



Policy Brief

Career Progression in Local Government: What's it Like at the Top Since the RPA?

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1. Background to the Study

This policy brief presents the results of research carried out by Ulster University Business School which addresses *Career Progression in Local Government: What's it Like at the Top Since the RPA?* The policy brief develops the theme of earlier research carried out by Ballantine et al (2016)¹, investigating gender equality at senior levels of the Northern Ireland (NI) public sector. In that research, Local Government was identified as an exemplar of best practice in playing an important role in promoting gender equality at senior levels of the public sector. In particular, the Local Government Women in Local Councils initiative, launched in 2006, and the role of gender champions were implicated in some of the successful practices evidenced in the Local Government sector. Despite the perceived success of the Local Government Women in Local Councils initiative, the results of the survey published by Ballantine et al., (2016) identified a number of issues relevant to the Local Government sector including:

Flexible Working

- *Low take up of flexible work arrangements*, mainly flexitime working. The take up of other flexible work patterns was limited.
- Females were more likely than males to feel that colleagues or supervisors held *negative reactions to the use of flexible work arrangements*, which acted as a barrier to their use.

Work Life Balance and Long Hours' Culture

- *Work life balance* was generally described as poor. Furthermore, a lack of recognition for *work life balance* was generally viewed as a barrier to progression for females.
- The existence of a *long hours' culture*, which impacts on a poor *work life balance*, was considered to be a barrier to career progression by females in particular.

Mentoring

- *Little awareness or offering of formal mentoring* (internal and external) with a senior executive or *informal mentoring*.

¹ The full results and an executive summary of the results of the original research project can be found at: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/investigation-gender-equality-issues-executive-level-northern-ireland-public-sector-0>

- *Access to an influential mentor and a formal mentoring programme* was seen as an important enabler of career progression by both males and females (but more so by females).
- *Lack of mentoring* was viewed as a barrier to career progression by both males and females.

Leadership Training and Development

- Access to *external and internal leadership training and development* programmes were viewed as an important enabler of career progression.
- While males and females agreed that leadership training and development are an important enabler of career progression, *females were more likely to view these as more important.*
- A failure of senior management to assume responsibility for those engaging in career development was seen as a barrier to career progression.

Succession Planning and Talent Management

- There was a widespread view that there was little in the way of *succession planning* or *talent management.*

2. The Current Study

Given the potential for the Review of Public Administration (RPA), and its associated reorganisation of the sector, to address some of the challenges identified in previous research (Ballantine et al., 2016), follow up research in the Local Government sector was considered appropriate. To that end, two focus groups were held in August 2019, one with Directors and the other with Heads of Service (HOS) to consider the following issues: flexible working; work life balance and long hours' culture; mentoring opportunities; leadership training and development; and succession planning and talent management. Drawing on the broad findings of the focus groups, a survey was then conducted in 2020² to ascertain the perceptions of CEOs, Directors and HOS with respect to the above issues. In the remainder of this policy brief, we present the results of the survey conducted.

2.1 Respondents' Characteristics

Some 116 responses, employed as CEOs/Directors/Heads of Service, responded to the survey. This represents 45% of those employed at these levels in the Local Government Sector. **Table 1** provides the characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1: Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Panel A: Sex (n=105)	Frequency	%
Male	59	56.7%
Female	45	43.3%
Total	104	100%
Panel B: Marital Status (n=104)	Frequency	%
Married	79	76.0%
Cohabiting	8	7.7%
Single	7	6.7%
Separated	5	4.8%
Divorced	3	2.9%
Prefer not to say	2	1.9%
Total	104	100%
Panel C: Caring Responsibilities		
Child/Children	62	
Elderly relative	28	
Sick or infirm relative	8	
Disabled relative	3	
None	27	

² The survey was subject to ethical review by Ulster University's Research Ethics Committee. In accordance with the principles outlined in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018), confidentiality and anonymity were adhered to.

Some 56.7% of those indicating their gender (**Panel A**) were male and 43.3% were female. A number of respondents did not answer this question (11) and one preferred not to state their gender. Almost 80% of the respondents were married, with far smaller numbers single, cohabiting, separated or divorced (**Panel B**). Respondents were also asked about their caring responsibilities (**Panel C**): 62 have a child/children, 28 look after an elderly relative, 8 care for a sick or infirm relative and 3 look after a disabled relative. Some 27 had no caring responsibilities. These results indicate that some respondents have multiple caring responsibilities (i.e., the numbers with responsibilities are more than the number of respondents).

2.2 Organisational Characteristics

Table 2 provides details of the positions held by the respondents and their working patterns. **Panel A** provides details of the respondents' position within their respective Council: four Chief Executives (3.9%), 25 Directors (24.5%), 69 Heads of Service (67.7%) and four respondents held other roles (3.9%). 14 respondents did not state what position they held. Respondents are employed across all of the Council areas in NI, with the greatest numbers employed in Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and Belfast City Council. The respondents are fairly equally spread between urban and rural Councils.

Table 2: Organisational Characteristics

	Frequency	%
Panel A: Position within Council		
CEO	4	3.9
Director	25	24.5
Heads of Service	69	67.7
Other Roles	4	3.9
Total	102	100%
Panel B: Working Patterns		
9am-5pm (Monday-Friday)	53	52.5%
Flexi-time working	26	25.7%
Combination of home and office working	18	17.8%
Compressed workweek	3	3.0%
Job-sharing	1	1.0%
Total	101	100%

With respect to the respondents' working patterns (**Panel B**), just over 50% of the respondents work a Monday to Friday, 9-5 pattern. Just over one quarter (25.7%) avail of flexi-time working, with smaller numbers (less than 5%) working a compressed working week or having a job-sharing arrangement. Around 18% combined home and office working. However, it must be noted that the survey took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, so greater numbers of workers would have been working from home during this period.

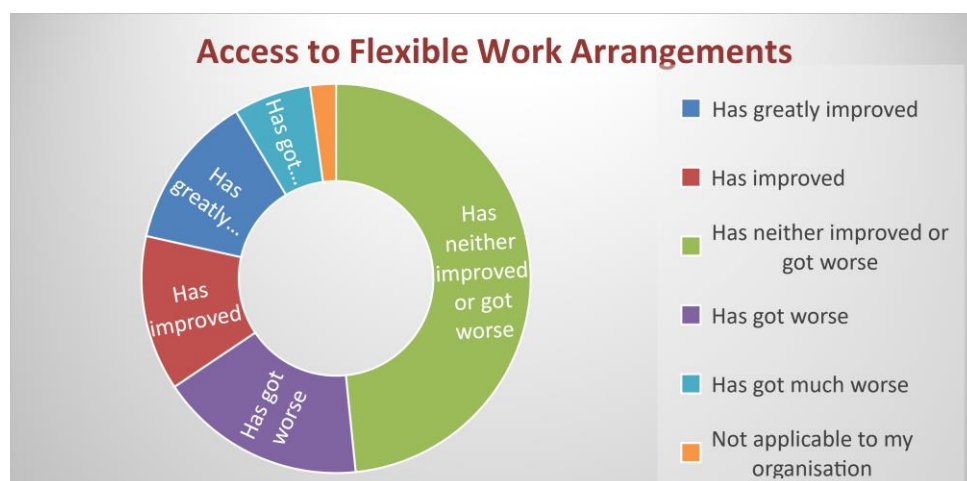
3. Improvements Since the Review of Public Administration: Summary of Key Findings

One of the main aims of the survey was to understand if the issues identified in the Ballantine et al., (2016) study had improved since the 2015 Review of Public Administration (RPA) of Local Government, which saw a reduction in the number of councils from 26 to 11 super councils. The results for these key issues will first be summarised before providing a more detailed analysis of these issues in section 4.

3.1 Flexible Working Arrangements

Figure 1 indicates respondents' perceptions of whether access to flexible working arrangements have improved since RPA.

Figure 1: Improvements Since RPA



Of those responding to the question, just under 50% have seen no change in access to flexible work arrangements (i.e., they have neither improved or got worse) since RPA. Just under 26% of the respondents have indicated that access has improved. However, just under 24% suggested that access has got worse or much worse. A small number stated that flexible

working was not applicable to their organisation. These results clearly indicate that there is still room for improvement and a need for Councils to reflect on whether policies around flexible working are fit for purpose at senior levels.

3.2 Work Life Balance and Long Hours' Culture

Figure 2 indicates respondents' perceptions of whether their work life balance has improved since RPA. The majority (just over 75%) of respondents felt that their work life balance has got worse or much worse since the RPA. A small number (less than 5%) perceived their work life balance had improved or greatly improved. Just over 20% had not noticed any change in their work life balance.

Figure 2: Improvements Since RPA

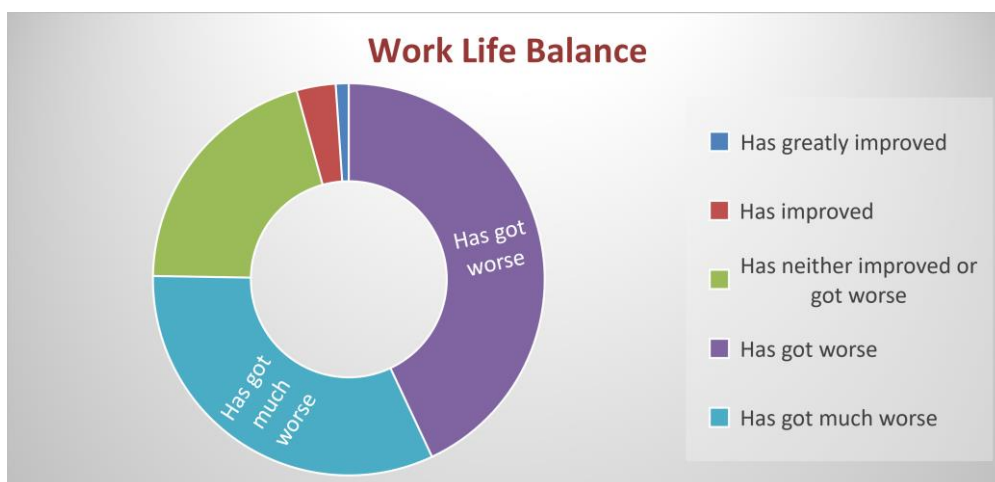
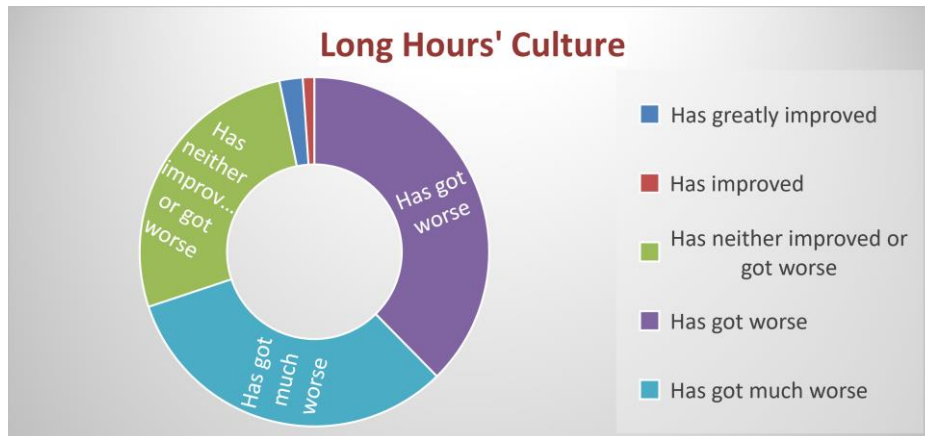


Figure 3 indicates the respondents' perceptions of a long hours' culture within their organisation. The majority (just under 70%) of respondents felt the long hours' culture in their organisation had got worse or much worse since the RPA. Only a very small number (3.3%) indicated that the long hours' culture of their organisation had improved or greatly improved within their organisation. Around 27% of those responding had not noticed any change in this area since the RPA. Combined, the perceptions of work life balance and long hours' culture demonstrate significant room for improvement within the Local Government sector in these areas.

Figure 3: Improvements Since RPA



3.3 Mentoring

Respondents were asked about access opportunities to mentoring, both formal and informal, since the RPA. **Figures 4 and 5** indicates the respondents' perceptions.

Figure 4: Improvements Since RPA

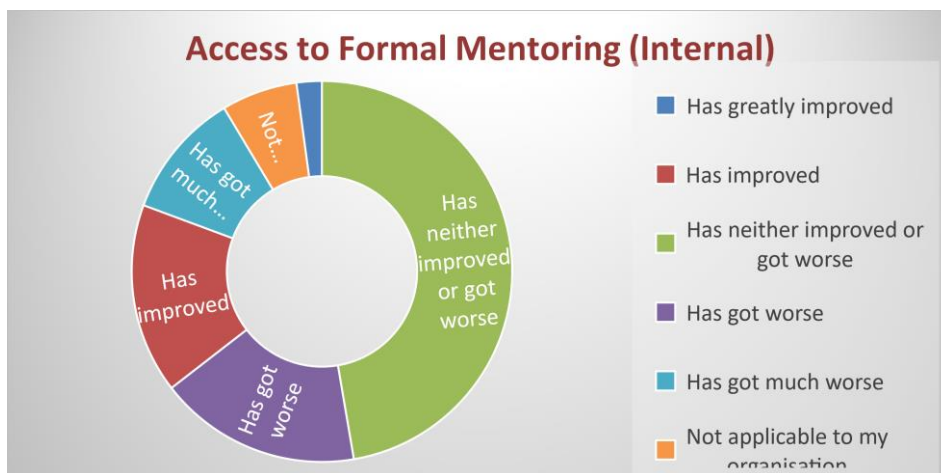
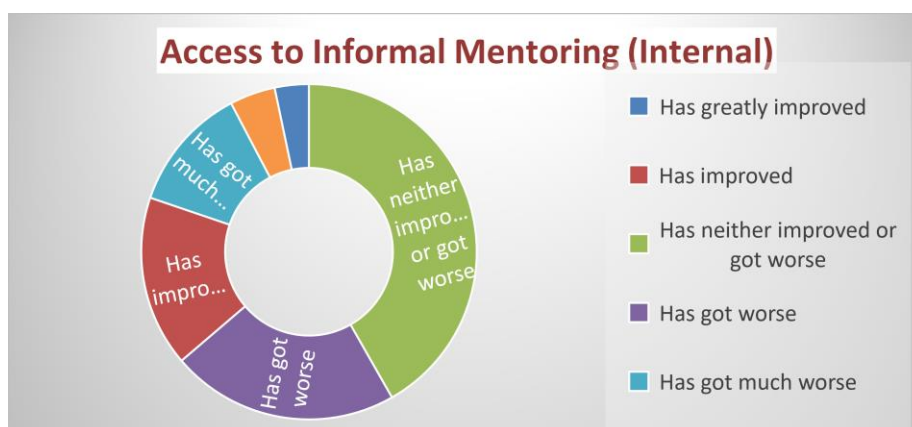


Figure 5: Improvements Since RPA



With respect to **access to formal internal mentoring (Figure 4)**, just under half (47.3%) of the respondents had seen no change since RPA. Only 18.3% of the respondents indicated that access had improved and 28% suggested it had got worse since RPA. A small number (6.5%) of respondents stated that formal internal mentoring was not applicable in their organisation. In comparison, perceptions regarding **access to informal internal mentoring (Figure 5)** were generally worse: while just under 42% indicated no change in access, almost 20% suggested access had improved and just over 34% indicated access had got worse or much worse. A small number (4.4%) indicated that internal mentoring was not applicable to their organisation. With regard to accessing **external mentoring³**, 47% had seen no change since the RPA, 26% felt it had improved or greatly improved and just 21% had thought it had got worse or much worse. 6.5% of the respondents stated that external mentoring was not applicable to their organisation. **Overall**, the perceptions with respect to access to both internal (formal and informal) and external mentoring indicate a position where little has changed since the RPA. While fewer respondents indicated that access to external mentoring had got worse since the RPA when compared to access to both formal and informal internal mentoring, the results demonstrate significant room for improvement within the Local Government sector if mentoring is viewed as a means of supporting those engaged in career progression.

³ For this question, we did not differentiate between external formal or informal mentoring.

3.4 Leadership Training and Development, Succession Planning and Talent Management

Respondents were also asked to indicate their perceptions of whether leadership training and development, succession planning and talent management had improved since the RPA. With regard to **leadership training and development**, a third (33%) of those responding to this question felt it had improved, whilst 10% thought it had greatly improved. Conversely, 21% felt it had got worse and 7% thought it had got much worse. 28% felt there had been no change and 1% stated it was not applicable to their organisation. The responses to **succession planning** were less positive. 24% felt it had got worse and 23% perceived it had got much worse. Only 12% perceived succession planning had improved, with just 1% believing it had greatly improved. 35% stated that there had been no change, whilst 5% answered that it was not applicable to their organisation. Finally, on the subject of **talent management**, the views were again quite negative: 24% perceived it had got worse and 21% indicated it had got much worse. Only 13% thought it had improved and 2% felt it had greatly improved. 33% stated that there had been no change, whilst 3% answered that it was not applicable to their organisation. **Overall**, the perceptions with respect to leadership training and development, succession planning and talent management within Local Government since the RPA show significant room for improvement. This is particularly the case for succession planning and talent management with some 47% and 45% respectively indicating that it has got worse or much worse. Additionally, while more positive responses were received that leadership training and development has improved since the RPA, some 28% of respondents indicated it has got worse or much worse, thus indicating the potential for further improvements in this area also.

4. The Main Problem Areas

4.1 Flexible Working Arrangements

Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) were investigated further to understand if they are available at senior levels, if there is a demand for them and how they might be enhanced. FWAs are seen as ways of working that suit an employee's needs, for example having flexible start and finish times, or working from home. Nine different types of FWA were investigated,

namely: flexi time; compressed working week; time off in lieu (TOIL); job sharing; term time working; homeworking; agile working; career break; and flexible retirement. **Table 3** indicates the views of Heads of Service and Directors regarding the availability of FWAs, and where not available, if they should be.

Table 3: Flexible Working Arrangements Offered

Type of FWA	Flexi Time	Compressed Working Week	TOIL	Job Sharing	Term Time Working	Home Working	Agile Working	Carer Break	Flexible Retirement
Head of service level									
Yes	57 (49.1%)	18 (15.5%)	49 (42.2%)	16 (13.8%)	5 (4.3%)	50 (43.1%)	51 (44%)	38 (32.8%)	25 (21.6%)
No	13 (11.2%)	22 (19%)	14 (12.1%)	26 (22.4%)	34 (29.3%)	7 (6.0%)	6 (5.2%)	5 (4.3%)	6 (5.2%)
No, but it should be	3 (2.6%)	12 (10.3)	8 (6.9%)	8 (6.9%)	6 (5.2%)	13 (11.2%)	13 (11.2%)	1 (1%)	2 (1.7%)
Director level									
Yes	19 (16.4%)	4 (3.4%)	17 (14.7%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	30 (25.9%)	27 (23.3%)	16 (13.8%)	11 (9.5%)
No	22 (19%)	25 (21.6%)	24 (20.7%)	27 (23.3%)	27 (23.3%)	6 (5.2%)	6 (5.2%)	9 (7.8%)	7 (6%)
No, but it should be	6 (5.2%)	13 (11.2%)	7 (6%)	7 (6%)	4 (3.4%)	9 (7.8%)	7 (6%)	1 (1%)	7 (6%)

With respect to **flexible working arrangements offered to Heads of Service**, flexi-time, agile working, home working, TOIL and career breaks are generally perceived to be available within the respondents' organisation. However, that said, these arrangements are **not uniformly available** within the local government sector: in particular a number of respondents indicated that term-time working, job sharing, compressed working week and, to a lesser extent flexitime, are not available to them. Some of the respondents also argued that where some FWAs are not currently available, these should be made available: in particular, there is **more demand** for home working, agile working, compressed working week, and to a lesser extent job share and TOIL. Further analysis (by gender) suggests that **female HOS** agreed that nearly all of the FWAs which are not currently available should be made available to them. Interestingly, consistent with female HOS, male HOS also indicated that they would like a number of FWAs to be made available where they are not currently available: TOIL, compressed working week, home and agile working.

The picture with respect to **flexible working arrangements offered to Directors** contrasts somewhat with those available at the HOS level, with fewer directors indicating that all of the FWAs in Table 3 are available to them. That said, Directors have indicated more demand for certain FWAs including, compressed working week, home and agile working, TOIL, job sharing, flexible retirement and flexitime. Further analysis (by gender) suggests that when compared to their male counterparts, female Directors are indicating more demand for FWAs which are not currently available to them. Interestingly, consistent with **female Directors**, male Directors are indicating that they would like a number of FWAs to be made available where they are not currently available: flexitime and TOIL.

Finally, some respondents provided additional free-form comments, which suggested a lack of evidence or examples of FWAs at senior levels within the new council structures:

“Whilst the above [FWA] policies exist, I am not aware of any evidence/examples of the above policies being implemented in the new council at these levels”.

There were also some comments to indicate that new policies developed as a result of RPA have reduced flexibility:

“However, the Council's new policy on flexible working has reduced the ability to effectively utilise it for short periods meaning you must either use full or half days”.

Respondents were also asked how flexible working arrangements could be enhanced within their organisation. The results are shown in **Table 4**.

Table 4: Enhancing Flexible Working Arrangements

	Yes	Maybe	No	No but should	Is already in place in my organisation
Formal policy regarding the provision of home working	47 (58%)	9 (11.1%)	4 (4.9%)	2 (2.5%)	19 (23.5%)
Reduction in negative perceptions around flexible working arrangements (e.g., lack of commitment)	40 (55.4%)	15 (18.1%)	6 (7.3%)	8 (9.6%)	8 (9.6%)
Active job redesign when someone avails of a flexible working pattern	37 (44.6%)	11 (13.3%)	9 (10.8%)	19 (22.9%)	7 (8.4%)
Formal policy regarding the provision of remote/hot desking	35 (42.7%)	20 (24.4%)	5 (6.1%)	7 (8.5%)	15 (18.3%)
Use of videoconferencing for meetings	23 (27.7%)	2 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.2%)	57 (68.7%)

There was more support than opposition for the majority of the above suggestions to enhance flexible working arrangements. Of particular note, there is a great deal of support for **formal policies regarding the provision of home working** (58%=yes, 11.1%=maybe). Indeed, some 23.5% of the respondents have indicated that their organisation has already such a policy in place. Allied to this, some 68.7% of the respondents indicated that their organisation has in place videoconferencing for meetings. The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly highlighted the need for organisations, including Local Government, to be responsive to the need for home working and supportive of videoconferencing facilities. Table 4 also highlights that active job redesign is an important factor for enhancing flexible work arrangements. However, in this respect, only 8.4% of the respondents indicated that their organisation has in place active job redesign. The same is the case for formal policies regarding the provision of remote/hot desking. While 42.7% indicated such policies would enhance FWAs within their organisation, only 18.3% of respondents indicated that their organisation already has this in place.

Table 5, Panel A provides free-form comments provided by respondents to the survey which specifically relate to the use of home working in the context of COVID. Interestingly, while these comments indicate that COVID has provided an opportunity to address home and agile working going forward, they also note there is some distance to go in terms of formalising such arrangements. **Table 5, panel B** provides some general comments on FWAs.

Table 5: Flexible Working Arrangements – Additional Comments

Panel A: COVID Related Comments
“The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that for the first time there has been home working and agile working. However, this is not yet formally adopted in policy and is currently only a response mechanism to the emergency situation. There is an opportunity to address this going forward”.
“Home working has only come in due to Covid measures. These arrangements did not exist before Covid”.
“Home working only a “yes” under covid-19. Prior to this period home working was not available”.
“Home working arrangements have only applied since Covid, although a new policy is under development”.
“Home working only available now due to Covid. Previously lack of trust regarding home working”.
“In terms of home working, it has not been acceptable for HOS, except for a short period at the start of the covid pandemic for some staff, and then not again until these current restrictions – January 2021”.

“Flexible working arrangements have been crucial during the pandemic when Covid restrictions have been in place”.

“Work patterns have substantially changed due to COVID, HR policy is behind the curve”.

“I think on the back of the flexible working arrangements that came in with the Covid pandemic, there is an acknowledgement by CEOs and Directors that it will be very difficult not to continue these in some format post-Covid”.

“There have been some changes to working arrangements enforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g., working from home, but these are not policy based and there remains a perception by many senior managers that those who work from home do less and are less committed”.

“Covid has brought it [home working] into place but [there is] still no formal acceptance of it and a feeling of mistrust that you are not working at full capacity because you are home working”.

“During the current lockdown restrictions flexible working arrangements have become necessary to maintain service delivery”.

“The impact of COVID has done much to force flexibility into local government. Councils needs to harness the benefits and more actively manage the potential barriers/ pitfalls to allow those who want to, to avail of agile working practices in the future”.

“COVID has enabled a lot more flexible working arrangements which weren’t really in place prior to the pandemic”.

“I think this will all completely change due to Covid-19 implications”.

“Flexible working arrangements have advanced due to the requirement to work from home due to Covid. I don’t believe this has necessarily been positive, as it has brought with it blurred lines between home and work life and adds to long hours of working rather than a better work/life balance”.

Panel B: Flexible Working Arrangements General Comments

“Flexible working arrangements are an excellent initiative, but at HOS level it is very difficult to avail of it due to long hours, including night-time meetings”.

“As previously noted, the new council’s flexible working arrangements have been a regression on the previous legacy [name of Council] policy”.

“There is no flexi system, we work the hours it takes to get the work done, which is often evenings etc”.

“Flexible working arrangement in LG are generous and well received, there’s a point where too much impacts the operation of the Council and some employees fail to grasp that not all flexible working can be reasonably accommodated”.

“Among some at senior levels there is a lack of trust regarding the practical working flexible working arrangements and whether staff will put in the hours. Generally, I feel this fuelled by a ‘management of activity’ culture, rather than outputs or even better outcomes”.

“I think in [name of Council] it [flexible working] has not been tried and tested at a Director level that I am aware of. So I don’t know how it would be evaluated and determined if a director applied, it is something that needs looked at and is especially important for departments that operate front line services, as they in many ways are more pressured environments, even for a director, and can be a 7 day a week job as services operating 7 days a week”.

“Compared to NICS [Northern Ireland Civil Service] flexible working is stunted, [there is a] lack of trust or ability to recognise benefits”.

“Flexi arrangements are available for staff of the organisation. Heads have the autonomy to work flexible hours to ‘fulfil the needs of the role’ but without the option of then using hours worked over 37 /week at a later stage. In essence we can work flexibly within the 37 hours”.

4.2 Long Hours’ Culture

The survey also investigated in more detail a series of factors potentially related to a long hours’ culture in the local government sector. Although there is no shared definition of ‘long hours working’ in the literature, it is normally taken to mean working more than 48 hours a week on average⁴. Becoming a phenomenon in the past 30 years, long hours working has been more common in the UK than in the majority of other European countries, and is on a par with the US, Australia and Japan (Kodz et al, 2003). A long hours’ culture has been attributed to a number of factors including specialist skills when it is difficult to delegate, advances in technology leading to more emails to process, and an attitude of ‘getting the work done, whatever it takes’ (Kodz et al, 2003, p. 65). However, long hours working has the potential to impact on workers’ well-being, including their physical and mental health (Barnett, 2006; Ganster et al., 2018). In the current study we investigate factors that were identified in the earlier focus groups with Directors and HOS: namely, general issues, emails, council meetings and responsibility for long hours’ culture. The remainder of this section presents the perceptions of respondents with respect to each of these factors. **Table 6** presents the respondents’ perceptions regarding a number of **general statements around long hours’ culture**.

Table 6: Long Hours’ Culture (general issues)

<i>Factors Impacting Long Hours Culture within your Organisation (n=82)</i>	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
Senior management within my organisation have a responsibility to have a discussion with their management team about the long hours culture	85.3%	11.0%	3.7%
There is a long hours’ culture within my organisation	81.9%	14.5%	3.6%
Working long hours is part of the job at my level	73.2%	12.2%	14.6%
The long hours culture in influenced by the tone from the top (i.e. senior management) within my organisation	69.5%	20.7%	9.8%
The impact of social media has contributed to a long hour’s culture within my organisation	53.6%	24.4%	22%

⁴ <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/working-time-limits-48-hour-week>

The respondents are clear in recognising that there is a long hours' culture within their organisation and also that working long hours is part of the job at Head of Service and Director levels. There is also a recognition that the tone at the top (i.e., senior management) is important in influencing the long hours' culture and that senior management have a responsibility to address the long hours' culture through discussions with their management team. Social media is also implicated as having some impact on a long hours' culture. Combined, while these results appear to acknowledge that working long hours are expected at senior levels, more could be done by senior management within the local government sector to address this issue.

Table 7 indicates the respondents' perceptions as to whether *issues related to emails contribute to a long hours' culture*.

Table 7: Long Hours' Culture (emails)

<i>Emails</i>	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
<i>Relationship between Emails and Long Hours' Culture</i>			
The volume of emails in my organisation has contributed to a long hour's culture	75.9%	18.1%	6.0%
All members of my organisation (including councillors) need to be aware of what is urgent and what can wait until normal working hours	78.7%	15.0%	6.3%
<i>Pattern of Emails</i>			
I regularly receive emails after 7pm, at weekends and when I am on holiday	84.4%	6.0%	9.6%
If I decide not to reply to an email, I should not be sent a text asking if I have received it	67.8%	19.5%	3.7%
I regularly send emails after 7pm, at weekends and when I am on holiday	63.0%	7.4%	29.6%
I do not respond to emails outside of working hours unless it is urgent	38.3%	6.2%	55.5%
<i>Training & Email Policy</i>			
My organisation needs to provide training on how to manage the volume of emails in my organisation	60.5%	29.6%	9.9%
My organisation needs to urgently develop and implement an email policy to help manage the long hours culture	56.8%	32.1%	11.1%
<i>Importance of Role Models</i>			
Senior management are poor role models in terms of sending emails after 7pm, at weekends and when staff are on holiday	51.9%	27.1%	21.0%

Respondents clearly indicate there is a relationship between the volume of emails and a long hours' culture. Reflecting this, the respondents generally report poor patterns in relation to email practice in terms of receiving and sending emails after 7pm, at weekends and when on

holiday. Despite this, respondents are relatively firm in their belief that they should not be receiving follow up texts asking them if they have dealt with emails received. A smaller number of respondents (38.3%) indicate that they do not respond to emails outside of working hours unless they are urgent. Furthermore, there is recognition that greater awareness needs to be developed to understand when an email is urgent or could be sent within normal working hours. Table 7 also indicates that respondents would generally be in favour of their organisation providing training on how to manage the volume of emails (60.5%) and that their organisation urgently needs to develop and implement an email policy to manage the long hours' culture (56.8%). Finally, slightly over half of the respondents recognised that senior management are poor role models in terms of their email practice.

Table 8 indicates the respondents' perceptions as to whether *issues related to council meetings contribute to a long hours' culture*. There was a general perception among respondents that more thought needs to be given to a range of issues around council meetings. Specifically, there should be a cut-off time for meetings (82.9% strongly agree/agree), that councils should have a conversation about what is an acceptable time for council meetings to be held (72.8% strongly agree/agree), and meetings should be better structured so that personnel only have to attend the part of the meeting that is relevant to them (62.2% strongly agree/agree). Only a relatively small number of respondents (17.1% strongly agree/agree) perceived that travelling to Council meetings impacted upon the long hours' culture.

Table 8: Long Hours' Culture (council meetings)

Statement	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree
There should be a cut off time for council meetings to conclude (e.g., no later than 11pm) in the evening in my organisation	82.9%	11%	6.1%
My council should have a conversation about what is acceptable timings for council meetings	72.8%	19.8%	7.4%
Meetings should be better structured so that you only have to attend for the discussion that is relevant to you	62.2%	26.8%	11%
The amount of travelling I have to do as a result of the council having one headquarters has significantly increased my working hours, thereby contributing to my poorer work life balance	17.1%	31.7%	51.2%

Table 9 indicates the respondents' perceptions as to *who is responsible for the long hours' culture*. Despite the majority of respondents perceiving that it is their personal responsibility

to manage their own work life balance, just under half of the respondents (46.9%) indicated that they are in control of it. Moreover, delegation did not appear to be a solution to working long hours.

Table 9: Long Hours’ Culture (who is responsible)

Statement	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
At my level, it is my personal responsibility to manage my work life balance	81.5%	7.4%	11.1%
I am in control of my own work life balance	46.9%	17.3%	35.8%
If you are prepared to delegate, then you should not have to work long hours	27.5%	20%	52.5%

4.3 Mentoring

The survey also investigated in more detail the type of mentoring available at senior levels and where mentoring opportunities are not available, if these should be. Mentoring is an important element of support and career development for managers at all stages of their career. The benefits of mentoring are well documented and include higher organisational commitment, improved succession planning, higher career satisfaction, improved retention and better management culture (see Singh *et al.*, (2002) for a summary of some of the literature in this area). Different types of mentoring exist, namely formal and informal. Formal mentoring is planned and structured, and normally available as part of career development opportunities within an organisation. Within organisations, formal mentoring is normally available internally, but it may also be designed by using external mentors who are employed elsewhere. In contrast, informal mentoring is carried out on a more ad hoc basis and can be undertaken either on an internal or external basis. **Table 10** indicates the respondents’ perceptions of all four types of mentoring: namely internal (formal and informal) and external (formal and informal).

Table 10: Types of Mentoring Offered

Type of Mentoring	Internal (formal)	Internal (informal)	External (formal)	External (informal)
Don't know	11	11	12	12
Head of service level				
No, but it should be	20	16	18	18
No	29	26	21	25
Yes	10	17	16	12
Director level				
No, but it should be	9	9	9	8
No	18	15	11	12
Yes	7	11	14	14

The perceptions outlined in Table 10 indicate the following:

- there are relatively low levels of internal mentoring, both formal and informal, at the Director and Head of Service level within the local government sector.
- when compared to internal formal and informal mentoring, external formal and informal mentoring is generally more widely used by Directors and Heads of Service.
- there is significant demand for both internal and external mentoring (both formal and informal), where it is not available by Directors and Heads of Service within the local government sector.
- many respondents do not appear to know if either formal/informal external/internal mentoring is available to them.

4.4 Talent Management and Succession Planning

The respondents were also asked a number of statements about ***talent management*** and ***succession planning***. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), talent management is the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement, retention and deployment of those individuals who are of particular value to an organisation⁵ due to their high potential or critical role. Succession planning⁶, on the other hand, is a strategy for identifying and developing business critical positions in an organisation, not just at the highest level but for important roles at all levels. It also helps an organisation prepare for contingencies by ensuring that high-potential employees are ready for

⁵ <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/resourcing/talent-factsheet#7237>

⁶ <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/resourcing/succession-planning-factsheet>

advancement. The respondents' perceptions of the various statements related to talent management and succession planning are outlined in **Table 11**.

Table 11: Talent Management and Succession Planning

Statement	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable to My Organisation
Talent management is an important aspect in supporting an individual's progression to senior levels	93.4%	2.6%	4%	0%
There are sufficient talent management processes within my organisation	9.2%	21.1%	67.1%	2.6%
Talent management is undertaken effectively within my organisation	5.2%	24.6%	66.3%	3.9%
Talent management needs to be equality proofed	55.2%	31.6%	11.9%	1.3%
Succession planning is effectively undertaken in my organisation	5.3%	21.1%	72.3%	1.3%

The respondents overwhelmingly agree that **talent management** is important in supporting career progression to senior levels, with 93.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the first statement. However, the respondents perceive that very few councils have sufficient talent management processes in place (67.1% disagree/strongly disagree) or that talent management is undertaken effectively (66.3% disagree/strongly disagree) within their organisation. Moreover, one would have assumed that all respondents, or at least more than 55.2%, would have believed that talent management needs to be equality proofed. Succession planning is perceived to be equally ineffective with only 5.3% of respondents indicating that it is effectively undertaken within their organisation. Collectively, these results also indicate significant room for improvement in both talent management and succession planning within the local government sector.

5 Barriers to Progressing to Senior Levels

Respondents were also asked their opinions regarding a range of potential barriers to their progression to senior levels (i.e., CEO, Director). The results are summarised in **Table 12**. A number of **significant barriers** were identified by respondents: **a long hours' culture**, the **long hours I would be expected to work** and a **poor work life balance**. These responses serve to confirm that the long hours' culture and work life balance, which were reported earlier as having got worse since the RPA, are likely to have a negative impact on respondents' decisions around career progression. In addition, some **less serious barriers** to career progression were

noted by respondents, including exposure to the media and the application and recruitment processes. A large number of respondents (43%) also strongly agree/agree that as there are fewer Councils, their options for progression are now limited. In addition, some 41% of the respondents indicated that the increase in pay through progression would not be sufficient given the increase in associated workload. It is pleasing to note that although a large number of the respondents have caring responsibilities, they do not see this as posing a particular challenge to their career progression. Finally, it is good to note that a number of gender related barriers are of limited relevance to the local government sector.

Table 12: Barriers to Career Progression

Significant Barriers	
Long hours' culture:	67% strongly agree/agree
Long hours I would be expected to work:	69% strongly agree/agree
Poor work life balance:	66% strongly agree/agree
Less Serious Barriers	
As there are fewer Councils, my options are limited	43% strongly agree/agree
Increase in pay would be insufficient for the increase in workload:	41% strongly agree/agree
Exposure to the media	37% strongly agree/agree
Caring responsibilities for dependants	35% strongly agree/agree
I do not want to put myself through the application process:	27% strongly agree/agree
The external recruitment process is too challenging:	27% strongly agree/agree
I would no longer be able to avail of flexible work arrangements at a senior level:	19% strongly agree/agree
I do not believe I have the right skills	9.3% strongly agree/agree
Gender Related Barriers	
Exclusion from informal networks of communication	24% strongly agree/agree
Feeling marginalised because of my gender	9.3% strongly agree/agree
Existing imbalance in gender composition at executive/senior managerial levels	8.1% strongly agree/agree

Respondents were also asked two additional questions in this section of the survey: one, if they were happy with their current position and two, whether they intended to go for promotion. With respect to the first question, 'I am happy with my current position', only 75 respondents answered this question. Of these, 43% indicated that they were happy with their current position, 20% suggested they were not happy with their current position and the remaining 37% neither agreed or disagreed with this statement. Only 46 respondents provided an answer to the second question. Of these, only 24% indicated their intention to go for future promotion, 17.5% indicated that they did not intend to go for promotion and the remaining 58.5% neither agreed or disagreed. The responses to both of these questions gives some cause for concern, particularly the second question where a large number of the respondents are either undecided or have already decided not to go for promotion in the

future. However, care needs to be taken in interpreting these results, as only 40% of total respondents answered this second question.

6 Sector Wide Policies and Practices

In the final part of the survey, respondents were asked whether it would be preferable for all councils to have similar *policies and practices* in place in a number of areas. The respondents' perceptions regarding similarity in approach in various areas can be seen in **Table 13**.

Table 13: Sector Wide Policies and Practices

	Strongly Agree/Agree (%)	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree
Mentoring, Talent Management, Succession Planning			
Mentoring	66.7%	20%	13.3%
Talent management	75.7%	13.5%	10.8%
Succession planning	77.3%	10.7%	12%
Flexible Working Arrangements			
Homeworking at senior levels (Director & Head of Service)	76%	13%	11%
Agile working (i.e., working at a location that is not your normal workplace – e.g., hot desking) at senior levels (Director & Head of Service)	72%	14.7%	13.3%
Time off in lieu at senior levels (i.e. Director & Head of Service)	69.7%	17.1%	13.2%
Flexi-time at senior levels (i.e. Director and Head of Service)	67.6%	20.3%	12.1%

The results indicate substantial support for the development of sector wide policies and practices with respect to mentoring (66.7% strongly agree/agree), talent management (75.7% strongly agree/agree) and succession planning (77.3% strongly agree/agree). With respect to mentoring, the relatively low levels of mentoring available to Directors and Heads of Service (reported earlier), together with support for sector wide policies and practices in this regard would appear to suggest that there is an appetite for more to be done in this particular area. The high levels of agreement with respect to sector wide policies and practices for both talent management and succession planning, in conjunction with the earlier perceptions that existing processes in these areas are somewhat ineffective, also suggest an eagerness for change in this area to be actioned. Finally, the respondents have also indicated general support for the development of sector wide policies and practices for homeworking (76% strongly agreed/agreed), agile working (72% strongly agreed/agreed), TOIL (69.7% strongly agreed/agreed) and flexitime for senior levels (67.6% strongly agreed/agreed).

7 Local Government: Key Findings

A number of key findings can be derived from the analysis of survey data presented in this policy analysis. These are summarised below.

Improvements Since the RPA: A mixed picture which should be an area of concern for senior management within the Local Government sector

- There has been little or no change in access to FWAs at senior levels, indicating significant room for improvement;
- Access to internal (both formal and informal) mentoring has got worse with many other respondents indicating no improvements in this regard. Access to external mentoring has been static, again indicating significant room for improvement;
- The long hours' culture has got considerably worse and the work life balance has deteriorated significantly;
- Respondents were more positive about leadership training and development, although some respondents felt it had got worse, indicating room for improvement.
- Talent management and succession planning were both viewed very negatively by respondents.

Flexible Working Arrangements

- With regard to working patterns, limited numbers of respondents are availing of flexible working (e.g., flexi-time working, combination of home and office working). However, a large number of the respondents have caring responsibilities and could therefore benefit from such arrangements.
- A full range of flexible working arrangements are not available in all councils and there is variation in availability between the roles of Directors and Heads of Service. Despite this, both Directors and Heads of Service would like to see a greater availability of certain arrangements, namely a compressed working week, home working, agile working, time off in lieu and job sharing. Females are more likely than males to want additional FWAs to be made available.
- A number of practices were seen as useful in enhancing FWAs: videoconferencing, which many organisations already have in place; a formal policy for home working and remote working or hot desking, which few organisations already have in place; and a

reduction in negative perceptions about flexible working arrangements and active job redesign, which very few organisations already have in place.

Long Hours' Culture/Work Life Balance

- There was some recognition that the long hours' culture is part of the job and influenced by the tone from the top and social media. However, that said, there was agreement that senior management have a responsibility to discuss the long hours' culture with their management team.
- The two main factors impacting upon the long hours' culture were:
 - Emails (the volume, the patterns of sending emails, managing expectations about what is urgent and senior management are poor role models in this regard).
 - Council meetings (cut-off time to conclude meetings, conversations need to occur around acceptable timings, and meetings should be better structured).
- Despite an acceptance that individuals are responsible for managing their own work life balance, some factors are beyond the control of respondents.

Mentoring

- There are relatively low levels of formal mentoring, both internal and external, although more use is made of external mentoring.
- Many respondents do not appear to know if mentoring is available to them.
- There is significant demand for all types of mentoring, i.e., formal and informal and internal and external.

Talent Management and Succession Planning

- There was a recognition that talent management is an important aspect in supporting career progression.
- Few organisations have talent management processes in place, or where they are in place, they are ineffective.
- Respondents also referred to the importance of equality proofing talent management.
- Succession planning is perceived to be ineffective.

Barriers to Progression

- A number of significant barriers to progression were identified: long hours' culture, the long hours expected of senior management and poor work life balance.

- A number of less serious barriers to progression were also identified: a lack of progression opportunities as a result of fewer Councils, insufficient rewards to warrant the extra work and exposure to the media. Caring responsibilities were also identified as a possible barrier.
- Of less importance were issues around the application and recruitment processes, the loss of FWAs, and a number of gender related issues (feeling marginalised because of gender, exclusion from informal networks, and existing imbalances in gender composition at executive/senior managerial levels).

Sector Wide Policies and Practices

- There was overwhelming support for sector wide policies and practices in the areas of developing people (i.e., talent management and succession planning), mentoring and flexible working (i.e., homeworking, agile working, time off in lieu and flexi-time at senior levels).

8 Recommendations

The results of the survey would appear to suggest that the reduction in the number of councils from 26 to 11 in NI has not contributed to improvements in some key areas, which are relevant to senior staff within the sector. Indeed, the results suggest that Councils need to improve a number of current practices, including the work life balance of senior personnel and moving away from a long hours' culture. Furthermore, councils should consider allowing staff at all levels to avail of more FWAs than currently being used. The phenomenon of home working during the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated that senior staff can be trusted if they are not working in their normal place of work. Councils should also urgently improve developmental measures such as mentoring, talent management and succession planning. Finally, Councils should take note of the barriers that may potentially prevent suited qualified personnel from progressing further, as they may be missing out on highly talented individuals applying for senior management posts. Based on the results, the following recommendations are therefore suggested.

1. Individual Councils to make more effort to improve the **work life balance** of senior personnel and consequently move away from a **long hours' culture**. This can be done in a number of ways:
 - Make as many flexible working arrangements as practically possible available to senior staff.
 - Continuing the use of videoconferencing tools when the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have reduced. This will reduce the need for senior personnel to always be physically present at work or having to travel.
 - Develop an appropriate email policy for senior managers and councillors to manage the volume of emails and patterns of email usage within the sector.
 - Have conversations around the timings of council meetings, with cut off times agreed and better structures in place.
 - Ensure that Chief Executives are good role models when it comes to working long hours.
2. The local government sector to develop a **formal mentoring** policy, which provides opportunities for both internal and external mentoring across the sector. External mentoring could be facilitated by engaging with senior staff in other councils in NI/ Republic of Ireland, or other parts of the public sector, including the Civil Service. In developing a sector wide policy, international best practice and elements of good practice from councils which already have effective arrangements in place should be drawn on.
3. The local government sector to develop **talent management** and **succession planning** policies, drawing on international best practice to ensure there is a pipeline of talented individuals to fill senior positions. Sector wide policies can be used to benchmark existing policies at the individual Council level.
4. Councils to consider the **barriers to progression** identified in the current survey, and where possible, identify initiatives at the individual Council or sector level, to reduce or remove them.

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