

**The Review of Public Administration
In Northern Ireland**

**Women and the Review of Public
Administration**

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Foreword

The RPA Team commissioned the Queen's University Institute of Governance to explore the implications for women in the Review of Public Administration and prepare a paper for consideration. As part of this work the Institute organised a roundtable under Chatham House Rules involving academics, policy-makers and practitioners which took place on 2 September 2005. Participants included 8 women from 5 political parties (each party was invited to send two representatives); 11 from social partners - 6 from voluntary organisations, 3 from the private sector and 2 from trade unions; 7 from the public sector including local government and the RPA team; and 4 academics.

The authors¹ would like to thank those who participated in the roundtable. Our special thanks go to those who prepared short papers to stimulate discussion on three areas:

- (i) Concerns, opportunities and measures to improve the position of women in local government as politicians and senior officers.
- (ii) Protecting and increasing the number of women appointed to public bodies from local government and civic life.
- (iii) Engaging women as partners in policy-making.

We would also like to thank the review team for being receptive to the need to undertake specific work on the potential pitfalls and opportunities for women. These are challenges that will be faced when Government makes its decision about the shape of public administration. They will be met first in the transition phase, particularly during preparation for new local government arrangements; and then as stages are implemented. Should Government introduce an implementation oversight mechanism we recommend that gender be specifically identified, and given some priority, among the responsibilities.

It is to be hoped that the new arrangements will be kept under review periodically, even after 2009, or that Government will put in place a research programme that will contribute to further development of good governance. We urge that the matter of women's access and participation be specifically monitored and assessed during any reviews or included in any programme of research. Lack of progress pointed up should promote further, more insistent action to achieve results.

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1. Introduction

‘Two main issues have been raised on equality: first a reduction in the number of public bodies, and therefore Boards, could impact on the participation of women in public life; the second issue relates to possible impacts that nomination of councillors to Boards may have on the important aim of improving diversity. This review presents both a challenge and an opportunity to increase the participation of under-represented groups in public life.’²

1.1 Tackling the Gender Divide

The Review of Public Administration’s reference to gender in its March 2005 consultation document, focused mainly on women’s access to public appointments; it also provided general figures on women’s employment. However, the Review also has implications for women as councillors, councils’ relationships with their female electorate and local organisations seeking to influence policy and deliver services for women. These should be of fundamental consideration for the current revision and rationalisation of local government and public administration in Northern Ireland, which is the most wide-ranging to take place for some time and presumably for some time to come. It remains to be seen whether local governance will emerge from the review and the transition period sufficiently modernised to offer greater diversity, openness and engagement.

Government has a responsibility to promote equality through, and mitigate inequalities arising from, its decisions on the RPA. Legislation on new governance structures, including in any provisions on checks, balances and safeguards, could include stipulations on gender balance. Integrating equality prerequisites is the norm in Northern Ireland in relation to religious/political balance, and there is no reason why similar conditions should not be set in order to tackle the, now, even more severe imbalance of women among Northern Ireland’s political and public bodies. Special attention to gender equality reinforced by consistent oversight of preparations for implementation during the crucial transition period from 2006 – 2009 will be critical to securing a successful outcome on positioning women in future local government, public policy and public administration.

1.2 International Commitments

Government has signed a number of international commitments on women’s access to power and decision-making. In 2004 the UN Commission on the Status of Women examined women’s equal participation in conflict prevention, resolution and post-conflict peace-building; and in 2005 it reviewed governments’ implementation of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. The Platform built upon the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW 1979), ratified by the UK Government in 1986. Both reviews are relevant to Northern Ireland, and the UN verdict was that insufficient progress had been made and more specific measures and determined action is required.

² RPA Further Consultation in Northern Ireland, March 2005, p129 para 10.51

Another UN review is planned for 2006 when the Commission will examine progress in all Member States on the equal participation of women and men in decision-making. The Review of Public Administration provides Government with an opportunity to put measures in place that will radically improve women's access to political and policy decision-making and allow it to report favourably on these to the UN in 2006 as part of meeting its international commitment. Northern Ireland continues to fall far short of reaching even the 1995 target endorsed by the UN Economic and Social Council of having 30% women in positions at decision-making.

1.3 Positive Action

Government has committed to 'setting targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women' and 'tak[ing] positive action to build a critical mass of women leaders, executives and managers', and to taking measures that encourage political parties to integrate women equally with men at all levels. The Beijing Platform invites political parties to take action to deliver full and equal involvement for women, including at leadership levels, and to incorporate gender concerns into their political agendas.³

Since then greater international attention and pressure has focused on women's equal participation including discussion at the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Resolution 1325 on the full and equal participation of women in peace processes at all levels including in post-conflict reconstruction and rebuilding of society. There is concern that women are experiencing *de jure* rather than *de facto* equality and this has led the UN, European institutions and some governments to introduce special time-bound measures to bring about a step change.

1.4 The Goal

Some countries are striving to reach 50/50 parity democracy while others have legislation, regulation and policy to guarantee 40% of places to either gender. Others are struggling to reach the 30% level of women's participation; a minimum of 30% is considered necessary to create the 'critical mass' of women necessary to make an impact on the culture and content of decision-making. Eight European countries (not the UK or Ireland) have more than 30% women in their national parliaments, an achievement that is shared with the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly of Wales which is leading the world on parity democracy with 50% women and men.

³ Beijing Platform for Action: Women in Power and Decision-making, 1995, www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform

2. Women Politicians

*'The parties affirm their commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community. Against the background of the recent history of communal conflict, the parties affirm in particular: the right of women to full and equal political participation.'*⁴

2.1 The Position in Northern Ireland

Concern about increasing diversity among politicians is not unique to Northern Ireland, although it is a fact that Northern Ireland has the worst track record within the UK. Women representatives form 24.4% of the UK representation to the European Parliament; 19.7% to the Westminster Parliament and 26.1% of the Cabinet; 39.5% of the Scottish Parliament and 27% of the Cabinet; 50% of the Wales Assembly and 55% of the Cabinet. Women are 16.7% of the Northern Ireland Assembly, an increase on the 1998 figure of 13%; and are 33.3% of MEPs. In the Republic of Ireland women are 38% of MEPs, 13% of Dáil Éireann and 17.5% of the Cabinet.⁵

The picture at national and regional level is reflected within local government. The position of women is worst in the Republic of Ireland where women members are 16% of County councils, 15% of Borough councils and 22% of City councils. On the other hand, the Greater London Assembly has 36% women members, while the average across English councils is 29.1%. Following the 2005 local government election in Northern Ireland women hold 22% of council seats i.e. 127 of the 582 places. This figure has increased at each of the last three local government elections in Northern Ireland, from 14% in 1997 to 19% in 2001 and 22% in 2005.

Prior to the 2001 local government election three councils in Northern Ireland were without women members; this is no longer the case. In 2005 a few councils substantially improved their number of women councillors; for example, the number of women on Fermanagh council increased from one to six. Newtownabbey council leads the field with 44% women members, closely followed by Moyle with 40%; and three councils – Castlereagh, Armagh and Belfast – have over 30%. However, this is far from the normal pattern. The majority of councils have less than 20% women councillors, with five – Strabane, Ards, Antrim, Larne and Cookstown – having only one or two women members.

There will be fewer councils following the Review of Public Administration and the number of councillors (now 582) will be reduced by between 100 to 140. This and boundary changes⁶ could mean that the already inadequate number of women politicians may diminish, with contest for seats reduced to a battle between incumbents 78% of whom are men; this also has serious implications for the RPA's

⁴ The Agreement, *Rights Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity*, 1998, p16, para 1.

⁵ Figures from the UK Women and Equality Unit, www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/public_life; Fawcett Society, Women's Representation in British Politics, undated, www.fawcettsociety.org.uk; Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics, Queen's University Belfast, www.qub.ac.uk/cawp

⁶ Reduction of Councils and boundary changes were both matters on which concern was expressed at the Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen's University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

suggestion on civic councils (see later). On the other hand, a creative approach to downsizing could provide parties with the opportunity to make a step change in their public profiles and redress the gender imbalance by substantially increasing the proportion of women councillors.

The 2002 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey found that the public supports more women in the political arena:⁷

- 57% of people in Northern Ireland believe that things would improve if there were more women in politics;
- 57% of men and 66% of women believe that more women should be elected to the Assembly and to Parliament;
- 74% of men and 83% of women say either they would have more confidence in a woman representing their interests or that it would make no difference if it was a man or a woman; (the percentage of women preferring a woman to represent their interests has almost doubled to 30%);
- 74% of people believe that political parties should be either *required* or *encouraged* to put forward a proportion of women candidates.

The survey also found women's attributes more closely matched those that people desired in their politicians. Male politicians were regarded as 'aggressive, ruthless, ambitious and crafty', and women as 'approachable, compromising, honest and level-headed'. People said they wanted politicians who were 'honest, compromising, hard working and approachable'.

2.2 Lessons from Europe

Reticence in taking specific measures to provide women with equal opportunity to represent the electorate might be overcome if Northern Ireland's political parties realised the range of mechanisms used across Europe and elsewhere to achieve this. In Sweden the proportion of women in parliament is 45% following the voluntary adoption of positive action by a number of parties whose party regulations specify at least 50% of party appointees shall be women; the two parties with female leaders have increased their electoral support.

Norway has 38% women parliamentarians as a result of many parties making provision for positive action in their internal regulations, e.g. 40% or 50% representation of either gender on party election lists. Parties which have not done so have the lowest female representation in parliament. Practice in Norway since 1986 has been to include at least 40% women in the Government. In Germany with 33% women in parliament, political parties present 'their positive action activities as a sign of modernity' and many party statutes have a separate equal rights chapter that sets out targets, quotas and rules. Party mechanisms include alternating women and men on party lists, setting 30% targets, and mandating 40% or 50% quotas for internal and external party offices.⁸

⁷ Galligan Y, Dowds L, *Women's Hour*, ARK Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive, Research Update Number 26, February 2004, www.ark.ac.uk

⁸ See ed. Russell M, *Changing the Law to Improve Women's Representation in Politics: Lessons from Europe*, Paper for Seminar 26 June 2001.

In Belgium, a 1994 law stipulates that the number of candidates of one gender on electoral lists cannot exceed two-thirds of the total. In Finland, the Act of Equality between Women and Men 1995 lays down that all elective municipal offices except the council itself must have at least 40% female members. In Denmark, measures to encourage participation include scheduling council meetings to enable reconciliation of political and family life and granting a supplementary allowance to cover child-care arrangements to councillors with children under the age of 10.⁹

In France, where women have suffered from low levels of representation, efforts since 1982 to legislate for positive action for election to public office met with opposition from the Constitutional Council until the constitution was amended in 1999. In the meantime some parties adopted voluntary measures such as alternating men and women on party lists or women-only shortlists. A new electoral law was passed in 2000 applying two equality measures. The first requires equal number of men and women candidates on party lists, equally alternating in the case of elections to the European Parliament, with the consequence that the party is disqualified if it does not comply. The second measure – the French State funds political parties – provides that parties will be financially penalised if either gender varies by more than 2% among party candidates contesting single member constituencies; the financial penalty increases the greater the disparity. The first local election following these measures was held in 2001 and resulted in a large increase in the number of women elected to councils from 22% to 48%.¹⁰

2.3 Positive Action and Diversity in Britain

Women's progress in Britain is directly related to measures taken by parties to select them as candidates in winning seats. From 3.5% in the House of Commons just over 20 years ago, the advance is mainly due to positive action strategies by the Labour Party. Labour adopted quotas for internal party office from the 1980s¹¹ and 'all-women shortlists' for the 1997 general election; a mechanism that was struck down in an Employment Tribunal before the election but not before 35 women were selected and went on to become MPs.¹² The result was a remarkable rise from 13.7% labour women MPs in 1992 to 24.2% in 1997.¹³ Steps were taken by Labour to integrate women into the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales before incumbents laid claim to seats, which they did through 'twinning' constituencies where two constituencies together selected one woman and one man. This led to the first Scottish Parliament achieving 37% women and Wales 42% in 1999.

⁹ Loughlin S, internal paper prepared as part of work on Checks, Balances and Safeguards, September 2005; quoting from council of Europe, *Participation of Citizens in Local Public Life*, Study Series, Local and Regional Authorities in Europe, Report no. 72, adopted June 2000, pp 40ff.

¹⁰ See ed. Russell M, *Changing the Law to Improve Women's Representation in Politics: Lessons from Europe*, Paper for Seminar 26 June 2001.

¹¹ In 1990 members of the Parliamentary Labour Party had to include votes for at least three women in elections to the Shadow Cabinet or they would be rejected as invalid, see Wilford R, *Women and Politics in Northern Ireland* in eds Lovenduski J, Norris P *Women in Politics*, Oxford University Press, 1996 pp 43-56.

¹² See ed. Russell M, *Changing the Law to Improve Women's Representation in Politics: Lessons from Europe*, Paper for Seminar 26 June 2001.

¹³ Fawcett Society, *Women's Representation in British Politics*, undated, www.fawcettsociety.org.uk.

In 2002 the Westminster Parliament passed the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act permitting registered political parties to regulate the selection of candidates for the purpose of reducing inequality between men and women. In 2003 Labour, with 54% of its successful candidates women, delivered more than half of the Scottish Parliament's total of 39.5% women. Similarly the Welsh Assembly owes much of its current position of having 50% women to Labour achieving a result of 65.5% women in its candidate return; supported by several smaller parties which achieved 50% women members.

Prior to 1997 the Conservative Party was choice of most women voters but it lost one million women voters in that election and more since. It is now alert to needing more women politicians. Former party chair Teresa May supports the 2002 legislation and Conservative Women's Association chair Lady Hodgson has called for all-women shortlists. Former candidate Sue Catling argues for positive discrimination in candidate selection on the ground that no party worldwide has achieved equality without positive action. Both Tory leadership candidates in 2005 support promotion of women either by strong persuasion of branches or by specific measures although, in their view, autonomy would remain at constituency level even though research indicates that most sexism and discrimination in parties exists at this level.¹⁴

Suggestions within Conservative ranks include an 'A' List of 50/50 women and men for the top 100 winnable seats, drawn up at party headquarters; all-women shortlists in constituencies with retiring MPs; improved selection procedures that weight empathy, listening and surgery skills as well as speaking ability; head-hunting in the business and voluntary sectors; training and mentoring; demonstrable leadership commitment to promoting women; and moving away from a 'punch and judy' confrontational approach to politics to one that encourages working together.¹⁵

'[T]he issue of who was represented *in* the institutions as well as who was represented *by* the institutions was at the heart of the debate' in Wales and Scotland and was successful in reversing the trend of male domination and establishing inclusive politics. It is argued that Government and political parties' should learn lessons from this for local government reform. In 2000 women in councils in Britain ranged from between 44% and 62% in the top ten compared with 0% in all bottom ten; and some councils with around 30% women councillors had no women in their cabinets. Among barriers to women's participation were several also identified in more recent work by the Scottish Executive – family unfriendly working practices such as long and inconvenient hours of business, lack of support, sexist and patronising language, cost of being a councillor and lack of proper party strategies to recruit candidates.¹⁶

In July 2003 the Scottish Executive established a working group to look at widening access to council membership. The challenge was to enhance democratic credibility by transforming councils from places where 'the average councillor is white and male with an average age of 55' to broadly reflecting the make-up of the community.¹⁷

¹⁴ Birkbeck College

¹⁵ Women's Hour, Martha Kearney with David Davis and David Cameron, and a piece by Sue Catling, BBC Radio 4, 9 November 2005.

¹⁶ Gill B, *Losing out Locally: Women and Local Government*, Fawcett Society, June 2000, p5.

¹⁷ Scottish Executive, *Renewing Local Democracy*, Report of the Widening Access to council Membership Progress Group, 2003-04.

One of the group's concerns was the low participation rate of women, which at 22% at the time of the study was already higher than in Northern Ireland. They were keen to increase opportunities for new people to enter local government, both within and from outside political parties and to overcome '[t]he perception that [local government] is the preserve of older men, constituting a wide ranging 'old boys' network'.¹⁸ The group made a number of recommendations for implementation before the 2007 local government election:

- Councillor role descriptions – to overcome the lack of understanding about roles and responsibilities that discourages people from putting themselves forward;
- Better organisation of business, time management and timing of meetings by councils – to instil work-life balance and overcome the long hours culture that discriminates particularly against those with caring responsibilities;
- Clear delineation of the role of the council, and the responsibilities of councillors, from the role of other public bodies;
- Attention to the council's ethos and atmosphere and attitudinal change – to eradicate sexism, racism, homophobia, disability and other forms of discrimination in the council's culture;
- Eradication of the macho culture by replacing adversarial and confrontational with more consensual approaches;
- Ridding the council of the patronage and lack of transparency that surrounds an inner circle of long-serving councillors;
- Training, confidence building, shadowing, mentoring available *in advance* of standing for election as well as when new in post;
- Induction that covers equalities, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, best value, community planning, finance as well as human resource, governance, policy development and decision-making.
- A 'buddy' system whereby a long serving or recently retired councillor can offer confidential counsel.
- Attention to continuous development through councillor annual development reviews.

The working group favoured a proactive role by the Scottish Executive and local authorities 15-18 months in advance of local elections to publicise opportunities to stand for election, and a 'recruitment publicity campaign' developed with representatives of under-represented groups. This would include information on council websites, guidelines and information packs, training and organised mentoring to provide opportunities for independents and non-party as well as party members to learn the ropes before becoming a candidate. Discussion with leading civic organisations is advocated to encourage them to offer sabbaticals, flexible working and time off to those who wish to serve as a councillor among their memberships.

The working group suggests that political parties should be more proactive between elections, encouraging people to stand, adopting a positive attitude to promoting under-represented groups and welcoming people with new ideas from outside the political arena rather than people who simply 'toe the party line'. In the group's view parties should ensure that their national policies and initiatives impact directly on

¹⁸ Scottish Executive, *Renewing Local Democracy*, Report of the Widening Access to council Membership Progress Group, 2003-04, p24.

selection processes for council candidates. In particular they should 'put in place arrangements for monitoring and enforcing selection, complaints and appeals procedures and should strive to have an equitable placement of women and men in seats they consider winnable.'¹⁹

Experience from establishment of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly suggests the significance of integrating opportunity for women and other under-represented groups from the beginning. It is appropriate for Government to make clear as it did in relation to Wales in its devolution White Paper that it attaches great importance to equal opportunities, greater participation by women is essential to the health of democracy and parties should bear this in mind when selecting candidates. While there was considerable opposition to positive action within parties, the measures taken by the leaderships of several led to women attaining 42% of seats in the Welsh Assembly, enough of a critical mass to bring about significant cultural and practical change.²⁰

Achieving gender equality from the outset of new political arrangements is crucial. It means that women as well as men shape the customs and norms in the new body as well as the policies. It appears that women in Wales have changed what is talked about, what is prioritised and how business is conducted; there is a view that committees where women predominate have succeeded in working in an inclusive manner. The new approach has impacted on rules for working hours and permissible language in debate. The positive female role models, the non-confrontational type of politics dedicated to achieving change in a constructive manner has been notable.²¹

2.4 Parties in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland no party has developed a sound strategy to redress gender imbalance among their representatives in the manner adopted in Britain for the 1997 general election and Scotland and Wales for elections to devolved institutions in 1999. Some have policy in favour of equal representation while others do not; but no party has an implementation strategy to deliver consistent results. Sinn Fein's leadership took steps to have at least one woman on every constituency slate for the 2003 Assembly election, and succeeded in doing this in all but one; but their action was taken after many of the original selections had taken place.

Women hold 18 of the 108 Assembly seats, at 16.7% an increase of just four over the previous Assembly despite the protection of the 2002 positive action legislation. Sinn Fein has the largest number with seven women comprising 29% of its Assembly members, followed by the SDLP at 22% with five. Bolstered by defections from the UUP the DUP doubled its female representatives to four or 12%, leaving the UUP with none. Both are well behind the Conservative Party rate of female participation in Wales at 18% and Scotland at 22%.²² Alliance has 33% women among its small Assembly representation.

¹⁹ Scottish Executive, *Renewing Local Democracy*, Report of the Widening Access to council Membership Progress Group, 2003-04, p30.

²⁰ Chaney P, *Women and Constitutional Change in Wales*, Occasional Paper No.7, Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics, Queen's University Belfast, October 2003, p8.

²¹ Chaney P, op.cit., pp9-10.

²² Fawcett Society, *Women's Representation in British Politics*, undated, www.fawcettsociety.org.uk.

In the 2005 local government election the proportion of SDLP women against SDLP men increased despite the party losing seats. The DUP and Sinn Fein substantially increased their number of women councillors, although with the gains both parties made in this election the increase represents just 20% and 28% respectively of their councillors. The Ulster Unionist Party's women councillors fared badly when the party lost many seats in the election.

Training has played a distinct role in increasing women's confidence and ability to contest elections and all parties have availed of opportunities. The DemocraShe programme, run by the Northern Ireland Women's Initiative and Queen's University Institute of Governance, assisted all parties to achieve modest results; 78% of *DemocraShe* participants who were candidates in the 2005 local government election won seats, and 33.3% of these were new councillors. Of the women currently serving in local government, 40% have been trained in the DemocraShe programme and several are mayors, deputy mayors/vice-chairs and committee chairs. Of the fifty-three new women councillors 32% received training on DemocraShe.

2.5 Action by Government

Government has cause to insist that political parties pay attention to engaging women and selecting them as candidates and for senior positions within the party. The Electoral Commission's report indicates that '[t]he candidate recruitment process, in particular whether candidates and Members of Parliament reflect the society from which they are drawn, could play an important role in dampening or encouraging turnout.' As women are more than 50% of the electorate 'facilitating opportunities for greater participation among women can be expected to strengthen representative democracy for society in general'.²³

Devolution, which brought much advantage to women in Scotland and Wales, has made little inroad into breaking down the male bias in political representation in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland starts from a lower baseline of women's political participation and much less political priority continues to be given to it by parties than in England, Scotland or Wales. Decades of conflict has meant that Government and political parties have focused on parity of esteem between two major political/religious blocks, not on integrating women and other under-represented groups into political and public life. Parties have prioritised monitoring equality of treatment by Government of themselves rather than on inequalities within their own ranks.

On the other hand, opposition by political parties to specific arrangements to overcome under-representation of women are difficult to understand given that political arrangements in Northern Ireland are designed to protect cross-community parity up to and including the highest levels of regional government. Even more, given that the United Nations and the European Union have stressed that women are as integral to building and sustaining peace, development and democracy as are men.

²³ *Gender and political participation*, Research Report, The Electoral Commission, April 2004, p47 & p14

It is now well-established that advances made in other countries have been as a result of positive action and only such proactive measures will deliver results for women within a reasonable timeframe. Government should consider whether the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 is sufficient to encourage Northern Ireland parties to adopt positive action, or whether additional legislative measures or other inducements are necessary to bring about change in the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland.

Over 83% of MLAs are men and many MLAs, 69 out of 108, hold two political positions; some hold three. Abolishing dual mandates would instantly widen democratic participation by increasing the pool of available seats and establishing a career path for politicians. It would also ensure proper separation of powers and accountability between the local level and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Government may also wish to consider whether the current electoral system is best for delivering representation that reflects the composition of the Northern Ireland electorate; it is proven that some systems are better than others in securing the inclusion of women. Other measures Government might consider are:

- offering incentives to parties to encourage greater gender representation, such as funding for training, commissioning gender experts or other specific purposes, providing the party commits to a target on women candidates;
- requiring parties to have a set percentage of women candidates in order to retain registration as a party or to qualify to stand candidates in an election;
- financially penalising parties for failing to reach a quota of women candidates;²⁴
- funding an independent training and support capacity working with parties and others to widen membership access membership for women and other under-represented groups;
- requiring councils to agree and publish job descriptions for councillors and promote local public awareness campaigns on forthcoming elections;
- setting parameters and enforcing standards in culture and practice in local government through council constitutions, codes of conduct and operating arrangements;
- encouraging councils to adopt family friendly policy, arrangements and allowances in relation to caring responsibilities.²⁵

Shadow councils will be appointed in advance of 2009 and will determine structures, processes and protocols for the operation of future local government. It is important that sufficient numbers of women are members of the Shadow Councils.²⁶ It is advisable for Government to take a hands-on approach to the composition and arrangements for Shadow Councils, e.g. by setting parameters for women's inclusion. Parties should regard increasing women's participation in Shadow Councils as an 'equality of opportunity' measure in preparation for new Councils after 2009.

²⁴ Political parties in Northern Ireland have faced financial sanctions through which Assembly grants have been withheld on recommendation by the Independent Monitoring Commission.

²⁵ A Belfast City Council study showed councillors working 56 hours per week according to a participant at the Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen's University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

²⁶ This was strongly endorsed at the Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen's University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

2.6 Actions by Political Parties

Political parties in Northern Ireland should consider how they can use the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to best advantage.²⁷ A combination of opening opportunity, promoting talent and increasing skill is required. Parties should be prepared to adopt both ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘positive action’; that is, they should rigorously consider women as well as men for any political opportunity that arises within the party and seek ways of taking specific steps to redress the ongoing deficit of women among their representatives. ‘Hard’ or prescriptive measures within party regulations such as establishing quotas as well as ‘soft’ measures such as training and mentoring are legally permitted.

Many actions can be taken to prepare both women and the party for increased representation by women from 2009. Some could be time-bound measures; and all could be adopted in the spirit of taking action until parity is reached. Parties could choose from among the following, some of which are more prescriptive than others:

- examine best practice elsewhere and bring in a gender equality expert to assist in and developing and implementing an integrated three-year gender strategy;
- demonstrate leadership commitment by leading cultural change within the party e.g. visibly promoting equality of opportunity for women and assisting constituency branches to develop a programme to complement the party’s gender strategy;
- gather statistics on women’s participation at all levels of the party to benchmark the current position in the party and monitor progress annually;
- examine the characteristics of women’s participation e.g. differences in rural and urban areas or level of campaign spend on female compared to male candidates,
- survey attitudes and identify barriers to women’s equality in the party and develop an action programme to remove obstacles to progress;
- change the party constitution, rules and/or party policy to require positive action measures until parity democracy is reached;
- reorganise patterns of business and timings of meetings to accommodate women and men with caring responsibilities;
- review party membership among women and recruit more women members, including young women;
- build women’s capacity throughout the party through general and women-only training;
- set up and resource a women’s network in the party and make it visible in party literature and on the website;
- provide gender sensitisation training for men and women in the party, making it mandatory for party and constituency officers and committees;
- encourage women to gain experience in headquarters’ and constituency committee and officer posts and increase access by setting term limits on positions within the party;
- identify potential women candidates at an early stage and provide shadowing arrangements with existing councillors;

²⁷ This point was strongly made at the Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen’s University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

- revisit selection processes to ensure they avoid any gender or other bias and take account of the range of skills that ought to be assessed;
- agree a policy on reaching 30% (critical mass), 40% (of either gender) and/or 50% (parity) within a timeframe;
- introduce quotas, or targets with a timetable, for internal party posts;
- introduce quotas, or targets with a timetable, for men and women going forward for selection as candidates;²⁸
- introduce quotas, or targets with a timetable, for equal numbers of men and women as candidates in winnable seats;
- agree women-only shortlists to replace retiring councillors until parity between women and men is reached;
- establish a mentoring scheme for new councillors with existing or retired councillors;
- appoint more women to senior positions within councils over the next 3 years so they can gain greater experience as mayors and chairs in advance of 2009;
- ensure that women councillors are fairly represented among their local government and party appointments to outside bodies;
- appoint someone to be responsible for co-ordinating party action on women's equality and making regular reports on progress and obstacles to the party executive.

Achieving gender balance in candidate selection is a means to an end not an end in itself, the final goal being to attain gender-balance among elected political representatives. Promoting women in selection as candidates in winnable seats is simply providing women with equality of opportunity. Equality of outcome is reached when women are elected in equal numbers to men.

The roundtable on Women and the RPA²⁹ not only demonstrated strong support for dedicated measures to increase women's political opportunities as candidates, it revealed consensus on the need to deal with the aggressive behaviour that had become embedded in political life that deterred women from entering politics. This mirrors findings in Britain and behaviour codes and protocols, underpinned by party leadership that visibly refuses to tolerate such behaviour whether to men or women, is required. Women from all sectors believed that reaching a gender-balanced Council is essential to a comfortable working environment for senior female officers and staff, better relations with civic organisations representing women and better policy outcomes for society as a whole.

²⁸ There is evidence to suggest that even where equal numbers go forward, equal numbers of women do not succeed as there is an in-built bias at constituency level that favours men.

²⁹ Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen's University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

3. Women Officers in Local Government

*'Achieving equality of opportunity in all its dimensions will be a fundamental requirement of the change process.'*³⁰

3.1 The current position

The position of women and gender sensitisation within the local government staffing structure is as important to mainstreaming equality in policy and services as is women's representation among political representatives. While the Welsh Assembly has demonstrated that women politicians in sufficient numbers can affect change, it was found that 'under-representation of women amongst [Welsh Office] staff and its poor record in promoting equality of opportunity means that much further work is necessary before gender equality is normalised in the bureaucracy.'³¹

There are no women among the twenty-six chief executives in Northern Ireland's councils; and there has only ever been one in the past. This compares with a figure of 36 women out of 351 chief executives, or 10.25%, in Britain.³² Women comprise 17% second tier officers in Northern Ireland, i.e. officers reporting directly to a chief executive; these are mix of directors and heads of service. Among the 144 first and second tier posts there are just 20 women comprising 14% over both level; in 54% of councils, that is 14 out of 26, there are no women in the top two management tiers.³³

3.2 Research Findings

Research by the Local Government Training Group in Northern Ireland indicates the following difficulties for women officers in local government Northern Ireland:

- highly visible institutionalised sexism/stereotyping;
- a male dominated culture in both staff and political representation;
- women's different management styles not recognised as valid by male managers;
- male arrogance and 'boys club' mentality;
- culture and stereotyping creating real barriers to progression;
- long hours and evening meetings culture and lack of work/life balance;
- undermining women's work and value through use of inappropriate language e.g. use of the term 'wee girl';
- male bosses bypassing women managers in favour of lower graded male staff;
- male bullying that affects women's confidence;
- reluctance by women to progress in local government where robust debate verges on harassment;
- academic qualifications rather than competence seen to be rewarded.

³⁰ RPA, op.cit., p105 para 8.9.

³¹ Chaney P, op.cit., p10.

³² Bristol Business School, *Room at the Top*, May 2001.

³³ Figures and research data come from Heather Loudon's paper at the Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen's University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

Women make up less than 7% of non-traditional workforce and more than 25% of these are part time. Research conducted for the WINS project (Women Into Non-traditional Sectors) in relation to operational/front line staff, including in local government, found that more than 70% of employees in these posts would like more gender awareness training within the organisation and that childcare was a major factor in their choice of job location and working hours.³⁴

3.3 Preparations for Equality Recruitment

Modernising local government should mean changing the culture within councils to one which is gender balanced, tackling the under-representation of women at senior levels and enabling more integration of either gender into non-traditional jobs. One challenge for Government is ensuring that women do not disappear, or become much less visible than they are presently, when management posts (chief executive, director and head of service) disappear due to the smaller number of councils.

Once new structures are announced equality proofing of all job descriptions and recruitment practices for management and other posts should be a priority; expert equality advice should be obtained. Given established employment patterns, for example, most women may be ruled out of consideration for senior posts if substantial budget management experience is specified as a requirement. Competence based assessment and validating 'outstanding potential' as well as track record could be considered.³⁵

Training and development opportunities could be made available from early in the transition period to enable potential candidates, whether from inside and outside local government, prepare for vacancies. Particular attention should be paid to high quality leadership and management development programmes; action learning sets could be useful to consolidate learning. An organised mentoring scheme could be introduced, matching mentees with a range of mentors inside and outside councils and/or with mentors in Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Women-only training should be part of the provision, and women encouraged to take all opportunities presented.

Tackling the long hours and the evening meetings culture is an issue for all senior staff who must service meetings. It impacts even more strongly on those with dependent care responsibilities, usually women whether they are staff or politicians. One element in resolving this is thought to be an adequate basic salary for councillors to replace attendance allowances. In addition, while retaining flexibility for out-of-hours meetings when necessary, a decisive step is needed to move toward a different norm in council work practices. The widening access working group in Scotland considered resolving the issues of remuneration and working time as key to increasing diversity in council membership too. They suggest that councils should be charged with substantially improving their organisation of business, time management and timing of meetings to instil work-life balance and overcome the long hours culture.³⁶

³⁴ The need for family friendly policies and childcare provision is a longstanding issue for women's participation in the workforce and other forums; the point also made several times throughout the Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen's University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

³⁵ See job advert for Regional Director, Government Office for West Midlands; post advertised at £110,000 by Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

³⁶ Scottish Executive, op.cit., pp33-38.

3.4 *Critical Mass and Culture Change*

A critical area of concern is the area of 'robust' debate that women frequently consider to be verging on, and sometimes actually, bullying and harassment. This style of behaviour is mentioned frequently by women politicians and staff, and is not unique to Northern Ireland. Attention is required to altering ethos, atmosphere and attitudes in the council including replacing the macho culture of adversarial and confrontational style of business with more consensual approaches. Setting parameters through council constitutions, standing orders, codes of conduct, protocols that define relationships is important as is enforcing standards in all arenas and oversight by Standards Committees.

While it would be wrong to place the onus on women to change council culture, and indeed it is the dominant male culture that requires attention, there is a view among women officers in Northern Ireland that having more women councillors would greatly assist. It must be emphasised that a sufficient critical mass of women, preferably across all parties, is required before a substantial difference is visible. Nevertheless, it has been found that women bring about differences in appreciation of gender imbalances and ways of working.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly, although deficient in critical mass, it was found that 'the most significant and consistent differences between male and female MLAs ... were in their attitudes towards women.' Women appreciated gender discrimination better than male colleagues, and were alert to job discrimination, work/life balance and the need for women to work together to 'change laws and customs that are unfair to women.'³⁷ In Wales the sheer number of women Assembly Members helped to consolidate determination by many to 'break down tribal, confrontational politics' and develop a more consensual, less combative style in the face of working with 'seasoned politicians ... acting in such as traditional way that it makes change very, very difficult.'³⁸

Gender sensitisation training throughout local government will be essential to transforming the culture to one which is more conducive to women staff and politicians. As part of the preparation for this discussions could usefully be undertaken with both men and women in councils, separately and together as appropriate, to identify behavioural, communication and other differences that cause concern. The training programme could be developed with trainers who are expert in equality and cultural change and rolled out across local government during transition and several years into the new council structure in order to embed it deeply. Experience indicates that change will not be secured unless it is constant and consistent over a prolonged period. Consideration should be given to making this a mandatory requirement for all chief executives and senior officers when appointed even if they have participated in a programme during transition.

³⁷ Cowell-Meyers K, *Women Legislators in Northern Ireland: Gender and Politics in the New Legislative Assembly*, Occasional Paper No.3, Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics, Queen's University Belfast, October 2003, p7.

³⁸ Chaney P, op.cit., pp10-11.

3.5 Transition: Women in Councils 2006

The transition stage following announcement of reorganisation arrangements is important in signalling to women that they are to be welcomed to senior posts in public administration. Given the poor representation of women currently, Government may want to make this explicit in statements and transitional arrangements that should ensure women have significant roles to play. This would include Shadow Councils.

The Local Government Staff Commission, in partnership with a number of other bodies, is leading the initiative Women in Councils 2006.³⁹ Government could contribute to the programme by organising a widening access event targeted at women as part of the initiative's programme for Democracy Week. Among other things, the Women in Councils 2006 will foster champions within political parties and councils to promote and support women. Government could encourage parties and councils to retain champions throughout the transition period with a view to maintaining progress on improving gender balance for 2009.

4. Women and Public Bodies

*'Pending the devolution of powers to a new Northern Ireland Assembly, the British Government will pursue broad policies for sustained economic growth and stability in Northern Ireland and for promoting social inclusion, including in particular community development and the advancement of women in public life.'*⁴⁰

4.1 Review Implications for Women

The Review of Public Administration suggests two options with regard to Public Bodies.⁴¹ The first is that there should be no public bodies in Northern Ireland with functions transferring to central or local government. The second is that they should continue, but the number of bodies should be reduced and accountability enhanced. Given that proposals relating to major services such as education and health propose new public bodies, option one seems highly improbable. In addition there are good reasons for the continued existence of public bodies. These include an important scrutinising role, the opportunity they present in terms of civic participation and enhancement of civic mindedness.

Changes proposed to public bodies need to be considered in the context of revised structures of local government and the existence of a devolved assembly. The RPA presents an important opportunity to review the system of public appointments and the working of public bodies to address the continued under-representation of women

³⁹ Local Government Staff Commission for Northern Ireland, National Association of Councillors, Northern Ireland Local Government Association, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, Belfast City Council, Business in Community, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, Queen's University Institute of Governance.

⁴⁰ The Agreement, *Rights Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity: Economic, Social and Cultural Issues*, 1998, p19, para 1.

⁴¹ RPA, op.cit., p98.

in this area of decision- making. The Review document notes that two main issues have been raised on equality – firstly, that a reduction in the number of public bodies could impact on the participation of women in public life and secondly, the possible impact that the nomination of more councillors to boards may have on the important aim of improving diversity.⁴²

A number of questions arise from a reorganisation of public administration. If there are fewer bodies working at a more strategic level, there will be fewer places to which people will be appointed. In particular the Review suggests that Health and Education, two areas to which women have been appointed in greater numbers, are to be vigorously pruned. It is likely that boards of public bodies will be constituted with a strong emphasis on relevant professional experience. Unless appropriate safeguards are implemented these measures could disadvantage women.⁴³

4.2 Current Representation on Public Bodies

Currently women are represented to a greater extent on public bodies than in local government. One reason for this may be that public appointments have been the subject of some scrutiny and political attention, including ‘targets’ for women’s representation. However, the number of women on public bodies and their positioning on those bodies has remained fairly static since the early 1990s. Since then the percentage of women board members has been 32-33%. Analysis of yearly appointments made since 1996 show that the number of women appointed peaked in 2002/03 at 42% but dropped to 32% in 2003/04, the lowest number since 1996.⁴⁴

Despite the move from an informal to a more formal and scrutinised process of making appointments, including the introduction of a Code of Practice and a Commissioner for Public Appointments, the public advertising of appointments, a short listing and interview process, there has been limited progress in terms of the numbers of women applying, and being appointed, to public bodies. Concerns include not just the numerical under-representation of women but the fact that women have been more likely to be appointed to ‘soft issues’ boards, such as education and health, and men to ‘hard issues’ boards. They are also much less likely to be appointed to the chair of a board and to posts attracting remuneration; in 2003/04 only 26% of chairs appointed were women.

4.3 Increasing Diversity

The Review refers to guidance drawn up by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, which it notes includes ‘action to promote equal opportunity and diversity’.⁴⁵ But the failure to achieve women’s equal representation despite the Code of Practice needs to be acknowledged and steps taken to address it prior to the setting up of new institutions. Experience has shown that despite rhetoric about diversity,

⁴² RPA, *ibid.* p129.

⁴³ Women supported the concerns expressed by Dame Renee Fritchie about the potential for post-review changes to reduce opportunities for women. They felt that changes ought to be proofed and safeguards implemented to ensure this did not happen: Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen’s University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005

⁴⁴ Central Appointments Unit Annual Reports

⁴⁵ RPA, *op.cit.*, p30.

there still appears to be a tendency to rely on the ‘tried and tested’ and a reluctance to attract and appoint new blood. The Code of Practice and Guidance emphasises that appointments should be made primarily on the basis of merit – but the concept of merit needs to be examined. There may be pre-conceived ideas about ‘suitability’ and about ‘requirements’ which work against women. More women should be encouraged to seek appointment as independent assessors working with public appointment panels.⁴⁶

The need to achieve more diversity has been emphasised in research and recently, by the Select Committee on Public Administration.⁴⁷ It expressed concern that attitudes towards conventional measures of merit can ‘limit the field of potential non-executive board members and carry a risk of re-cycling the same kinds of narrowly based candidates’.⁴⁸ It recommended that ‘government should consider the requirements of public bodies for various types of expertise and experience...’.⁴⁹ Dame Renee Fritchie, the previous Commissioner for Public Appointments, set up a working party on diversity which reported in July 2005. The Commissioner’s report should inform the Reviews decisions on public bodies.

One issue is the number of bodies that do not fall within the remit of the Commissioner. These include the Equality Commission, the Police Board, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and cross border bodies established under the Agreement. There is effectively no scrutiny of appointments to these bodies. Another is the fact that public appointments are still perceived as something of a closed shop which acts as a disincentive to potential applicants. This could be addressed to some extent by more transparency and accountability, a review of information made available to prospective applicants and how information is presented and made more accessible.

Initiatives to encourage more women to apply for public appointments initiatives have been developed and introduced by individual departments but tend to be ad-hoc. The lack of an overall strategy to which all departments should have to work is problematic. Unless there are clear overall plans which are time limited, with targets that are monitored and reviewed, then results will continue to be very limited. A more active and coherent approach needs to be taken in relation to achieving gender equality on boards. Consideration should be given to giving OFMDFM’s Gender Equality Unit a cross departmental remit in relation to public appointments.

4.4 Nominating Bodies

The RPA document indicates that ‘many elected representatives have suggested that the way to improve the accountability of public bodies is to ensure that boards include both ministerial appointees and elected representatives nominated by local government’.⁵⁰ The argument for this is that local government nominees would introduce an element of democratic accountability and make bodies more locally responsive. Under present arrangements local government has a right to

⁴⁶ Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen’s University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005

⁴⁷ House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, Fourth Report, 2003, para.148.

⁴⁸ H of C Select Committee on Public Administration, *ibid.* para 142

⁴⁹ H or C Select Committee on Public Administration, *ibid.* para 148

⁵⁰ RPA, *op.cit.*, p98.

representation on a number of boards; these along with nominations from a range of external bodies, including local authorities, trade unions, business and the churches, accounts for 35% of appointments to public bodies in Northern Ireland. This is more than elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

The high level of appointees from nominating bodies has not been favourable to efforts to increase women's representation. Fewer women come through this route and there are particular problems in relation to local government where the vast majority of councillors are male. The Commissioner for Public Appointments raised concerns about this matter in annual reports and in a submission to the RPA.

Summarised the problems are:

- nominating organisations generally do not have a selection process so there is a lack of transparency about how people are nominated for particular posts;
- nominees from external organisations are not judged against the selection criteria in the same way as other applicants;
- there is often little emphasis on matching nominees with skills and expertise required;
- there is a tendency for the same people to circulate around boards and to hold appointments for much longer periods of time.

These problems are particularly important given the suggestion in the RPA consultation document that statutory representation on public bodies could be increased, for example, in new bodies set up for education and health. Given the current male dominance on councils this would have the likely effect of reducing women's representation in these areas, ironically in areas where they are major users of services. The Review creates an opportunity to rethink the structure and composition of boards to ensure that public bodies are more diverse, democratic, accountable and representative. Lessons could be learned from innovative practice in other areas of the United Kingdom, such as the shadowing arrangements in Scotland, and from the guidance applied to the setting up of District Policing Partnerships which have more women on them than any other public bodies in Northern Ireland.

4.5 Requiring Gender Balance

International experience demonstrates that introducing a legal requirement for gender balance has positive outcomes for women; in Norway and Finland the impact has been considerable. Thirty years ago women in Norway comprised just 11% of the membership of public boards, so in 1988 the Gender Equality Act introduced a gender quota. All publicly appointed boards, committees and other fora are expected to comprise at least 40% of either gender.⁵¹

Finland's 1987 Equality Act was reformed in 1995 to similarly decree that women and men must each comprise at least 40% of all public bodies, including inter-municipal and regional decision-making structures in which representatives are indirectly elected from the councils of the member municipalities. Importantly, the quota law is applied without regard to the gender composition of the local council.

⁵¹ Gender Equality Act Para 21, see ed. Russell M, *Changing the Law to Improve Women's Representation in Politics: Lessons from Europe*, Paper for Seminar 26 June 2001.

Following enactment the proportion of women members of newly appointed public commissions increased from 30% to 48%.⁵²

Government could follow the practice Norway and Finland, and other countries such as the Republic of Ireland, France and Sweden, by making gender balance a requirement. It could protect and increase the ratio of women on public bodies by specifying in law that a gender balance of 60:40 of either gender is required for all public bodies. At a minimum it should introduce and regulate a firm policy to this effect. Success should be judged by the number of women in positions as Board chairs as well as members.

There is no reason why statutory and other nominating bodies as well as ministerial appointments could not be made amenable to this requirement. Nominees from local government and these bodies should be required to meet the same recruitment and selection conditions as other appointees; for example, in terms of meeting the skill, competence and experience requirements for appointment. Appointments should be time limited to increase turnover and access.⁵³

5. Women's Civic Participation

*'the parties affirm in particular: the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity.'*⁵⁴

5.1 Involving the Women's Sector

The Review of Public Administration indicates that the role of the community and voluntary sector 'will develop in scale and importance at both central and local levels of government'⁵⁵ but there is little detail on how this will come about or how women's representation will be secured. Women's organisations have a role to play in this expansion and their inclusion in the design and delivery of policy and services should be considered important. Due recognition should be given to the women's sector, including community-based women's groups and groups that represent other marginalised interests such as women from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Sustained funding is important if women are to participate fully, reversing the historical exclusion of women due to lack of investment in the women's sector. The recent consultation on the Gender Equality Strategy, at the urging of the women's sector, provides a positive example of meaningful participation where resources were provided for community facilitators to work with women across Northern Ireland.⁵⁶ One might expect to see a properly resourced equality unit within

⁵² Holli AM, *Quotas for Indirectly Elected Bodies: A tailor made solution for Finland*, European Political Science, 2004, 3.

⁵³ Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen's University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

⁵⁴ The Agreement, *Rights Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity*, 1998, p16, para 1.

⁵⁵ RPA, op.cit., p26 para 3.13.

⁵⁶ Dr Margaret Ward, Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen's University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005

the new, larger councils. Consideration should be given to appointing dedicated women's officers, whether or not there is an equality unit, whose role within council would be to maintain relationships with the women's sector and facilitate access to and influence on mainstream policies. This would be in addition, rather than an alternative, to a proper funding strategy for the council's local women's sector.

5.2 The Equality Duty and Gender Mainstreaming

It ought to be remembered that, in relation to enabling public authorities to meet statutory obligations, women encompass the diversity of interests under Section 75, not one-ninth of those interests, and represent several with more legitimacy than do men. Consultation should be managed in the best way to ensure the inclusion of those most affected by policies with women specifically targeted, including young women.

The Welsh Assembly too is required to have due regard to the principle of equality of opportunity in the conduct of its business and in the exercise of its functions.⁵⁷ The constitutional blueprint for that Assembly has been crucial to its capacity to apply equality of opportunity and is a testimony to the lobby successes of gender equality activists in the campaign on the Assembly's legislative basis.⁵⁸ Government could similarly strengthen the equality focus in councils by including references to Northern Ireland's statutory equality obligations in new local government legislation. Furthermore, it could mandate, through legislation and/or council constitutions and protocols, that gender balance is required in all aspects of council composition and business. In Northern Ireland as in Wales an increase in women councillors and senior council officers and effective networking with the women's sector would help to bridge the divide between public authorities and women.

The importance of political will in driving for equality results should not be underestimated. Government may wish to use the opportunity of the Review of Public Administration to clarify for local authorities that the statutory equality duty is a positive duty that enables structural inequalities to be tackled, as opposed to being about equal treatment in every circumstance. Thus it is a very relevant tool in support of gender mainstreaming. It is important for councillors and officers to have greater knowledge of gender mainstreaming tools such as gender proofing, gender/equality impact assessment and gender budgeting. They should be enabled to appreciate the importance of applying these within strong scrutiny and policy overview functions in new local government.⁵⁹

5.3 Civic Councils

The RPA consultative document suggests that civic councils may be introduced at a more local level than councils. These would be 'made up of elected representatives would form a given area. They would have a role to consult locally, to form partnerships and to gather local views to feed into the main council's deliberations and undertake assigned responsibilities on its behalf. They would also have a profile

⁵⁷ Government of Wales Act 1998, s48 & s120.

⁵⁸ Chaney P, *Women and Constitutional Change in Wales*, Occasional Paper No.7, Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics, Queen's University Belfast, October 2003, p6

⁵⁹ For further information on scrutiny and overview see Hinds B, Loughlin J, op. cit.

in their area and provide civic leadership within it.’⁶⁰ It is also envisaged that ‘[c]ouncils would advocate for communities, work in partnership and build critical links with all stakeholders – public, private, voluntary. They would negotiate with central government and public bodies on behalf of the community.’⁶¹

There is considerable concern about the implications that civic councils have for women in the absence of sufficient women councillors. Each civic council would be unlikely to contain more than a very small number of women; some may have no women councillors unless parties succeed in taking radical steps to reach gender balance. A wholly male civic leadership would find it difficult to arrive at holistic policies for community well-being; and women question how this arrangement could possibly be regarded as providing adequate or effective local leadership. The case made for civic councils – that they are to embody local identity and effectively consult, form partnerships and provide civic leadership – is damaged unless they reflect the whole community. The preferred option is for civic councils to be opened out to become a wider civic forum that includes social partners, appointed to a gender-balanced standard.⁶²

5.4 Appointment to Council Committees and Partnerships

It has been suggested that Government could follow local government policy in Britain and Ireland to make provision for councils to co-opt/appoint independent non-councillors to council committees and task forces. Measures should be put in place to ensure that women are among those appointed. Furthermore, councils could be mandated to appoint a majority of women with the necessary skills to fill co-optee positions where a committee lacks a fair proportion of women councillors.⁶³

It is important that concrete methods of involving women are put in place before councils are given statutory powers to lead community planning. Women should form 50 % of community forums and partnership arrangements, but at the very least these structures should be required to comply with the general principle of 40 % of each gender. There is evidence of good practice in relation to the way in which people are selected by the community and voluntary sector to sit on local strategy boards, but women’s participation in strategic and neighbourhood partnership boards is limited.⁶⁴ It is useful to organise these and other public boards on a sectoral basis, but unless gender-balanced participation is mandatory for all nominating bodies women will be under-represented and women will not find them acceptable.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ RPA, *ibid.*, p40 para 4.33.

⁶¹ RPA, *ibid.*, p24 para 3.7.

⁶² Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen’s University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

⁶³ See Hinds B, Loughlin J, *Checks, Balances and Safeguards*, RPA Briefing Paper, 2005.

⁶⁴ Dr Margaret Ward gave the example of the Strategic Partnership Board Belfast with 4 women and 24 men in a paper at the Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen’s University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005

⁶⁵ There are examples of representation being successfully transformed from a very low level to equal representation of women e.g. the Waterside, Derry and the Rural Community Network: Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen’s University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

6. Conclusion

The reorganisation of public administration for the Review will have a gender impact. Acknowledgement of this by Government and commitment to take action to deal with it positively - by mitigating negative impacts and creating opportunities to make a step change in women's representation and access – is sought by women.⁶⁶ The Review of Public Administration, and each stage of its implementation, should be proofed against equality legislation and the gender strategy for Northern Ireland.

The Review promises key things that women consistently argued for to achieve fair participation - structural, attitudinal, cultural and behavioural change. It proposes radical change; at the same time, gender mainstreaming means placing radical change for women at the centre of the Review. Equality should underpin and permeate all changes in public administration. Women can take steps to enhance their position but major barriers to their progress must be dismantled by those in authority.

- Positive action mechanisms for women's engagement should be prescribed across all areas rather than left on a grace and favour basis. Quotas for gender-balanced representation could be introduced for the political arena, public bodies and partnerships; preferably a minimum 60:40 either gender.
- Sustainable funding for the women's sector needs to be resolved to fully harness its potential to inform policy.
- A Public Services Commission, or other management body, should be comprise 50% women and include rigorous monitoring of equality.
- Transitional management arrangements should not replicate the gender imbalance of the status quo. Significant numbers of women politicians and staff should be in Shadow Councils. Active change management involving women must be the norm across every sector, with continuous impact assessment and review.

The future vision for democracy and governance in Northern Ireland can be informed and exhilarated by looking beyond the local and regional to wider horizons. Regular articulation of Government commitments to international obligations on equal participation of women in decision-making, such as the CEDAW Convention and UN Security Council Resolution 1325, would be welcome. The importance of these standards could be reinforced by making them available on the Assembly website.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Government could include international principles in council regulations and constitutions and instil among local authorities the importance of meeting devolved responsibilities in these matters so that Government can deliver on its international obligations.

⁶⁶ Roundtable on Women and the RPA, Queen's University Institute of Governance, 2 September 2005.

⁶⁷ The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister does this e.g. the Council of Europe's Recommendation on Participation of Citizens in Public Life.

