



The digital gender gap:

How to build gender-diverse digital
teams in London councils

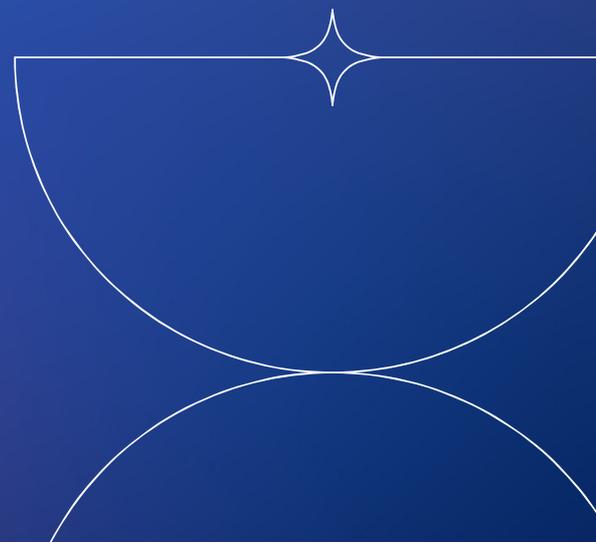


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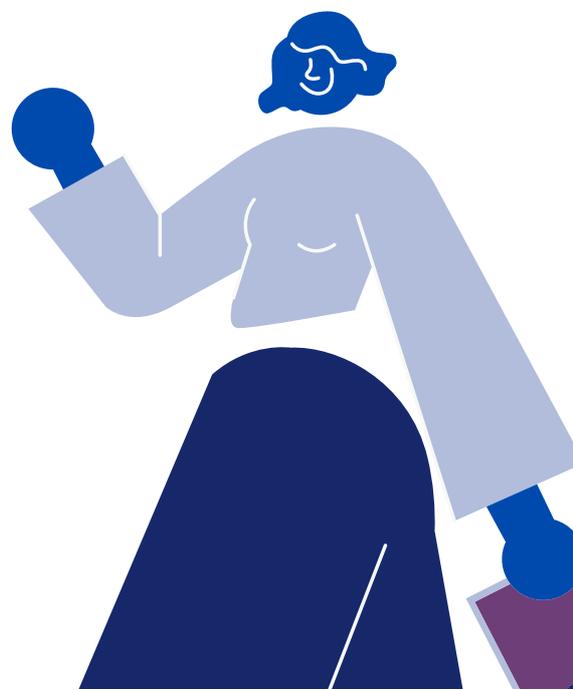
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Executive summary

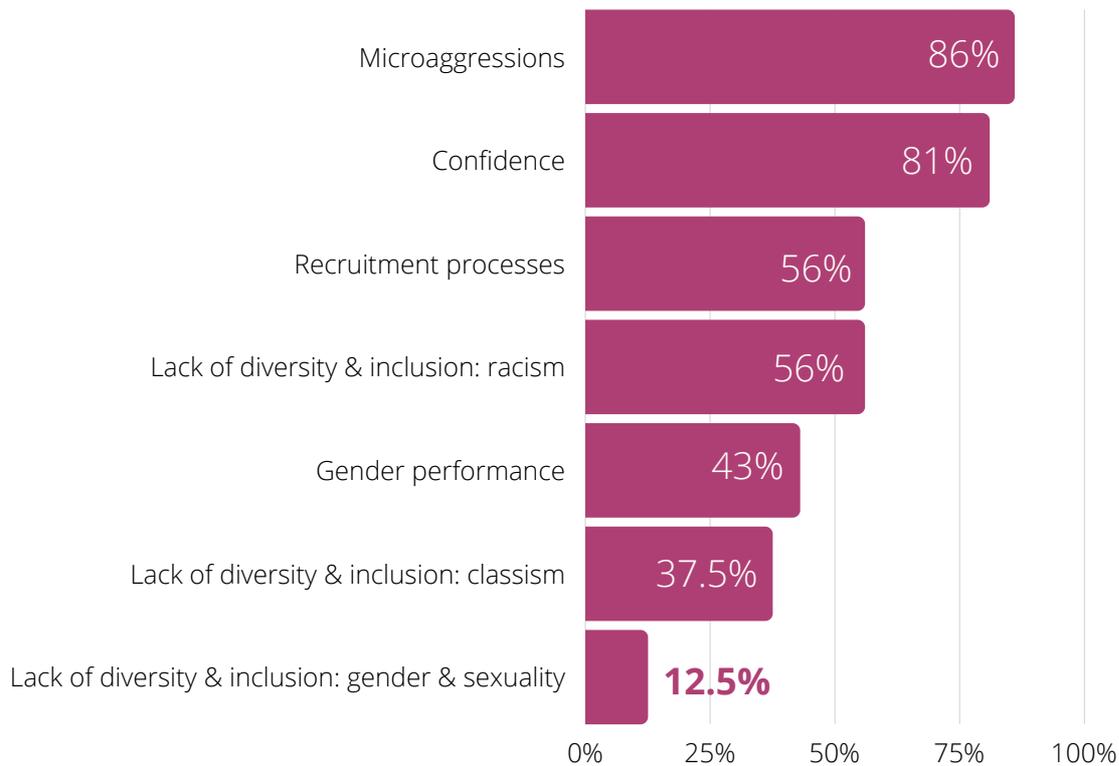
This report explores the state of gender diversity in digital teams across London councils through in-depth interviews with current and former employees. The majority of participants — 81% — said that there is a dearth of women, transgender and non-binary people on councils' digital teams.

Respondents were asked whether they believe that a lack of gender-diverse representation on digital teams can affect public services and other government outputs. Sixty-three per cent said that designing services requires a diversity of lived experience — to provide different perspectives, avoid bias and challenge assumptions. The remaining 37.5% of participants either said that there is no relationship between gender diversity on digital teams and government outputs, or that they did not know.

Five recurring barriers to the hiring and retention of women, transgender and non-binary people in digital work surfaced in interviews:

- **Confidence** can be a double-edged sword for women in local government, this research found. Some participants were told they weren't confident enough; others that displayed self-esteem faced backlash. 81% of participants struggled to find the right balance between “too confident” and “not confident enough”.
- **Gender performance**, or feeling the need to alter one's behaviour to fit in with binary gender stereotypes, is an issue that 43% of participants struggled with.
- **A lack of diversity, inclusion and intersectionality** in the workplace can lead to differential treatment and greater power imbalances. Fifty-six per cent of participants cited racism as a mitigating factor; 37.5% discussed classism; 12.5% brought up gender- and sexuality-based discrimination.
- **Recruitment and promotion processes** don't do enough to support women and gender-diverse people from progressing in government, 56% of participants said.
- **Microaggressions** — subtle remarks that express sexism, racism or another form of bias — were experienced by 86% of participants, making them the most prevalent form of discrimination uncovered in this research. Microaggressions may be subtle, but can have a destabilising effect on confidence in one's ability to do their job.

Barriers by percentage of respondents who discussed them



Participants were asked to generate ideas about what a diverse, equitable local government workplace would look like, based on their lived experience. Goal mapping was used to distil these ideas into **eight recommendations for culture change** and **eight for the refinement of recruitment and promotion processes**. These include measures such as: building more balanced teams with succession plans; developing formalised mentorship programmes; redesigning jobs to take caring and work-life balance into account; removing gendered language from job descriptions; and re-engineering interview processes. (The full list of recommendations can be found on page 23.) The goals of these recommendations are to build inclusive workplaces for people of all genders and bolster diverse representation in local government.

This work highlights a gap in research about women and gender-diverse people's experiences in public sector technology roles. In order to better understand the current state of diversity, data on representation across junior, mid-level and senior roles in councils' digital teams is needed. However, this research concludes that an intersecting set of systemic barriers influence women's career progression in London councils. If councils want to hire and retain diverse digital talent, they should re-evaluate and redesign their organisational cultures and hiring practices with these barriers in mind.



Introduction

This research endeavours to address a gap in literature, due to the dearth of data and research on gender diversity in public sector technology in the UK. Specifically, we do not know how many women, transgender or non-binary people work in digital, technology and data-focused roles across local (or central) government. These roles are crucial to the machinations of councils, as the people in them are responsible for designing, developing, testing and delivering digital public services. Digital teams also often lead councils' innovation and transformation efforts. As a result, this research found, digital teams can feel entitled to shape their own — often less inclusive — cultures, separate from the wider organisation.

This research interrogates what works to recruit and retain women and gender-diverse people in London councils' digital teams. It will endeavour to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a lack of gender diversity on digital teams in London councils?
 - a. If so, does this lack of representation affect the provision of public services, policy outcomes and other government outputs?
2. Which barriers prevent the recruitment and retention of women and gender-diverse people in local government technology roles?
3. How can councils' workplace culture and recruitment processes be refined to accommodate all genders?

These questions are designed to feed into each other: gender-diverse representation cannot be achieved without an inclusive workplace culture and recruitment practices; inclusive processes cannot be designed without tackling systemic barriers.

The research will analyse the complex, layered and often imperceptible means by which social interactions reinforce gender norms, inequalities and expectations in the workplace. First-person data collection in the form of semi-structured interviews was used to elicit evidence on gender-driven workplace behaviours and standards. The interview data was coded and analysed to answer the research questions, and goal mapping was employed to develop a series of policy recommendations for the London Office of Technology & Innovation and London councils.



Background

Gender, identity & intersectionality

We will begin this section by briefly reviewing relevant academic thought on gender and using it to frame the opportunities and interactions of women and gender-diverse people in the workplace. One of the most prevalent theories in gender studies is that gender itself is a social construct, rather than a biological reality (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Connell & Pearse, 2015; Risman, 2018). It is therefore always changing, and cannot simply be understood in the male-female binary (Risman, 2018; Warner, 1991). These constructs involve learned behaviours, roles, and norms traditionally aligned with masculinity and femininity — from our manner of speaking to the way we dress. Constructs of gender vary over time and by country, religion, socio-economic group and many other factors.

As a result of these social constructs, people — knowingly or not — feel societal pressure to “perform gender”, a term popularised by gender theorist Judith Butler (1988). To perform gender means to behave in accordance with the binary depictions of gender we learn from our families, the media, our peers, school and the workplace. Butler’s (1988) philosophy on gender performativity emphasises how, because gender is a construct determined by social dynamics, it is “real only to the extent it is performed”.

As we will explore in this research, women can be disadvantaged by the pressure to perform gender in the workplace. For example, women may be expected to take minutes in meetings, fetch coffee, organise holiday parties or perform other forms of emotional labour more often than their male counterparts. In the workplace context, emotional labour is work that involves managing co-workers’ or customers’ feelings and expectations (Taylor, 1998). This work is largely unpaid and unrecognised. It can come at the expense of women’s time, productivity and feelings, in service of social norms. (Some women – particularly white women, it should be noted – reap benefits from performing these behaviours and embodying feminine ideals, which Hamilton et. al [2019] called “the femininity premium”.) These constructs can negatively affect anyone, not just women – from a non-binary person who feels pressure to dress according to their sex assigned at birth to a man who refuses mental health help because it’s not “manly”. Not conforming to heteronormative prescriptions of behaviour, Butler (1988) warns, can have consequences.

In addition to the concepts of gender constructs and performativity, this research

is also heavily informed by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework (1991; 2006). Gender is just one of many interrelated and intersecting social identities that influence one's treatment in society. We must consider all the factors that lead to power imbalances: gender, but also race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, disabilities, age, nationality and more (Crenshaw, 1991; 2006). In this research, we will delve into how these individual characteristics affect how people are perceived and treated in the local government workplace.

Gender in Whitehall & beyond

As aforementioned, we do not know how many women and gender-diverse people work in councils' — or central government's — digital teams. (Former Downing Street Chief of Staff Jeremy Heywood wrote in a 2017 Civil Service Blog that 36% of UK civil servants working in technology roles were women [Heywood, 2017]. However, the raw data has not been made publicly available.) In the private sector, women make up 31% of technology jobs in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2022) — but, according to a PricewaterhouseCoopers report, hold just 5% of leadership roles (PwC, 2017).

There is also very little to draw on about the female, transgender and non-binary experiences in London councils in general. Therefore, the majority of the research referenced in this section focuses on women's experiences in central government, due to more availability of data. (Note: references to 'the UK Civil Service' refer to central government employees and do not include local government staff.) The aim of including such data and research is to shed light on the culture of British government workplaces. Comparisons to local government are drawn where data is available.

The UK Civil Service has said that it aims to be the country's most gender-inclusive employer. In some ways, it has delivered: the percentage of female civil servants has hovered above 50% since 2010; in 2021, it was 54% (Cabinet Office, 2022). Notably, the Civil Service has also increased the percentage of women in senior civil servant positions from 35% in 2010 to 47% in 2021 (Cabinet Office, 2022). However, women are overrepresented in some departments, such as the Department for Education, Ministry of Justice, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Cabinet Office, 2022). Several of the most prestigious civil service roles have yet to be filled by a woman, such as the Cabinet Secretary, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury and the Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. Nine per cent of women in the civil service and 20% of non-binary people reported being bullied at work (Cabinet Office, 2022). Ten per cent of women and 25% of non-binary people said that they had faced discrimination in the office (Cabinet Office, 2022).

When it comes to local government, analysis from the Fawcett Society charity found that London boroughs won't reach gender parity in councillor representation until 2077, due to a paucity of female councillors. One of the key reasons cited by the study is that 75% of councils across England don't have parental leave policies for councillors in place (Fawcett Society, 2022).

And despite better overall representation, women in the civil service are still underpaid in comparison to men: the median pay gap in the civil service is 8.1%, and the median bonus gap is 40.5% (Cabinet Office, 2022). At the Senior Civil Servant level, men earned, on average, £92,520 in 2021; women earned £88,270 (Cabinet Office, 2022). Pay is more equal at the local government level, where women make up 78% of employees (Women's Budget Group, 2020): the median pay gap is 1.4% (UK Government, 2022).

The below chart shows a breakdown of the mean and median gender pay gaps by council. These vary considerably: the boroughs of Sutton, Westminster and Waltham Forest have the highest median hourly pay gaps, at 12%, 11.8% and 11.7% respectively. In Barnet, meanwhile, female employees' median hourly pay is 25.6% higher than men's.

Gender pay gap by borough, 2021/2022



As we will delve into in the discussion, government workplaces were said by several of this study’s participants to be “laddish” and “cliquey”. This echoes existing research on government culture in the UK. A report analysing the history of female senior civil servants found that women had to be “the right sort of chap” — in other words, behave in a traditionally masculine manner — in order to be seen as practising “real politics” (Devanny & Haddon, 2015). In an analysis of Welsh local government, Charles (2013) found that female staff behaved more aggressively and competitively than they would have naturally in order to fit in with the blokeish local government culture. Older research by Childs (2004) on female Labour MPs came to a similar conclusion: it found that a “feminised” style of doing politics in the House of Commons was seen as less legitimate than “male” approaches (Childs, 2004). The feminine style, the study found, was characterised by less aggression, defensiveness, waffling and jargon, and more focus on social issues and empathy. The masculine style, meanwhile, was said to be reminiscent of behaviour at an all-boys prep school (Childs, 2004).

The effects of representation on policy & services

But does gender-diverse representation in government ultimately affect policy outcomes, the provision of public services and other government outputs? This question has yet to be answered substantively; academics have been grappling with measuring the impact of representation on policy since the early 1990s.

In a study of 159 developing countries, Asiedu et al. (2018) found that the higher the share of women in parliament, the more likely these countries are to pass laws on women-centric issues like sexual harassment, domestic violence and rape. Devlin and Elgie’s (2008) research on parliamentary representation in Rwanda, meanwhile, found that while women “add new dimensions to the policy agenda”, they have little effect on policy outcomes. When it comes to street-level bureaucrats, studies in the US found that increasing the number of female police officers leads to higher rates of reporting of and arrests for sexual assault (Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006); and that hiring more female math teachers leads to higher test scores for girls (Keiser et al., 2000).

However, evidence on the effects of representation on policy and public services is mixed (Dolan, 2001), sparse (Fitzpatrick & Richards, 2019) and lacks relevance to local government.



In The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics, Chappell (2013, p.614) writes:

“Gender does not merely exist in the state, but it is also reproduced through it. The products of institutions — laws, policies, and rules — are imbued with these internal values and come to shape societal norms and expectations, which are then reflected onto institutions; in this sense, gender and institutional outcomes can be seen as co-constitutive and mutually reinforcing.”

This research will seek to determine whether Chappell is correct in her assertion that gender and policy outcomes are inextricably linked.



Methodology

Interviewing was selected as a data collection method due to the dearth of existing knowledge on the topic, as well as for its ability to gain in-depth insights into the inner workings of London councils. I conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with mid- to senior-level employees in digital, data and technology roles. The goal of the interviews was to elicit data on their experiences and ideas for what works to build gender-diverse digital teams. I primarily used qualitative research as my goal was to investigate the complex set of factors that affect the experiences of a group in a particular socio-cultural context (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2022). I also used basic quantitative analysis to report on participants' responses to research questions one and two. Exploratory and generative research questions were chosen to gain a better understanding of this under-investigated problem (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2022).

I interviewed 16 participants in total: 13 women, one person who identifies as non-binary transgender and two men. Of these, 13 currently work in a London council and three previously worked in local government but left for the private sector. (Participants who left government work were helpful in identifying barriers to councils' retention of high-potential talent.) Thirty-eight per cent of participants were from a racial minority. The 16 participants have combined experience at 21 different London councils.

Participants were primarily approached via email or LinkedIn message. Some were found through networking groups or via an introduction from another participant. The interviews were conducted in person at locations such as restaurants, parks, coffee shops and government workplaces, or via videoconference. Interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 70 minutes, depending on participants' answers and how much time they had to devote to the project. I used the same primary questions to guide the interviews with the women and non-binary trans person, and altered the questions slightly for male participants. (Men's responses were not always taken into account when discussing findings, as the focus of this research is the experiences of women and gender-diverse people. This is noted in the relevant sections.)

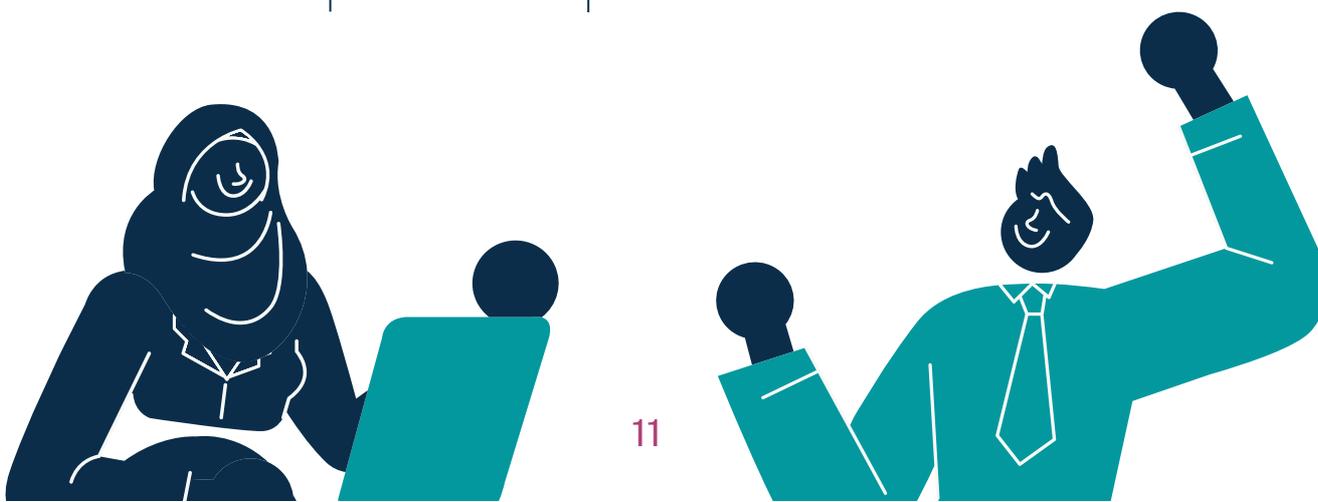
The themes of the questions (career and identity; experience and barriers; solutions and ideas for the future of government) remained the same for all participants. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their own experiences and the organisational cultures of their department, council and local government in London at large. The interviews focused on both present realities and future scenarios, in order to elicit abstract ideas about what gender-inclusive councils could look like.

All participants were promised anonymity in the final product and were told that they would be identified solely by their gender, whether or not they currently work in local government and a generic role descriptor. It was critical to protect participants' identities to ensure that sensitive information about their experiences with employers, past and present, was not revealed. All participants consented to be recorded on the condition that the recordings (and notes taken) were destroyed upon completion of the project. Interviews were pseudo-anonymised in the analysis process.

I used thematic analysis, an inductive, iterative method that involves a deep reading of the data (in this case, transcribed interviews), followed by the identification of key ideas, which are refined until a final set of categories emerges (Neuendorf, 2018). This process is particularly useful for analysing complex and lengthy qualitative data (Neuendorf, 2018) because it allows for new and unexpected themes to arise. Once recurring themes emerged, I arranged them into a two-pronged coding scheme that was used to analyse interviews. Themes were grouped into issues (problematic system behaviour) and goals (desired outcomes). All interviews were coded at least twice to ensure accuracy. The coding scheme allowed for easier comparison and pattern identification.

Below is an example of two themes in the coding scheme and how they relate to participants' quotes.

Theme	Type	Example
Microaggressions	Issue	“In meetings, men talk over me. It’s very difficult as a woman to deal with those situations. If you do try to tackle it, you might be seen as aggressive or difficult.”
Value change	Goal	“The spirit of creativity naturally leads to more inclusive behaviour.”



To answer the first research question and its sub-question, I reported on how many participants said that they think there is a lack of women, transgender and non-binary people on digital teams, and if so, whether that dearth of representation affects the provision of public services, policy outcomes and other government outputs. To answer the second research question, I used thematic analysis to surface which barriers to gender-diverse representation participants said are most prevalent in local government workplaces. I used basic quantitative analysis to report on how participants responded to both of these research questions.

To answer research question three, I analysed the themes that surfaced while coding interviews with goal mapping. Goal mapping can help set direction by looking at current system behaviour and visualising an interrelated web of dynamic and complex policy aims (Eden & Ackermann, 2013). In their seminal text on the method, Eden & Ackermann (2013, p. 18) wrote that a goal is “defined not so much by the particular words, but its context of supporting goals and supported goals”. Goal mapping can help articulate the strategic policies that will contribute to the achievement of an overarching goal — which made it an ideal analysis method for this project.

There are key limitations to this research, which are important to convey for transparency. The first, and most important, is that this research cannot be said to be representative of employees who are transgender, non-binary or have other gender expressions. Extensive efforts were made to find a gender-diverse cross-section of participants (including asking participants, reaching out to members of government LGBTQ+ groups and posting about the research in online networks). However, I was only able to find one person with a digital background who identifies as non-binary transgender and was willing to be interviewed for this report. This may suggest that the barriers to entry to digital work in local government for such people are high; or, they may have been reticent to share their stories and opinions publicly, even anonymously. Therefore, most of the opinions and thoughts on gender diversity in this report are those of cisgender women; they cannot be said to represent people with different gender expressions.

The second limitation of this project is that the views of 16 participants with experience working in 21 councils do not represent the breadth of experiences of people working in all 32 councils and the City of London. This research offers a snapshot of the experiences, perceptions and motivations of people — primarily women — working in councils’ digital teams. A larger evidence base — derived from carrying out research with a greater number of gender-diverse people across all councils — would lend greater validity to the findings.



Discussion

In this section, we will review the data collected in service of answering this project's research questions. We will begin with an analysis of whether women and gender-diverse people are well-represented in digital teams and whether said representation affects government services.

Gender diversity in digital teams

Thirteen out of 16 participants (81%) said that in their experience working in and interacting with London's councils, there is a lack of gender diversity in digital teams. One participant (6%) said she did not know; two (12.5%) said that their councils' digital teams are majority-women but are uncertain about the gender makeup of other councils' teams.

Of the participants who believe there is a lack of gender diversity, the majority said that the dearth of representation is concentrated at the senior leadership level. Participant #12 said that there has been an influx of female digital employees from central to local government recently, but "if you look at the chief officer level to the head of service level, there's a still a disproportionate amount of men."

Participant #3 said that in her council, women are concentrated in middle management roles: "It's mostly men in senior to executive director roles. There are often women in middle management who use soft skills. The majority of actual delivery and technical roles will be male." She said that in her council, digital work is highly gendered: women often work on content delivery and design; men work on the back end, frameworks, data architecture and product.

The division between "technical" and "non-technical" was a recurring theme. Several senior leaders I interviewed mentioned that they are habitually talked down to or patronised by men because they do not code. "There's a little bit of sexism behind it. There's a boys' club," said participant #5. Calling someone non-technical "is one of the biggest ways you can insult technology leaders. 'You're not really in the tribe' is what that means," she said. Calling someone non-technical, several participants said, not only undermines their skills but infers that they are junior employees, rather than senior leaders.

It's not just women who are struggling to make it to the top, this research found, but ethnic minorities. Participant #4 had a term for this: the Guinness effect.

“At the bottom, you’ll see a mix of people. But at the top, it’s very white.” Participant #13 agreed: “There is a significant underrepresentation of women and of people who aren’t white. It’s a sector-wide problem.”

The dearth of women and people of colour in senior leadership roles, several participants said, is a symptom of a vicious cycle: when you don’t see people who look like you at the top, you don’t know if it’s possible for you to make it there. “A glass ceiling remains. There are women managers, but only until a certain level. At the highest levels, I see no women at all,” said participant #2.

The effects of gender representation on public services & policy

What does it mean for public services, policy and other government outputs if their systems and processes are primarily designed by men? Ten participants (62.5%) said that a lack of representation affects policies and services. Four (25%) said that they did not know and two (12.5%) said that they do not believe it has an effect. Participant #14 said that while he has noticed the benefits of diversity in his council’s workplace culture, “it would be unfair to say inclusivity has improved the outcomes of services we provide.”

Three participants who believed that representation affects services cautioned that teams which are overwhelmingly male, white and technical can mistake technological innovation for a solution to a social problem. Such teams don’t consider factors like evidence of need, interoperability, usability, testing and accessibility, participant #4 warned. “These whizzy solutions aren’t rooted in the real world,” she said.

“Male leaders are more likely to be from STEM backgrounds, and in my experience, are more likely to shy away from human solutions. This can lead to a lack of creative problem-solving,” participant #5 said. Female technology leaders, meanwhile, are often from multidisciplinary backgrounds, she said, which helps them make informed decisions. Male digital leaders are less likely to collaborate with others outside their field, participant #5 added, and less focused on building inclusive cultures. Oftentimes, the culture fostered in digital teams clashes with that of the council as a whole, several participants cautioned.

When it comes to delivering essential services to residents, assumed knowledge can be dangerous, two participants warned. A range of experiences and voices is key to designing services that represent people from a variety of genders, ethnicities, socioeconomic contexts and educational backgrounds, they said. Having teams that

reflect the boroughs they represent allows them to collect the right data, design and test thoughtfully by challenging biases and long-held assumptions. “You can’t design for users you don’t understand. You can get a long way by doing really good user research, but if you don’t have lived experience and diversity of thought, you’ve got groupthink,” participant #9 said. “In the first wave of digital teams, leaders said things like, ‘Ask forgiveness, not permission.’ That comes with a massive amount of privilege.”

Two participants mentioned that given the breadth of discrimination many women and gender-diverse people have faced in their lives, they “think differently”; namely, with compassion. Women “look at the periphery, not just the expected outcome,” participant #6 said. This is especially valuable in stretched local government departments, which, in a period of austerity, can prize quick wins over sustainability, she said.

Participant #12 explained how London councils collaborate on certain digital projects, which tend to be technical and infrastructure-focused. These include improving WiFi in council buildings, bolstering cybersecurity and setting up data stores and platforms. What these cross-borough projects don’t tend to focus on, she said, is using technology to improve outcomes for residents. “It’s really hard to get senior buy-in for projects like a pan-London fostering service, creating shared standards for building resident-facing technology or building the technology that a woman who needs a food bank may use.” She noted that when these collaborative, citizen-centric projects do get pushed through, they tend to be female-led.

The answers from these 10 participants suggest that diversity of knowledge, lived experience and perspective can improve lateral thinking. However, with 37.5% of participants either saying that diversity does not affect government outputs or that they do not know, we cannot answer this question with certainty.



In the next part of the discussion, we will delve into the five most-mentioned barriers that surfaced in the thematic content analysis. (Many other barriers were mentioned in interviews, but due to space constraints, could not all be included.)

The themes discussed in this section are: the confidence gap, gender performance, a lack of diversity, inclusion and intersectionality, recruitment and promotion processes and microaggressions.



The confidence gap

Six participants mentioned that they struggle with confidence in the workplace, and three said that they don't anymore, but did earlier in their career. However, this section is not solely about women and gender-diverse people's confidence in the workplace, but what reactions they receive to outward projections of confidence. Four additional women mentioned that their expressions of assuredness are often misconstrued as arrogance. Altogether, 81% of participants reported having struggled with confidence in the workplace in some form. (Men were not asked this question.)

Participant #5, for example, is manifestly confident in her leadership. But throughout her career, she has been called “aggressive”, “intimidating”, “rude” and “presumptuous”, she said. Multiple studies from the private sector have found that women struggle to ask for promotions, raises and more responsibility out of concern that they will come off as bossy, unlikeable or entitled — labels that can lead to backlash in the workplace (Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Heilman, 2012; Campbell & Hahl, 2022). “I would consistently get told I wasn't formal enough; that I didn't have enough gravitas and was too outspoken; that [I wasn't] corporate enough [or] tough enough,” said participant #5. Hearing these things “over and over again” led to her leaving the civil service for a time. (She has since returned.)

Participant #1 noted that in every performance review she has undergone with a male manager, her perceived lack of confidence was noted as a problem. She has been told repeatedly that she is not “assertive” enough — a trait that is stereotypically associated with male gender expression (Gerber, 2009). (In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Civil Service ran “assertiveness training” sessions for women to help them become more akin to the “ideal type” of civil servant. [Devanny & Haddon, 2015].) “Why does government value confidence and visibility, rather than hard work?” participant #1 observed.

The majority of participants' councils are not doing anything to systemically develop confidence among employees — which is the norm. However, several participants said that government work in particular triggers feelings of inadequacy in women. “I've struggled with my true value... it partly stems from a career in government, where what you're worth [financially] is prescribed, and you can't really negotiate.” Participant #12 said that it can be difficult to navigate the “traditional, antiquated behaviours that stem from a formal, hierarchical process that's sometimes very patriarchal... Young women can come into that environment [and struggle] to find their voice and their place.”

Several participants said that they suffer from imposter syndrome after having their confidence knocked by instances of sexism and racism in the workplace. Participant #10, for example, said that she projects confidence, but “it’s inner turmoil going on underneath”. Participant #11 said that she “puts on a front” because she has often felt belittled in local government work: “If I need to not betray that I’m feeling a bit pushed about, I’ve learned how. But it would be nice to not have to do it.”

Gender performance

Six out of 14 participants (43%) said that they have felt pressure to alter their behaviour to act in a manner either more traditionally masculine or feminine — or both, leading to undue pressure to embody dualities. (Men were not asked this question.) Participant #3 noted, “you have to posture in a masculine way to get your point across... I don’t [behave] the way I would in a group of women.” Participant #8 said that she has felt the need to adopt a “nerdy” demeanour with male technology leaders. “I would use straight talk and nerdy behaviour to try and fit in and build relationships. It’s not that I wanted to do that, [but] if I don’t behave in a certain way, I’m not going to be included or accepted.” Participant #9 noted that when she started working in the civil service in the 1990s, she felt that she had to fit into the “laddish culture”, which involved a lot of drinking; but now, she has matured into “the sort of leader who leads the way I want to lead, and it’s not particularly masculine.” But, she said, civil service leadership is still centred around patriarchal norms; qualities that are more stereotypically female, like collaboration and empathy, are not as highly valued. Participant #12, meanwhile, said that she has never felt the need to adopt masculine mannerisms in local government. Her previous bosses, who were male, encouraged her to develop her own leadership style and lean into her empathetic nature.

Others, however, have felt the need to conform to more feminine stereotypes. Participant #10 said that she used to “play up the dumb blonde bit” by asking basic questions about how a type of technology works. In doing this, she was attempting to emulate a previous female manager who would ask employees to explain complex technical ideas in plain English, which participant #10 said made her feel like an expert in her field. However, participant #10 found that by acting that way with men, “it was read a different way.”

Participant #5 said that she is often expected to perform emotional labour — like organising birthday collections or making leaving speeches — because the majority of her peers are men. “It’s a gendered expectation to be womanly or that women

should do certain things.” Participant #13, a man, agreed: “It’s things like leaving dos and Christmas parties that very easily become women’s work.”

For transgender and non-binary people, as well as those with different gender expressions, the idea of gender performance is more nuanced. Participant #15, who identifies as non-binary transgender, recently started hormone replacement therapy (HRT), and not everyone at their workplace knows that they are in the midst of transitioning. They said that although they don’t want to be seen as a man, they sometimes behave like one around people who seem less open-minded. “When I joined the council, I was exploring my gender identity, but at work, I would come in in a suit. I was trying to fit in,” participant #15 said. They noted that in meetings with women, they often feel comfortable being themselves. In majority-male meetings, however, they feel like they are “constantly on the edge of someone making a comment.”

“Now that I’m on HRT, the ball has started rolling. I better get prepared. I’m not always going to be able to hide this from people who might not be accepting. I’m going to have to be more open about it, as I won’t have a choice,” participant #15 said.

Lack of diversity, inclusion & intersectionality

As mentioned in the background section, it is crucial to keep intersectionality in mind when discussing inequalities in representation, due to the power imbalances faced by people depending on their race, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, disability, class, age or other factors (Crenshaw, 1991; 2006).

Race & ethnicity

Nine out of 16 participants (56%) discussed how racism affects their and their peers’ interactions in local government workplaces. “It’s taken me a lot longer to be successful,” said participant #4. “I feel like I should have had this success maybe 10 or 15 years ago... I just think I wasn’t the first choice for promotions because I wasn’t the same.” Participant #6 said that she purposely does not put her picture on LinkedIn because she is concerned about racism in hiring: “Even though local authorities’ policy is to be open, transparent and welcome people from different backgrounds, you can’t guarantee that,” she said.

Participant #8 said that while running design workshops with male government leaders and conducting user research with residents, she has faced “so much racism... People will comment on my country and try to make an assumption about my political beliefs.” She did not feel that she had the support of her workplaces

during these experiences. “The gaslighting behaviour makes you think you’re not good enough... I thought it was my problem and I could just get better. Nowadays, I can see that I experienced these things because of my race.”

The Tackling Racial Inequality Working Group, which advocates for equality in London councils and communities, found that the percentage of Black, Asian and other minority groups working in London councils — 45% — was higher than the percentage of those groups in the city’s population as a whole, at 41% (London Councils, 2022). However, people from racial minorities aren’t ascending to local government leadership roles accordingly: the study found that representation falls significantly at the £50,000-60,000 pay band and above (London Councils, 2022).

Class

Six participants (37.5%) brought up class discrimination as a barrier. Participant #4 said that people judge her by her accent: “People have said to me, ‘Oh, you’re very Essex.’ There are so many classist implications embedded in that.” Participant #5 said: “The levels of prejudice and privilege are very deep. The welcoming of working class people as deserving leaders in the same way that middle class, university-educated people are is important.”

One crucial component of the class discussion is how people of a certain “type” — male, white, Oxbridge-educated — tend to stick together. Local government “can be quite cliquy,” participant #6 said. “Men come together, introduce people to each other and go play golf, but women don’t really have that network.” Three others mentioned that local government has a “laddish” culture. “With the very senior roles, a group of guys go out to the pub all of the time, and they have access to power from being in that club,” said participant #10. Participant #11 said that she found the “boys’ pub culture” much more noticeable in local government than in central government.

Gender identity & sexuality

Two participants (12.5%) mentioned that councils should better support and include LGBTQ+ people. Participant #15 described how a support group for LGBTQ+ employees at their council helped them build the confidence to feel comfortable at work. But the network has few resources and participants are expected to take part outside of work hours, which limits access. The network asked the council’s chief executive if it could meet during work time for one hour every six weeks, but the request has not been approved. “I think I’m a lot more effective at work when I can be me, and I want that for [others],” said participant #15.

In addition to racism, classism and gender- and sexuality-based discrimination, one participant mentioned ableism and another mentioned ageism as issues councils need to contend with.

Recruitment & promotion processes

Nine out of 16 participants (56%) emphasised that local government recruitment and promotion processes should change to support gender diversity. Under the current system, employees must apply for promotions. Interviewees said that while some employees seek out promotions with vigour, others, especially those who lack confidence, will hold back — regardless of whether or not they are qualified. “Your self-esteem dictates how quickly you progress, and so does the advice you’re given by managers,” participant #1 said. She explained that she and a male peer were given different guidance on how soon they should apply for a promotion and expect to progress, despite the fact that they had the same qualifications. Even when candidates do have the confidence to apply for promotions, their self-assurance doesn’t always serve them: “I’ve left jobs because people said, ‘How dare you think you could go for a promotion? You’ve only been in this job for six months.’ I’ve had to learn that that’s another person’s problem. If you haven’t gone through that realisation, it could impact your career,” said participant #16.

The government interviewing process is based on skill profiles called “behaviours” (HM Government, 2018). In interviews, applicants must demonstrate how well they embody desired behaviours, such as “developing self and others” and “making effective decisions”. Four participants said that the interview process hinders the recruitment of technology talent from the private sector who are more accustomed to standard interview practice. “If you don’t know the system, it’s completely impossible to decipher from the outside. The interviews are still based on whether you can get by without getting too nervous for an hour, manage to articulate yourself and not freak people out. That is not conducive to someone who has come through years of gender- or race-based discrimination,” said participant #3. Participant #1 agreed: “The culture rewards style over substance. That can hurt people from different socio-economic backgrounds.”

Participant #14 said that local government has poor branding, which hampers recruitment. “People don’t know what it does and why it would be fun to work there. Our biggest challenge is getting into people’s consideration,” he said. Another key component is salary: local government pay grades tend to reward the number of people you line-manage and the breadth of your responsibilities, which can make it difficult to attract technical specialists.

Participant #3 noted that the current system doesn't easily allow hiring managers to distinguish which qualifications are must-haves and which are optional or can be learned on the job. Soft skills, she said, are ignored or undervalued, and as a result, fewer women apply for senior-level digital positions. Participant #4 said: "These rigid frameworks come from a system that is historically unequal and has structural inequalities built into it." Participant #12 agreed, stating that government recruitment is based on patriarchal traditions that women struggle to adhere to. "If women could see [councils] as dynamic and flexible places where soft skills are important, maybe we'd have more in these senior roles," said participant #3. Two participants volunteered that they would not put themselves up for such opportunities unless they met every single qualification: "When I look at a job application, I'm always trying to tick every box," participant #10 said.

It was noted by four participants that managers tend to hire people who look like them. "Most leaders will recruit to type, so the more tech-focused, male senior leaders we have, the more we'll get. The problem has to be solved intentionally," participant #6 said. "In the UK, it's about who you get on with well. If you're not part of that clique, you won't get that high-profile job. So, do you try and fight it? Or do you just move on to the private sector?" (Participant #6 has in fact moved on to the private sector.)

Microaggressions

Participants were asked whether they had faced any form of discrimination in local government. Twelve out of 14 participants (86%) said that they had experienced microaggressions in the workplace. (Men were not asked this question.) Microaggressions are manifestations of people's conscious or unconscious biases against marginalised groups, often taking the form of verbal slights which — intentionally or not — can express hostility, distrust, rudeness or insensitivity (Dipboye & Colella, 2004; Pierce, 1974). Microaggressions can happen subtly and are sometimes disguised as a joke, which makes them easier to refute. The difference between overt discrimination and microaggressions is that those who perpetuate microaggressions may not even be aware they are doing it. That does not dilute their impact, however. One study found that for women in STEM fields, microaggressions can "trigger a cycle of rumination and self-doubt that may ultimately result in women choosing to leave" their jobs (Kim & Meister, 2022, p.1).

Participant #4 detailed several instances of microaggressions that she has experienced in local government. In one, she had arranged a meeting via email. When she walked into the meeting room — before they realised who she was —

the men waiting asked her to take away their used coffee cups. In another, a council's senior director insinuated that he didn't take her seriously because of her accent. "I'm working class; I sound like I come from the slums; I'm a woman of colour. People put all these things together and assume you're a certain kind of person," participant #4 said.

Participants #5, #6 and #11 shared parallel stories about times when they were the senior leader on a project and men directed questions to junior male colleagues in meetings. "I've felt less listened to and talked over at meetings. My viewpoint hasn't always been taken with as much credibility as male colleagues," said participant #11. Participant #6 also said that her male colleagues frequently talk over her. "It's very difficult as a woman to deal with those situations. If you do try to tackle it, you might be seen as aggressive or difficult," she said. To make it in councils' digital teams, you "have to be thick-skinned," participant #5 said.

Participant #9 said that the microaggressions she faced while working in central government were worse; however, they are still prevalent in local government. The male head of human resources at her previous council, for example, never got her name right, despite the fact that they worked in the same office for years. "It's interesting, how much you stop seeing... because you're so used to [microaggressions]," participant #9 said.

Several participants mentioned other, more overt discriminations. Participant #16, for example, said that at a previous council, one of the male senior staff would refuse to speak to female project managers. Participant #12 noted that several of the women she manages have experienced predatory behaviour, including two instances of sexual harassment by senior white men at their council. "They didn't know how to raise it. I've had to validate their experience and say, 'This is unacceptable.' They've gone, 'Oh, yeah.' That's the really scary part: there's an acceptance that this is how women will be treated," said participant #12.



Recommendations

To shape this project's recommendations, I used suggestions sourced by participants: people with lived experience in London councils' digital teams who have faced inequities first-hand. I chose this avenue, rather than case studies from the private sector, firstly, because the local government context is distinct and such evidence may not be applicable. (Robust evidence on these recommendations from local governments does not yet exist.) Secondly, I chose to use participants' suggestions because of the social innovation philosophy that the people most affected by a problem are imperative to addressing it (Brown & Wyatt, 2010). I distilled participants' ideas into eight policy recommendations for culture change and eight for the refinement of recruitment and promotion processes.

I developed the goal system outlined below using goal mapping, which helped connect themes and illuminate means-end relationships between meta goals (broad aims), strategic policy goals and lower-level, specific goals (Eden & Ackermann, 2013). For example, one of the high-level policy challenges examined in this research is how to make digital teams' cultures more inclusive. This may be achieved by implementing a series of strategic policy goals, such as designing succession plans for digital teams. More specific goals, like instituting an apprenticeship program, can help achieve the build-out of succession plans.

It should be noted that these recommendations have limitations and caveats. Firstly, it's difficult to engineer, let alone measure, culture change. Secondly, the opinions of these participants are not representative of all women or gender-diverse people working in local government: a different set of interviewees may have led to different outcomes. Thirdly, these ideas lack test case evidence. For councils looking to build more inclusive and representative teams, this section may serve as a list of ideas to test, learn from, adapt and monitor.

Culture change

As participant #14 put it: "Culture can be defined by who is left out". Digital teams are often seen as the vanguards of innovation and transformation in government organisations. For this reason, several participants pointed out, digital teams can feel entitled to shape their own, often less inclusive, cultures, separate from the wider organisation. This exceptionalism can come at a long-term cost. Building an inclusive organisational culture that suits both digital and the council at large is one of the crucial challenges facing technology leaders, this research found. What follows are participants' suggestions for how to build an integrated, inclusive culture that can tackle the barriers outlined in the discussion.

1.

Engineer a more balanced team by designing succession plans.

Develop a team structure that has diverse employees across senior, mid-level and junior roles. That way, when people progress or leave the organisation, there are experienced employees prepared to take on more responsibility.

- It can be difficult to find the right hires for senior technology roles. Councils may consider creatively shaping roles by disaggregating responsibilities and distributing them to high-potential emerging leaders, thus allowing them to grow into senior roles. Inclusion comes from carefully crafting talent pipelines, said participant #8.
- Actively seeking out talent can bolster this approach: integrate structured ways to support diverse people into technology, such as apprenticeships.
- Remember that developing gender-diverse representation is an ongoing commitment, “not something to tick off your list,” participant #13 said.

2.

Co-create your values. As dissected in the discussion section, many participants felt the need to fit into a prescribed role: “The model of a successful government worker is historically built around men. We need to stop trying to get women to change to fit into that vision of success,” participant #1 said.

- “We shouldn’t be saying digital is only technical. If we make it sound narrow, we can unintentionally discourage large groups from the profession,” said participant #13. Put soft skills on equal footing with technical ones to improve representation, he — and several other participants — advised.
- Develop values with employees of all levels, and don’t allow for deviation. Technology leaders with specialised skills often get away with behaviour that doesn’t align with a council’s values due to their privileged position, warned participant #14. Tolerating inconsistency sends a message to other managers that such behaviour is acceptable, and “it will usually come at the cost of diversity and inclusion,” he said.

3.

Redesign jobs to take caring responsibilities and work-life balance into consideration. There is substantial evidence that part-time work hampers wage progression: people who undertake it are less likely to get promoted, which has the obvious effect of derailing women’s careers (Connolly & Gregory, 2008; Dex & Bukodi, 2012; Costa Dias,

Joyce & Parido, 2018). Because technology is a male-dominated field, participant #11 said, mothers can be made to feel guilty for picking up their kids from school or staying home to care for a sick child. Consider what support and conditions women, transgender and non-binary people need to thrive (be it flexible work, job-shares or other arrangements), integrate them into terms and conditions for positions and ensure that the entire team is aware of changes. Where possible, introduce flexible work for all team members to further alleviate the stigma.

4.

Develop formalised mentorship programmes tied to onboarding. Several participants emphasised the importance of learning from women who have faced similar challenges: “Seeing women like me who were further along was the main thing that helped build my confidence,” participant #5 said. Ensure onboarding sets new employees up for success by appointing a role model who can help them navigate workplace struggles.

5.

Implement team- or organisation-wide learning. With the effectiveness of unconscious bias training in dispute (Williamson & Foley, 2018; Noon, 2017), consider gender awareness training. In it, participants learn about the experiences of people across the gender identity and sexuality spectrums, as well as how to use gender-inclusive language.

- One council hosts “show and shares” to discuss issues such as racism, sexism and intersectionality. Employees tell peers about their lived experience and have an open discussion, in which people ask questions freely. “It sends a really strong message,” said one participant. (However, the onus for teaching employees about these issues should not be put on staff who are LGBTQ+, female or from a racial minority.)
- Teach employees about the concept of emotional labour to undo learned behaviours and ensure gendered stereotypes don’t accidentally slot into roles. (For example, women shouldn’t always be the ones taking minutes in meetings or organising holiday parties.)
- Some councils are supporting women and gender-diverse people by implementing managerial training and policies on perimenopause, menopause, periods, pregnancy and transitioning.

6.

Run retrospectives. Councils continue to employ outdated diversity and inclusion programmes that aren’t working, participants said. Check in on your team’s efforts to improve inclusion the same way you would with big projects: set objectives, see if the programme in question is hitting them and adjust as necessary.

7.

Make women's confidence an institutional, not individual, challenge.

Confidence is a skill that can be learned. Rather than simply telling people to act confidently, managers should put in the effort to understand barriers. For example: if employees are nervous about speaking up in all-team meetings, break into smaller groups to encourage participation.

- Some councils are providing employees with tools to build their confidence, such as the UPFRONT confidence course.
- Recognise the accomplishments of female, transgender and non-binary employees (or any employee) publicly. Not only does celebrating contributions reward good work, but it also shows others like them that success in technology is possible.

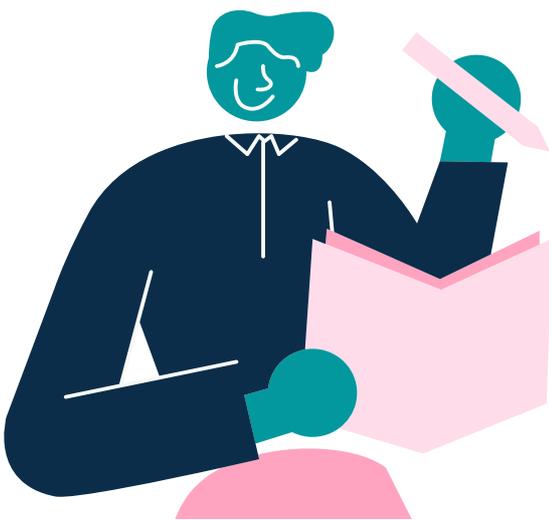
8.

Support men to be allies.

- Educate men not to speak over people, respect others' opinions and give credibility to female, trans and non-binary voices.
- Urge them to challenge microaggressions by intervening, rather than acting as a bystander. Teach them to respond with humility, rather than defensiveness, when their behaviour is called into question.
- Encourage them to educate themselves to be anti-sexist and anti-racist.

Refining recruitment & promotion processes

As examined in the discussion section, many of the participants profiled for this research questioned the ability of councils' recruitment and promotion systems to hire gender-diverse candidates for key roles. To attract high-value talent, many said that digital teams need to change what hiring managers look for. Rather than focusing single-mindedly on technical ability, they should seek transferable skills, the ability to navigate uncertainty and creativity. Their other suggestions follow.



1.

Local government does not have the best branding: as participant #14 put it, “people assume we’re fussy bureaucracies, pushing paper around”. To get high-potential, publicly-minded talent to consider local government, **emphasise the mission-driven nature of your council’s work.**

- Job descriptions and marketing efforts should stress that working in local government gives employees the chance to have a direct impact on citizen welfare and see policy applied in practice.

2.

Hire for values. Hiring people whose values align with your council’s can bolster retention. To achieve this, include statements of cultural value that show candidates what your team stands for. Consider also including detailed statements of welcome and inclusivity to attract people from underrepresented groups.

3.

Remove gendered language from job descriptions. Studies show that gendered language can maintain inequalities in male-dominated fields (Gaucher, Friesen & Kay, 2011). Words like “committed”, “competitive” and “go-getter” are often associated with men and may deter women and gender-diverse people from applying. Replace them with words such as “compassionate”, “team-oriented”, and “collaborative”.

- To make jobs more accessible, make descriptions transparent: specify which qualifications are required and which are optional or can be learned on the job.

4.

Highlight opportunities like apprenticeships or time off work to undertake an advanced degree. This shows that although local government can’t offer top-tier pay, it can give employees the time and space to grow in their careers.

5.

To curtail bias in the application process, ensure hiring panels are gender- and race-balanced. Panels should reflect the diversity of the borough, and panellists should be trained on gender inclusion.

6.

Give diverse candidates the opportunity to take on new and exciting projects. Rather than tapping favourites for big opportunities, use open recruitment to find the best people for the project. Advertise widely among staff. Ensure that candidates prioritise diversity and inclusion.

7.

As mentioned in the discussion section, government interview processes reward eloquence, confidence and quick thinking. These are important skills, but they alone don't signal intelligence and competence. **Trial different interview approaches, such as giving candidates interview questions beforehand.** This allows hiring managers to judge critical thinking, resourcefulness and attention to detail.

8.

Build a talent pipeline intentionally and proactively. “Local government is not the most obvious choice for people in the private sector. You need to almost intersect — at forums, conferences or networking events — to talk about the work we do,” said participant #8.

- Host “meet the team” evenings to showcase the diversity and benefits of working for your council.



Conclusion

This research aimed to, firstly, explore the ongoing challenges faced by women and gender-diverse people in London councils' digital teams, and secondly, offer policy options to address these barriers and bolster inclusion. To do this, I conducted qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews with 13 women, two men and one non-binary transgender person with experience working in digital, technology or data in London councils. Below, I will summarise the most salient findings for each research question.

1. Is there a lack of gender diversity on digital teams in London councils?
 - If so, does this lack of representation affect the provision of public services, policy outcomes and other government outputs?

The majority of participants — 81% — said that there is a dearth of gender diversity on digital teams in London councils. The remaining three participants were uncertain. The evidence presented in this report indicates that there is a lack of gender diversity in councils' digital teams; however, data on representation across junior, mid-level and senior roles in councils' digital teams is needed to further investigate this claim.

The answer to the sub-question is unclear: 62.5% of participants said that inclusion affects the quality of public services, policy and other government outputs. The remaining 37.5% either said that there is no relationship between diversity and government outputs or that they did not know. Those who said that inclusion improves government outputs cited the need for a diversity of lived experience to provide different perspectives, avoid bias and challenge assumptions. Homogeneity can reinforce inequalities, several cautioned. More research should be done on the potential cause-and-effect relationship between staff diversity and the quality of government outputs to substantively answer this question. It is likely insufficient to answer this question based on interviews with local government staff alone; outcome metrics such as take-up of public services and citizen satisfaction should be studied.

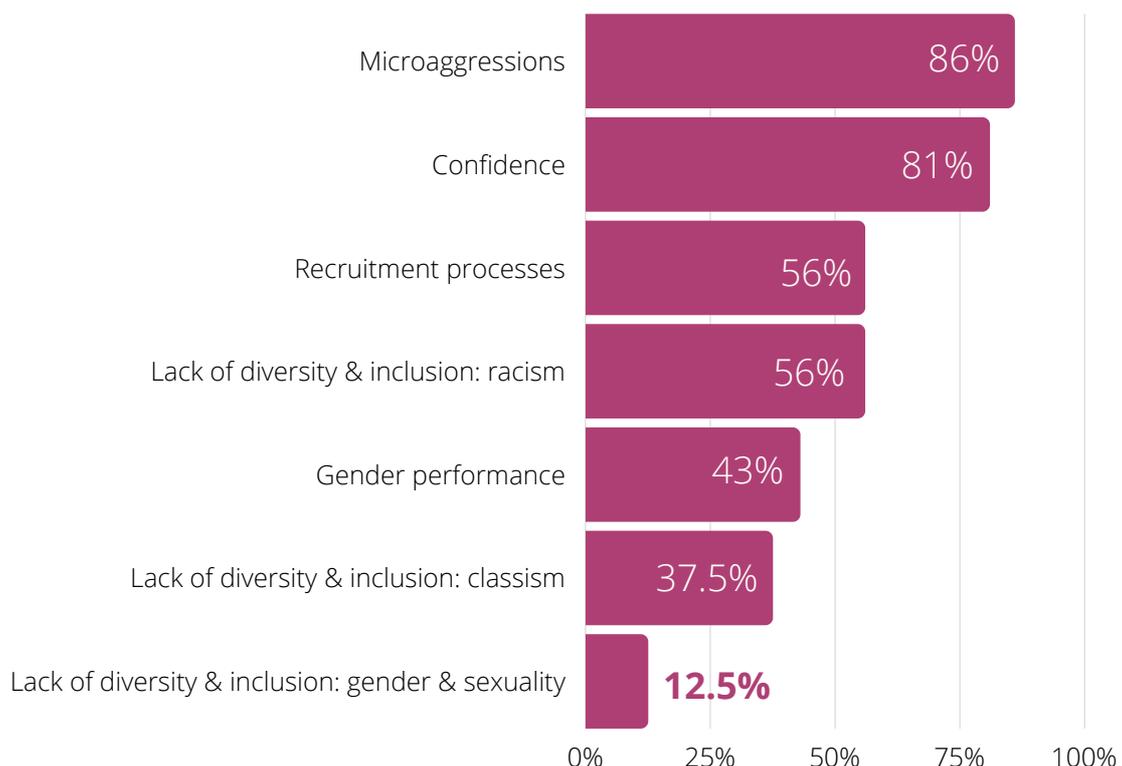
2. Which barriers prevent the recruitment and retention of women and gender-diverse people in local government technology roles?

In this section, I provided concrete examples of everyday acts of discrimination from participants' personal accounts. The primary barriers to attracting and retaining

gender-diverse people in local government digital roles, as per this research’s findings, are outlined below.

- **Confidence** is a double-edged sword for women. Some participants were told they weren’t confident enough; others that displayed self-esteem faced backlash. Eighty-one per cent of female and non-binary transgender participants struggled to find the right balance between “too confident” and “not confident enough”.
- **Gender performance**, or feeling the need to alter one’s behaviour to fit in with binary gender stereotypes, is an issue that 43% of female and non-binary transgender participants struggled with.
- **A lack of diversity, inclusion and intersectionality** in the workplace can lead to differential treatment and greater power imbalances. Fifty-six per cent of participants cited racism as a mitigating factor; 37.5% discussed classism; 12.5% brought up gender- and sexuality-based discrimination.
- **Recruitment and promotion processes** don’t do enough to support women and gender-diverse people from progressing in government, 56% of participants said.
- **Microaggressions** — subtle remarks that express sexism, racism or another form of bias — were experienced by 86% of female and non-binary transgender participants, making them the most prevalent form of discrimination uncovered in this research. Microaggressions may be subtle, but can have a destabilising effect on confidence in one’s ability to do their job.

Barriers by percentage of respondents who discussed them



Participants shared many barriers other than these; however, due to space constraints, I limited the discussion to the five most-mentioned themes. Further research could focus on other issues, such as the stigma of flexible work, barriers to STEM education or access to parental leave and childcare.

3. How can councils' workplace culture and recruitment processes be refined to accommodate all genders?

Based on the barriers discussed, I asked participants to generate ideas about what a diverse, equitable local government workplace would look like. I collated these ideas, analysed patterns and organised them into overarching themes, which ultimately became eight policy options for culture change and eight for the refinement of recruitment and promotion processes. These include measures such as: building more balanced teams with succession plans; developing formalised mentorship programmes; redesigning jobs to take caring and work-life balance into account; removing gendered language from job descriptions; and re-engineering interview processes. The goals of these recommendations are to build inclusive workplaces for people of all genders and bolster representation in local government.

This work highlights a gap in research about women and gender-diverse people's experiences in, firstly, public sector technology roles and, secondly, London councils. This research is not designed to be representative of all London councils, but to provide anecdotal evidence of the barriers faced by women in digital teams. While I had hoped to provide more evidence on the experiences of transgender and non-binary people, I was only able to find one non-binary transgender person with a digital background who agreed to be interviewed. Therefore, this research is evidently not representative of transgender and non-binary people's experience. A larger evidence base, with a more gender-diverse group of participants, would lend greater validity to the findings. Additionally, very few participants worked at councils where women's median pay was equal to or greater than men's. If there had been greater representation from those councils, the results may have been different. This research only scratches the surface of the complex topic of gender-diverse representation in local government, on which more research is needed. Additional research could be undertaken to explore the similarities and differences between local and central government digital teams.

Women are told to be more confident, study STEM subjects and learn to code if they want to be technology leaders. Addressing inequalities should not rest solely on their shoulders. This research concludes that an intersecting set of systemic barriers influence women's career progression in London councils. If councils want to hire and retain diverse digital talent, they should re-evaluate and redesign their organisational cultures and hiring practices with these barriers in mind.

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