officers can be classed as examples of 'fuller feminists'.

### Implications / Discussion

Using the concepts of the gendered substructure (Acker 1992) and gender aware embodiment (Colgan & Ledwith 1996), it is possible to re-interpret women's equality practice as a strategy of embodiment which aims to change the perspective of organisational participants of how an officer should function (i.e.



the gendered substructure). The different approaches (legislative, positive action and mainstreaming) that women's officers have pursued can be grouped according to the nature of the challenge they are mounting to the gendered substructure.

It is useful here to recall Cockburn's (1990) understanding of the long and short agenda for change. Actions under a short agenda highlight discriminatory procedures for recruitment and resource allocation, arguing for equal gender treatment. These approaches ask the bureaucracy to perceive women in the organisation as being the same as men, in other words to suspend their assumptions about female bodies and about women's roles and responsibilities. They do not challenge the gender substructure, they simply demand that it accommodates women.

Positive action approaches such as women's committees and units, budgets for women's services and women-only training programmes are further along the continuum. This provision supports women in developing proactive forms of feminised embodiment at work. Women are encouraged to behave in a way that is antithetical to that of the gendered substructure. In doing so many of the individuals involved in positive action programmes develop a greater sense of the existence of gendered attitudes and hence become potential change agents. These approaches create an alternative embodiment in the organisation that unsettles the validity of the status quo and hence provokes resistance.

Cockburn has described long agenda strategies as follows:

The transformational project, while it necessarily includes access of more individuals of disadvantaged groups to positions of relative advantage, is not only about quantity. It is also qualitative, proposing the restructuring and resocialising of the organisation in its purpose and its behaviour (1990:74).

Mainstreaming claims to be a transformative strategy (Rees 1996). As Chapter 3 described, the programme endorsed by the European Commission is explicit that the underlying intention of mainstreaming is to make the consideration of gender differences a routine part of all policy formulation and implementation. With the

framework of gendered substructure and embodiment it is possible to suggest what this may actually entail. A mainstreaming approach appears to be asking every organisational participant to take up a gender aware position – to develop an alternative view of their lived body experience in contrast to the existing gendered substructure in which they work. In Cockburn's terms, mainstreaming requires their 'resocialisation' (Cockburn 1990:74). Mainstreaming presumes that once organisational members are gender aware, they are then able and willing to effect further transformative change which extends beyond their own organisation and may even disrupt their domestic lives. Participants in the case study authorities have recognised this need to change staffs' way of thinking about themselves and their behaviour as organisational participants, in order for a mainstreaming approach to work. Officers in Portheld BC have called this process 'winning hearts and minds'. In the other two case studies, participants are expressing a similar sentiment in their insistence on the need for specialist officers to secure the opportunities brought about by structural change.

How can this process of embodiment be effected? The experience of participants in Belford DC and Portheld BC (who are more advanced in their implementation of a mainstreaming approach) contains a number of preliminary suggestions. From Acker's work we can see that a mainstreaming approach, which aims to change men's and women's understanding of the gendered substructure, needs to unpick the gendered processes that perpetuate it, and hence the tangible sites from which those processes are generated. Connell's idea of the gender order supports this analysis. The previous section demonstrated the way in which the nature of the tangible sites (occupational segregation, power relations and individual actors) limit the degree of change that can be achieved. The first step is to shake up the existing environment so that organisational participants are required to reflect on their own personal form of embodiment. In Belford DC and Portheld BC the organisational environment has been changed for all staff during the decentralisation and downsizing of service departments, and the removal and retirement of traditional members of staff.

While the environment is changing, participants advocate the use of positive action strategies to direct this reflection, so that staff succeed in changing their



conception of their own lived experience at work and come to respect the different lived experience of others. In Portheld BC this was being done through the workshop discussions with managers. It has covered the issue of gender bias in organisational departments, location, staff composition, size of the workforce, procedures, tools and the ways of structuring decision-making. Every aspect of the organisation has been scrutinised, which has involved the investment of time and money. The mainstreaming initiative in Portheld BC is still at an early stage. There are no signs yet that the internal emphasis on awareness of people's difference embodiment is affecting the way staff have begun to configure their external objectives and relationships. In Belford DC, where a similar degree of change to the environment has taken place, this scrutiny has been missing. Participants report that gender awareness is arising in a spasmodic way as certain individuals in particular positions become more aware. This helps to explain why participants in Belford are despondent about a mainstreaming approach.

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This chapter has sought to demonstrate that the case study authorities have undergone significant contextual shifts that have altered the circumstances in which their equality strategies are operating. These shifts have not come about because of the equality strategies, but have arisen out of larger political and economic movements. I have used Connell's notion of the social structures of the gender order to identify what the previous strategies (based on specialist provision) have achieved (Connell 1987). His framework demonstrates that the scope of these strategies was inevitably limited by the social structures of sexual division of labour and power relationships, which it was not in their power to address.

The contextual shift to decentralise and downsize authority service departments has created new gender orders. These orders provide greater scope for change in each of the social structures. Case study participants insist that the methods that they had used to change the social structures of the old gender order are still pertinent in the new orders. Applying Acker's work on gendered organisations, it is possible to argue that mainstreaming objectives and methods would not have

been appropriate under the old gender order. It required the shift to the new order to provide the necessary structural circumstances in which the cultural barriers to equality delivery could begin to be addressed.

The intention of a mainstreaming approach is to transfer specialist gender know-how from equality officers to everybody, on the assumption that an organisation of gender aware members will be able to effect far reaching external changes. Using Colgan and Ledwith's idea of embodiment (1996), I have argued that women's practice in organisations can be reinterpreted as a continuum of strategies of embodiment. In their most limited form, as under the previous gender orders, these strategies aimed to support feminised forms of embodiment or demand that it should not be used to discriminate against women. I argue that mainstreaming is at the other end of the continuum. Under the present gender orders, it insists on a rejection of the masculine understanding of the worker and 'his' objectives and the creation of a more holistic concept which potentially is able to recognise all aspects of the lived body experience of women and of men.

The final chapter discusses the implications of the experience of the case study authorities and its theorisation for policy makers and practitioners undertaking mainstreaming approaches to gender equality delivery.



## **Theoretical and Policy Conclusions**

This chapter returns to the research objectives of the thesis to draw out the key issues and to demonstrate how the research questions have been answered. Taking each objective in turn, I will highlight the contribution which the thesis makes to new knowledge in the area of women's equality practice, based on the findings from my research. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of these contributions for policy making. It puts forward a set of criteria, based on the experience of the three case study authorities, for the successful implementation of a gender mainstreaming approach.

### **Research objectives**

The first research objective of this thesis was to update the empirical knowledge of women's equality practice, to demonstrate how and why strategies had changed since the 1980s. As I described in Chapter 2, the 1980s accounts written by equality practitioners were mainly concerned to explore the degree to which feminists' alliance with the Labour Party had been successful in terms of achieving their goals, for example, Goss (1989), Harriss (1989). The issue of tokenism was a central focus of these articles. I had set myself the broader task of providing a holistic description of women's practice in the 1980s, to supply a comparison with contemporary practice. I have therefore extracted the detail about what women's officers actually did, and supported it with original primary data from the Greater London Council's Women's Committee Support Unit (GLC WCSU). This synthesis makes a unique contribution to the existing literature.

My examination of primary documentation from the GLC WCSU challenges the stereotype that the male dominated state had intentionally tried to corrupt the principles of the women's movement by inducing feminists into office. The accounts

of women's officers demonstrate that they revised their feminist principles because there were ethical and practical problems in making them work in practice. The GLC women's support unit was forced to address the inequalities arising from collective working practices, which had failed to recognise the different abilities and experience of women team members (reflected by their different grade and salary scales). Their attempt to change the value or meaning attached to each person's job potentially posed a more fundamental challenge to bureaucratic assumptions than their original commitment to work in a collective way which was completely at odds with the organisation's experience. This finding supports the work of Halford (1988) who could find no evidence to either confirm or dispel the accusation of tokenism, and had concluded that the local circumstances and detail had been ignored in reaching this conclusion.

As the records of the GLC WCSU demonstrate feminists started to re think their practice as soon as they began to engage in significant programmes of activity. They realised that the symbolic commitment to feminist principles was not as important as concrete changes to delivery of services. My exploration of the literature revealed that by the early 1990s there was a debate within the sector of the need formally to recognise that separate feminist practice was unworkable and that new strategies had been developed, which has been overlooked by academic and practitioners' literature.

As I described in Chapter 3 this shift was not well publicised at the time. It represented a private consensus among practitioners. The need for change was rooted in two interrelated observations. First, that to survive in the changed political and economic context of the local government sector, women's practice would have to be embedded in the mainstream in order to safeguard the women's perspective<sup>1</sup>. Second, that the strict adherence to feminist principles when designing the structures and strategies of women's initiatives had been detrimental to their success. Separate units, budgets and programmes for women had often been ineffective at achieving lasting change because of the resistance they provoked. This realisation also led to calls for closer collaboration with the bureaucracy. This was an unofficial version of

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<sup>1</sup> The economic cuts reduced the resources available to all developmental work which did not have a statutory basis and the political realignment of the Labour party to broaden its electoral bases meant that radical activities lost their legitimacy.



‘mainstreaming’ which the local government sector had already embarked on, in 1991. It explains why practitioners have responded to the European Union’s programme to mainstream gender equality by saying ‘we’ve been doing that by another name for years’ (Becker 1996). There is a very strong case to be made that past practice holds important insights for the contemporary development of a mainstreaming approach to equality delivery.

The second research objective aimed to explore the shift away from a focus on women and women’s provision to a general focus on disadvantage delivered by every member of the organisation. The records of the form and number of women’s initiatives demonstrate that by 1997 many women’s initiatives had been changed from separate women’s structures to those which addressed equal opportunities, combining women’s equality with initiatives for equality on the grounds of race ethnicity or disability, or had been mainstreamed. The experience of the case study authorities suggested that these changes were made as the result of financial pressures. Women’s practitioners have been very clear that they do not support any weakening of the women’s perspective.

The distinction which women’s officers have drawn is that, while they support an integrated form of equality practice, they consider that named staff are a vital part of maintaining the pressure on an organisation to act. They therefore reject generic styles of delivery that dispense with named officers and rely on everybody to act according to a corporate mission statement<sup>2</sup>. My examination of the literature and practitioners’ accounts demonstrates that confusion around generic delivery has arisen first, because women’s officers, through integrating, aim to bring about *general* ownership of equality and to eventually work themselves out of a job. Second, they recognise that difference between women lends itself to generic approaches to equality delivery wherein specialists on women, race, ethnicity and disability come together to ensure that service provision is holistic. None of the case study participants considered that their work had adequately addressed the issue of multiple discrimination.

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<sup>2</sup> This distinction has been recognised by the 1997 EC Strategy Paper EQOP 0297/rev DG V/D/5, which gives practical guidelines to mainstreaming implementation.

The shift to integrated, generic approaches was supported by theoretical developments in feminist explanations of patriarchal power. Post-modern social theory had opened up the possibility of conceptualising power as multi sited and multifarious, consequently the state arena could be reconceptualised as a collection of competing interest groups. Different men protected their different interests, sometimes in opposition to each other. Although the overall effect of male power was to suppress women's opportunities, its fragmented and dynamic nature meant that there were 'chinks in the armour', as one case study participant put it, which feminists could exploit. I noted the work of Cockburn (1990) and Edwards (1995<sup>a</sup>) who described the implementation of feminist principles in organisations as a constant process of negotiation and improvisation. Feminist organisational theory emphasised that change could not be a steady incremental process, it was necessarily *ad hoc*, opportunistic piecemeal. This thesis builds on the work of Watson (1990) who recognised a lag between feminist practice and theory. As I pointed out in Chapter 3, the modern explanation of universal male state power has dissuaded practitioners from exploring possible opportunities. It has also meant that they have evaluated partial changes to procedures and understanding as compromises or failures rather than as positive contributions to lasting change.

The need to explain the shift to generic approaches in the UK became more pressing as my research continued, as the European Union launched its programme of mainstreaming gender equality in the Fourth Community Action Programme in 1996. In Chapter 3, I have reviewed the development of this programme in order to accomplish the thesis's third objective: to contribute to the small but growing number of commentaries which aim to explain how the approach is new and potentially transformatory. I have shown that its originality lies in its development of a gender perspective alongside existing perspectives around women's equality and equality of opportunity. This perspective is under theorised. I have suggested that the gender perspective has arisen from a variety of different 'drivers'. These include a postmodern understanding of the structuring nature of discourse on agency, which suggests that changing the perceived meanings attached to certain actions and roles is one way of fundamentally changing them. Another driver has been the changed political context of the European Union, in the light of the expansion of its membership and its changed economic circumstances, as demographic shifts change



the composition of the potential labour force. Both these changes have set up the demand for mechanisms to encourage integration. Mainstreaming gender equality describes an objective to reach out to women as potential citizens and workers in the new Union and to encourage men to adapt their lives so that women can pursue these roles to their fullest extent. The last driver has been the women's lobby, which has astutely recognised the need to convince men about the merits of social equality, in order to achieve lasting change. A focus on gender rather than on only women represents a more inclusive project and hence potentially a more powerful vehicle for change. It attracts practitioners pursuing both economic and social agendas, it attracts men and also women by recognising the difference between them but also among women and men.

Many UK practitioners have reacted negatively to the EU agenda because it appeared to represent a retreat from a focus on women's material and structural oppression and because it was closely associated with economic arguments for greater equality. Despite being reassured by the Commission that a focus on women's oppression should be maintained within a mainstreaming approach (EQOP 0297/rev DG V/D/5) practitioners continue to reject mainstreaming. As I observed in Chapter 3, there is no recognition of a gender perspective among UK practitioners, rather only an acceptance that the mainstream should be involved in the process of equality delivery. There is little evidence to suggest that women's officers in my case study authorities will adopt gendered policy making instruments. The only example that I found of a gender perspective in my case study authorities had arisen because the women's officer was working in a male dominated section where men were the only audience for resocialisation (Caulder CC's holiday childcare scheme).

I have used the notion of an 'equality stool' to explore the underlying reasons why practitioners in UK continue to insist that a women's perspective rather than a gender perspective remains the best way to further the equality agenda. This new conceptual model is readily transferable to the experience of other sectors or other countries. The model allows us to understand the need for robust legislation, and positive action programmes to compulsorily raise awareness and to establish a more equitable set of organisational arrangements before a set of gender tools can effectively be applied. Practitioners are arguing that the UK local government sector is not yet sufficiently



prepared to undertake a mainstreaming approach. This discovery holds important implications for the European Union's development of mainstreaming, since it suggests that there are certain prerequisites which need to be in place for a mainstreaming approach to be successful.

The last objective of my thesis has been to try to describe and conceptualise the experience of my case study authorities as they develop new strategies for implementing women's equality into the next millennium. Connell's notion of historical gender orders provided a useful framework for the analysis of the differences between past and present practice, typified by separatist and generic approaches respectively. The prerequisites for mainstreaming can be established by examining the changes which practitioners were recommending should be made to the social structures of the past and present gender orders. Significantly, although practitioners had not used gendered policy making instruments, nor explicitly described their new approach in terms of developing a gender perspective, their past and present practice can be described in this way. Combining the ideas of Colgan and Ledwith (1996) with Acker (1992) it is possible to show that women's equality practice in local government in the UK has posed a challenge to the gendered conceptualisation of women's roles at work and in the community. In trying to get officers to 'own' equality work, women's officers have in effect been asking them to transform themselves into gender aware agents for change. The concept of embodiment, which describes organisational participants' lived body experience, allows us to fit together all the aspects of women officers' activity into a single 'change project'. Women's officers' physical presence, their management of interpersonal relationships, and their strategic programmes and structures act together to prompt people to reconceptualise the gendered substructure which determines their behaviour at work. It is possible to argue that women's officers are fundamental to the project of mainstreaming gender equality in a way that the existing literature has not yet adequately recognised.

### **Policy implications**

I want to conclude by reviewing the implications of my case study research for the future implementation of mainstreaming in those authorities in the UK which have undergone a process of structured equality provision, and also for those authorities



starting from scratch to pursue this agenda. Drawing on the elements which my participants identified as ‘catalysts for change’, necessary ‘institutional support’ and ‘organisational barriers’, I have constructed a summary of the possible prerequisites for a mainstreaming approach structured in terms of Connell's gender order (Connell 1987). As I have indicated above, the presence of gender aware change agents is essential to invigorate and achieve the most from each of these requirements. Although many of the prerequisites are already accepted as being necessary to bring about change of any type in organisations, the importance for mainstreaming is that each element is underpinned by the women’s perspective. This is not an exhaustive list, it reflects the findings of this study. Research carried out in other sectors or other countries may put different emphasis on what conditions are required and add conditions which I have not identified. As the contrasting experience of Caulder CC, Belford DC and Portheld BC demonstrated, there may be an optimum organisational size (whole organisation, one department one division) around which to structure the implementation strategy - for example, to ensure that the corporate message and team decision making are not diluted so that they become meaningless, and that initiatives to change the segregation of the labour force are tailored to fit particular local circumstances and historical experience.

<b>SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR</b>	Reduce vertical and horizontal segregation of female workforce	Named corporate responsibility for women’s equality with clear links to department staff	Resources – dedicated budget and time		
<b>POWER</b>	Remove ‘dead wood’, men and women who refuse to change, optimise gender aware allies	Gender balanced decision making allowing meaningful interaction	Clear political objectives and accountability for women’s equality	Charismatic feminist leadership repeating corporate commitment	Corporate team with diagnostic skills around equality delivery
<b>CATHEXIS</b>	New gendered language and conceptual models	Women’s networks asserting critical narrative			

**Figure 1: Summary of prerequisites for a mainstreaming approach, drawn from the accounts of case study participants.**

### *Sexual Division of Labour*

The form of the social structure of the sexual division of labour contributes to configure the other two structures of the gender order. It is an obvious starting point for change for this reason, and also because, as I noted earlier, it is the most visible of the social structures. Inequalities in the sexual division of labour can more easily be demonstrated and changes to them can be measured. Changes to the segregation of the workforce as the literature and case study participants describe, can start as very modest improvements to working hours which can allow greater access to excluded groups of women. The growing debate about the need to achieve home and work balance supports these types of changes. It aims to question the current taken for granted nature of working arrangements and, significantly, aims to engage men in the debate. For transformative change in this area, positive action programmes to recruit train and then support women in non-traditional areas of work are also needed to overcome women's structural and material disadvantage, which is rooted in stereotypes of their domestic role. This is necessarily a costly and long-term change strategy. The case study authorities were in the process of re-establishing their gender order as a result of large-scale programmes of decentralisation (planned and completed). In circumstances where every part of an organisation is forced to accept changes to its lines of reporting, physical location and daily chains of interaction there may be greater acceptance, or less resistance, to significant gender revisions in the division of labour. As the case of Belford DC demonstrates however, for positive changes to be effected in this situation a focused leadership is necessary to ensure the agenda does not get lost.

All participants (excluding the leadership of Portheld BC who were not sure in which direction to go) put forward arguments in support of maintaining mechanisms at corporate and department level to designate responsibility for women's equality to named officers. Both levels of responsibility were thought to be necessary as they fulfilled different functions. Corporate officers acted as symbols of the importance of the equality goal, and were also in a position to take an overview of progress across the whole organisation to facilitate useful partnerships and to identify gaps in development. Officers at department level functioned as points of advice and information on a day to day basis, who were accessible to individuals and who understood the context and constraints of their particular environment. They acted to



tailor the corporate commitment to suit their department and relay an overview of their progress to the corporate director to complete the chain of information.

### **Power**

Changing the social structure of the sexual division of labour unintentionally brought about change to the authorities' power relationships. However participants indicated that relying on passive change risked smaller 'fiefdoms' being set up within the new structures. They demanded sanctions against those leaders of the old 'fiefdoms' who were unable, despite training, to recognise the need for change. As Colgan and Ledwith's (1996) typology of gender awareness describes, individuals can become stuck in states of denial and uncertainty. In this case mechanisms such as inclusive decision making which is carefully facilitated to provide new concepts to deconstruct past prejudice (as in Portheld BC) may be the way forward. Participants also stressed the need to identify and develop the potential of sympathisers, to secure possible allies and in so doing build up to a critical threshold of gender aware change agents.

Clear political objectives and accountability relate particularly to the operations of the local government sector, since the actions of the authority are sanctioned by democratic consensus. If politicians fail to uphold a clear change strategy, the actions of committed equality practitioners is seen to be illegitimate in the eyes of other officers and also in the eyes of the electorate. Participants in the case studies demanded political, executive and management commitment to feminist principles. Political commitment conferred legitimacy in the absence of statutory requirements, executive commitment motivated the authority's attention and action to the issue ensuring it a high place on the organisational list of priorities, and management commitment ensured that the implementation process was carried out in the spirit it was intended. Participants also mentioned the importance of high levels of skill among their administrative leaders to fulfil their role as managers of people and policy makers. The same requirement could also be applied to political members.

### ***Cathexis***

The most innovative work being done by participants in the case study authorities was around personal relationships and the barriers of stereotyped assumptions. Strategies were carried out on two levels. Participants described how through their own

behaviour they have attempted to encourage alternative forms of interaction. They have been prepared to challenge conventional wisdom, act without the face of professionalism, and to include anyone in their decision making or planning process. On a organisational level case study authorities have used training to begin to assist staff to re-think their taken for granted assumptions. Changing the language used is one way of reaching down to people's unconscious. Participants emphasised that this process required significant resources to ensure that challenging people's ways of thinking did not leave them feeling under attack or confused as to the what the new words meant.

Networks of women to sustain the meaning and intention of the whole change process appear to be crucial. These networks need not be inside the state structures. Vital support and new ideas can come from women on the outside, interacting with staff in community forum or in more formal ways as contracted trainers, voluntary sector service providers or even as campaigners. They provide a source of constant pressure and inspiration. Their contribution to the whole development of women's equality delivery through the structures of local government in the UK cannot be understated.

### **Future Research**

There is a need to continue to record the development of mainstreaming in the UK local government sector in order for best practice ideas to be generated and exchanged. It would be possible to test the applicability of the set of prerequisites that I have identified in bureaucracies of different sizes and differing organisational arrangements. Examining the implementation in different cases may reveal that additional prerequisites are needed. It would be particularly interesting to investigate the development of the new bureaucratic structures of the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament and Regional Development Agencies. The government is explicitly working with the Equal Opportunities Commission 'to ensure that equality is built into those institutions ... from the outset ...[with] practical models of how this can be done' (Bahl 1998). With no previous gender order to hinder their progress it would be possible to explore the effect of external values and expectations of gender roles on the creation of the gendered substructure in each case.



It would also be valuable to undertake a more detailed study of the archive records of the Greater London Council. This could explore not only the work of the women's support unit, which had an external grant aid focus, but also the work of the equal opportunities unit whose remit was to effect internal change. I have become increasingly aware throughout my research that clear theorisation, grounded in full and detailed accounts of women's activity, is an important means to produce effective political practice in the future.

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## **Appendix 1: Case study template**

The four key themes identified from the literature review were explored by raising the following issues for discussion with each of the case study participants. These issues were also used to structure my collection of case study documentation. The template was adapted from that used by Stone (1988).

### **Key themes:**

1. The juxtaposition of feminist practice in the authority to the context of formal politics - exemplified in the officer - councillor relationship
2. The culture of the organisation and its receptiveness to feminist ideas - exemplified in the practitioners' relationships with authority colleagues
3. The definition of feminist agency - the self identified role of practitioners
4. The equality agenda in the authority, its description, interpretation and purpose as stated by practitioners, which included the policies, resourcing and structural changes over time

### **Issues discussed:**

#### **Origin of the women's initiative (committee and unit)**

- Driving force behind the initiative being established
- Where the idea for a committee came from
- Nature of the involvement of internal / external actors in the development of the initiative
- Background of women appointed to equality officer positions

#### **Basic information about the committee / unit**

- Length of time in operation



## **Appendix 2: Case Study Documents**

Assurances of anonymity were given to all research participants. For this reason it has been necessary to disguise the identity of certain authors, and of certain authorities.

### **Chapter 2: Historical Accounts of Women's Equality Practice**

Greater London Council [GLC] Women's Committee Support Unit Meetings Minutes 13 Sept 1982 – 4 July 1983 LSPU/WEG/01/25 London Metropolitan Archives

GLC Women's Committee Support Unit Administration Team Meetings Minutes 16 Mar 1983 – 6 Dec 1985, LSPU/WEG/01/01 London Metropolitan Archives.

GLC Annual Reports of the Women's Committee 1982/83, 1984/85, 1985/86, LSPU/WEG/01/02 London Metropolitan Archives.

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