



# Evaluation of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Women Councillors Taskforce

## Abstract

The work of a Taskforce set up to find practical ways to encourage Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) women to become councillors was evaluated in a multi-stage research programme over eight months. This assessed the short- and longer-term impacts of the work (outreach events, shadowing and mentoring scheme and community leadership course), mainly among the women themselves but also others involved in the programme's delivery. The evaluation showed that significant outcomes had been achieved in this short time including the election of some women as councillors. A number of suggestions are put forward to help make future programmes even more successful and to address the sustainability of the Taskforce's work.

## Key findings

The Taskforce set itself five objectives; to improve BAME women's knowledge and awareness of underrepresentation, to motivate and encourage them, to build their confidence and skills, to work to overcome cultural barriers within political parties that act as barriers to BAME women, and to help reduce stereotyping and raise awareness of the benefits of representation by BAME women. The key findings were:

- The events were largely (but not exclusively) targeted at BAME women and succeeded in highlighting the issue of underrepresentation and the need for BAME women to come forward
- Specific BAME women events worked well and there is an appetite for them. Delegates commented on the sense of solidarity and the potential to identify and harness networking opportunities.
- The programme in general helped strengthen the women's resolve by confirming they were well equipped to become a councillor and the credibility of the shadowing and mentoring scheme in particular gave women the confidence to take advantage of opportunities offered. Their confidence was also increased by the support of the other women and, in particular, the use of existing BAME women councillors as credible role models.
- The shadowing and mentoring scheme and community leadership course resulted in a statistically significant increase in knowledge in specific areas
- A high proportion of those taking part in the events and shadowing and mentoring scheme said they were motivated to become a councillor or MP
- Skills in 'hands on' activities such as campaigning and handling the media were sometimes gained as part of the shadowing and mentoring scheme
- The commitment of the national political parties was seen in the support they gave to women who approached them; women's experience of local parties was more varied
- The Taskforce instigated a media campaign aimed at stimulating debate about the underrepresentation of BAME women and tackling stereotyping both within and outside their communities. This achieved overwhelmingly positive coverage in print and online articles, radio and TV interviews and features.

## Background

The BAME Women Councillors' Taskforce was convened in May 2008 to consider practical ways of encouraging BAME women to become local councillors and make councils more representative of the communities they serve. This took three principal forms; a programme of outreach events to make BAME women aware of the issue of underrepresentation and open their minds to the possibility of becoming a councillor; a programme in which they could shadow and be mentored by a councillor; and an online first course in community leadership.

The specific research objectives were:

1. To identify and examine the **outcomes and effectiveness** of the BAME Taskforce
2. To identify the **strengths and limitations** of the BAME Taskforce programme of work
3. To assess the **value** of the Taskforce programme of work, including how to make this agenda sustainable in the longer term
4. To **follow-up and track participants' progress** in getting involved in political and public life.

## Research findings

The research considered the impact of each of the practical programmes initiated by the Taskforce, as well as the overall findings. This research was conducted between Summer 2009 and Spring 2010 and provided an indication of the progress made to that date. Some findings are treated with caution due to small sample sizes; data is mainly presented as raw numbers rather than percentages, and in some cases interpreted qualitatively. Where it is possible to assert statistical significance this has been applied through non-parametric statistical significance tests.

### Outreach Events

Sixteen outreach events were held in cities across England, Scotland and Wales between July 2008 and July 2009. Consisting of a series of presentations, Q&A and networking opportunities, they lasted about two hours and were attended by nearly 1,100 women. The main impacts from the events were:

- 91% of those attending an event rated it as 'fairly or very good'; 54% rated it 'very good'

- 97% 'agreed' that they would recommend the event to a friend or family member; 54% 'agreed strongly' that they would recommend it
- 95% of attendees said that it had made them more aware of the lack of BAME women in public life
- 94% reported that it had made them more aware of how they might benefit from becoming a councillor
- 91% said that it had made them more aware of what a local councillor does
- 90% agreed that having attended, they knew how to access information about how to become a councillor (though they also would have liked to have been given a clear and succinct summary of their next steps)
- 70% reported that the event had made it more likely that they would consider becoming a councillor
- The events had other 'softer' effects such as creating a sense of entitlement and solidarity, inspiring and energising the women
- A high proportion of women discussed the idea of becoming a councillor with family and friends following the event and others sought more information on the internet

### Shadowing and mentoring programme

The programme offered sixty women with a range of ethnic heritage, political affiliations and ages, the opportunity to shadow councillors for a minimum of six days over a five month period in order to gain 'first hand knowledge of the role and responsibilities of councillors, serving officers and an insight into the authority's systems and procedures.' The scheme was commissioned by the Government Equalities Office and delivered by Operation Black Vote (OBV). The main impacts were:

- A statistically significant increase in the women's knowledge about what it means to be a councillor; this included knowledge about what a councillor does, skills and qualities needed, steps to becoming one and how to approach a political party
- A statistically significant improvement in overall attitude scores about becoming a councillor. Most notable were the decrease in concern about gaining the support of the local community and other councillors not being welcoming

- The programme was particularly valuable for providing insights into life as a councillor and a structure to help women pursue their goal. For some of the most motivated, it also acted as a springboard for their political ambitions and giving them the confidence to push for and take advantage of opportunities
- Three-quarters of those taking part in the shadowing and mentoring programme felt they still wished to become a councillor and others were open to the idea of pursuing a role in public life

### Community Leadership course

The First Certificate in Community Leadership is a modular online learning package covering the principles of community leadership, the local government environment, and the skills and qualities of an effective councillor, delivered by Solace Enterprises. Fifty women were offered and accepted a place on the course. Its main impacts were as follows:

- A statistically significant improvement in understanding of what a councillor does and how decisions are made by councils
- A statistically significant improvement in overall 'knowledge' scores as measured on eight statements about becoming a councillor.

### Conclusions and lessons learned

The Taskforce initiated and oversaw delivery of a number of important initiatives in a short period with limited resources, and on an ambitious national scale. Seventeen of the women taking part in the evaluation put themselves forward as candidates in the local (and general) election of May 2010. Fourteen were shortlisted to stand as a councillor or MP and of these, ten were selected. Four went on to be elected as local councillors. There are likely to be others who did not take part in the research or who may stand at the next round of local elections in May 2011.

Given the challenges faced, it achieved a great deal in terms of the positive impacts on the women involved, and is likely to continue to do so as they develop and become advocates for participation in public life. In essence, a model based on outreach events, followed

shadowing and mentoring opportunities is one that has real potential.

If such a push for increased representation is to be considered again, then some very useful lessons may be learned from this programme, with implications not only for any central government department coordinating a similar programme, but also for organisations promoting the same goals of fairer representation, as well as local councils and political parties. These are:

- The importance of **good communications between delivery partner organisations** to harness the valuable input of each and coordinate efforts from an early stage.
- The importance of **identifying and developing ways to support women in pursuing their goal** to become a councillor (or another role in public life), throughout the process. Resources may not be available for women to follow formal programmes but typical pathways and how to access them should be communicated. It is also important that the women feel that their **individual journey is valued and supported**.
- The importance of clearly signposting women to a **single clear summary of the steps** they need to take to progress their ambition and the help and support available. In addition to a printed publication, information, guidance and support might be delivered in part electronically, possibly through a **one stop information resource and exchange**.
- Where possible, **'cohort effect' should be harnessed** for positive effect, for example, the cross-party networks of friendships established among women on the shadowing and mentoring programme. Consideration should be given to how the willingness to help with local initiatives can be harnessed and ways identified for the women to be involved as part of the pathway for future cohorts. In addition, a forum for the exchange of ideas and support on an online resource could provide the **potential for networking** that the research has shown is so highly valued.
- The success of the shadowing and mentoring programme relies on the goodwill and interest of individual councillors who agree to be shadowed and offer their advice and

support. The research showed the difficulties of communicating with busy councillors and the importance of **supporting the councillor mentors, managing expectations and taking care in matching the women** with appropriate councillors. An online resource could be one channel for communicating and exchanging ideas for effective shadowing and mentoring.

- The need for political parties to recognise that more support is needed to engage BAME women in party politics. The research showed the importance of helping women who require it to identify the party whose views resonate most with their own. Consideration should be given to **how information about the political parties and what they stand for, both nationally and locally, can be passed on to the women**

**and how their first encounters with local party groups can be made welcoming and productive.**

- Finally, it has been noted that the ambitious national scale of the outreach events and shadowing and mentoring scheme made the undertaking all the more challenging. The involvement of a central government department added to the prestige and credibility of the programme, and **devolving more of the planning and running of such a programme to local administrations** could take advantage of the greater knowledge of the people they serve and where imbalances in representation need to be addressed locally. They could improve the identification and reach to women who might be potential candidates

## Further information

The full report produced by Creative Research is published by the Government Equalities Office (GEO). To order further free copies of these Research Findings or the full report please contact GEO Enquiries (details below) or download a copy free of charge from [www.equalities.gov.uk](http://www.equalities.gov.uk). We will consider requests for alternative formats that may be required. Please send your request to:

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