

Blog: Transgender councillors and other census findings

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When survey researchers report to clients, they are often asked about their *least* surprising finding. If those from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) were asked such a question by the LGA commissioners of the recently published *National Census of Local Authority Councillors 2010*, they would surely have found it hard to resist their discovery that “the majority of councillors reported that their gender identity was the same as they were assigned at birth” (<http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/20406192> (<http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/20406192>) - p.15).

I must be honest with you, though – as the footballers’ cliché goes; that last sentence is a very slight misquote. In fact, the actual sentence might easily have qualified as the *most* surprising finding: “the majority of councillors (94.3%) reported that their gender identity was the same as they were assigned at birth”. However, before you get too excited/alarmed by the thought of more than 5% (1,033) transsexual, cross-dressing or otherwise gender dysphoric councillors running around in a hitherto unsuspectedly sybaritic world of local government, I should quickly add the remainder of the finding: “0.1% of councillors reported that it was not [the same]; a minority answered ‘prefer not to say’ (1.7%) or gave no response (3.9%).”

So, more or less back to ‘least surprising’ – but not quite. Personally, I hadn’t really expected the census to ask questions about sexual orientation at all. None had been included in previous councillor censuses, or, despite pleas from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, in the 2011 Census for England and Wales. **We have no comprehensive national baseline, therefore, against which to judge whether the 0.1% (23) self-reported transgender councillors – or the 2.4% (440) gays and lesbians, and 0.9% (154) bisexuals – over-reflect or under-reflect the numbers in the adult population as a whole – or, more seriously, against which properly to monitor the impact of equality legislation.**

It’s true that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) does now include sexual identity questions in its Integrated Household Survey, but its figures are, unsurprisingly, further towards the hetero, or more reticent, end of the spectrum than those for councillors: 1% gay or lesbian (equivalent to 490,000 adults), 0.5% (239,000) bisexual, 0.4% ‘other’. Which tends to confirm the strongly held view of those with a first-hand knowledge of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) ‘community’ – supported by the DTI’s 5 to 7% estimate for the purposes of the 2004 Civil Partnership Act – that large-scale, household-based surveys are likely significantly to under-record the true size of the LGBT population. If for no other reason, then, these councillor statistics deserve recognition for adding some useful data in a field in which hard and reliable evidence is at a premium.

Very obviously, though, they are not what the Councillor Census is primarily about, and the remainder of this blog will focus on a few of the more ‘mainstream’ findings and trends – starting (he types preeningly) with a slick segue from gender identity to gender itself. The 2010 Census is the sixth in a roughly biennial series dating back to 1997, and, sad to report, **it is the first in which the proportion of female councillors has not increased. In 2008 it burst – well, inched – over the 30% line for the first time, but now it has fallen back from 30.8% to 30.6%. The actual number of women councillors is lower than in 1997.**

The percentage slippage isn’t huge and is partly explicable by the fact that over half of this 2010 sample were Conservatives, traditionally the least women-friendly of the three major parties: 28% women, compared to the 34% of Labour and the Lib Dems. But its symbolic significance seems much greater. The ‘Counting Women In’ campaign recently projected that “at the present rate, it will be more than 150 years before there are equal numbers of men and women elected to English local councils”. Perhaps – but at the 2008-10 rate, 150 years will take the proportion of women members back to the 12-15% of the pre-reorganisation 1960s.

Meanwhile, **there has been no such reversal in the ever-upward trend in councillors’ average age, which at 59.7 now for the first time rounds up to 60 – compared to 55.4 in 1997.** With the possible exception of the Greens – 11% under 30, 9% over 65 – none of the parties have the age profiles for which they would presumably wish, but there are differences. The Conservatives’ average age is 61.1, with 6% under 40 and 46% over 65; Labour’s average is 56.2, with 11% under 40 and 27% over 65. The Lib Dems are in between, and Independents tottering: average 64.5, just 6 councillors (0.7%) under 40, and 56% over 65.

With these figures in mind, it is interesting to look at the section of the Census report on the use councillors make of various ICT resources, summarised in the accompanying table. The huge spread of smartphones in particular has led many of us to become part of the ‘always connected’ society of those who use their toys in meetings, at meals, in the bathroom, and doubtless in even more once-intimate settings – but not, generally speaking, councillors, large numbers of whom appear content grazing in the ‘not too closely connected, please’ society.

ICT resources used (%)	All	Under 40	65+
PC/laptop	72	65	75
Broadband	65	51	68
Remote log-in access to council system	58	63	54
BlackBerry for council business	21	30	15
Mobile phone for council business	16	14	15
Council email address	75	84	74
Own webpage	11	18	9
Blog	4	16	2
Social network sites (eg Facebook, Twitter)	8	31	3

Of course, as more devices are connected to the internet and mobile broadband connection speeds increase, it becomes harder to interpret some of these user statistics than it would have been only a couple of years ago. For many councillors their PC or laptop has no doubt been displaced by a BlackBerry or iPhone in the same way as their fixed phone line – though, with great respect to silver surfers everywhere, it would be slightly surprising if this applied to more than a minority of the 25% PC/laptop non-users among the over-65s. **There is here, as elsewhere in our society, an IT generation gap in what should be some of the really key areas of councillor**

communication.

But the issues raised by some of these relatively high non-usage figures go way beyond the inter-generational. Our councillors put in longer hours and represent larger electorates than most of their Euro-counterparts. If only out of electoral self-interest, they might be expected to be natural and active users of social media – communicating with and listening to their constituents, and supporting their councils' use of these media to improve service efficiency. The evidence here is that, as a class, they are not. In the phraseology of the Local Government Group's useful guide to using social media, *Connected Councillors* (<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/28632240> (<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/28632240>)), many of our councillors are less connected than the electors they hope to get to vote for them.

According to Ofcom's 2011 *Communications Market Report: UK*, 74% of adults now have fixed and/or mobile broadband and 48% have a social networking profile - http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr11/UK_CMR_2011_FINAL.pdf (http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr11/UK_CMR_2011_FINAL.pdf).

(p.15). **The Census figures seem, on the face of it, to suggest that councillors' internet usage is no greater than that of their electors, that their social networking is substantially less, and their blogging and webpage communication also considerably less than might reasonably be expected of elected representatives.** True, it doesn't make for as eye-catching a headline as the one I chose, but it's unquestionably more important

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