



Central Executive Council Special Report

GMB WOMEN'S PROJECT

ANNUAL CONGRESS 2013 PLYMOUTH PAVILIONS

CONGRESS – SUNDAY 2 JUNE - WEDNESDAY 5 JUNE

9.30 am - 12.30 pm, 2.00 pm - 5.30 pm

CONGRESS – THURSDAY 6 JUNE

9.30 am - 12.30 pm

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1 Introduction

In April 2012 the GMB commissioned TCC to undertake a research project into the representation of women in the union. We were charged with developing a set of recommendations that would be sensitive to the history and culture of the union and build on some of the recognised progress that has been made in recent times. From the onset it was appreciated that in order to make the necessary further progress – particularly in respect of the lack of women holding senior positions – the report would make significant proposals.

We set out below our summary findings having undertaken a significant body of primary research with women in the union. More documentation relating to the desk research and quantitative and qualitative surveying is available and will be published in the final full version of the report when the research is concluded.

The union will wish to consider these findings and take a view as to which of the recommendations they judge prudent to implement, in what order and at what pace.

We also include in this report the research that is still outstanding and the areas that we feel need further examination before the final report is submitted.

The following quotation from a recent study into representation of women in trade unions neatly encapsulates the context and why this project is urgent and important:

“For unions in most industrialised countries to thrive and more importantly to survive, they must recruit and retain women members and this means having an agenda that is fit for purpose – one that serves the needs of a diversity of workers – and this in turn means ensuring that unions are inclusive of diversity at all levels. This need not be a zero-sum game with existing, long-established leaders losing out to newcomers, but it does mean that the established hierarchy – women as well as men – might need to be prepared to concede power bases and positions for what we might call the greater good.”

Women and Union Leadership in the UK and USA: First Findings from a Cross-National Research Project. Gill Kirton, Geraldine Healy, Sally Alvarez, Risa Lieberwitz, Mary Gatta

Our view is that this project is timely and has captured a mood for change. Indeed, we further believe that there is a strong business case that the union will be able to realise the expertise, commitment and energy of a large percentage of its workforce if these recommendations are implemented. This will give it a competitive advantage in relation to employers and other trade unions who may be competing over the same territory.

Part of our work involved examining what other unions have done to tackle this issue. We are aware of the unique historical development of the GMB and appropriate best practice will need to be tailored to suit the GMB. We are also aware that unlike several other major British trade unions the GMB has not had a merger to contend with that has forced major structural and cultural change.

It is important to emphasise at the outset that we have been charged with examining an identified problem. We have therefore sought to focus our research around that issue and have explored barriers and the underlying reasons that have prevented women from achieving to the same level as their male counterparts, rather than seeking to present a completely balanced view.

Some of the reasons for this are generic and not specific to the GMB. The GMB cannot operate in a vacuum and it would be unreasonable to expect the union to tackle every aspect of gender-based discrimination in society. We have therefore concentrated on what we believe is within the scope of the union to tackle. We would also want to note that whilst we have identified some serious issues for the union to tackle, we found an almost universal recognition that significant progress has been made in recent times and a profound confidence in and loyalty to the union. This leads us to believe that there is a firm foundation on which to build a programme that will have significant impact.

Our report sets out proposals that would represent a concerted and coherent initiative. But sustained progress will require a change management procedure that will take years, rather than months. It will also need consent and consensus to be built around the programme for change. This is why we recommend the creation of a Task Force with representation from the key stakeholder groups inside the union and appropriate contributions from external parties.

The set of actions that we outline below represent a major undertaking for the union. It would be tempting to see them as too difficult or secondary to some of the other fundamental challenges that the union currently faces in this difficult political and economic climate. Furthermore, there are some immediate challenges ahead with the imminent prospect of changes in senior personnel in the union. The question to pose to the leadership is can the union afford to allow this process to proceed without being seen to actively promote an increase in the representation of women? This must be a key leadership issue.

2 Summary of the research undertaken

The following is a brief summary of the substantial and detailed research that was conducted and contributed to the key findings in the next section:

- 2.1 **We undertook desk research that involved examination of the available literature on interventions** that have been taken in similar organisations to tackle the issue of representation of women.
- 2.2 **We conducted a programme of deliberative events and depth interviews in five selected regions:** Southern, North West, Northern, Yorkshire and Scotland (as well as Wimbledon, Euston and the National Administration Unit). We subsequently conducted depth interviews with 46 women and the deliberative events were attended by a total of 114 women staff and officers.
- 2.3 **We attended and presented at CEC, NEF and NNC (formerly ONC/NSRC) meetings.**
- 2.4 **We attended the new Southern Region Women's Conference and subsequently attended the regional Equalities Forum.**
- 2.5 **We designed and implemented a survey for all women staff of the union that was completed by 171 participants.**
- 2.6 We have yet to undertake the survey with women members or the analysis of social networks. This is in part due to technical issues but also that we feel the survey will usefully form part of the delivery of the proposed interventions. However **we have conducted interviews with a number of women activists** that has given us sufficient insight to make the recommendations set out below.

3 Key Findings

The key findings here summarise the insight that came from the combination of desk-based, quantitative and qualitative research. More details of the elements will appear in the final full report at the end of the project.

3.1 Culture of the union

The culture of the union derives from its history, purpose and operating environment. There are many aspects of it that are seen as strengths. We have explored it only from the perspective of this project. In that regard, the Culture is identified by a large number of women as something that is exclusive and a barrier to fairness. It is often described as 'male, working class, and old fashioned'.

"There is a macho culture in the union by many men. I have personally found the top line management very helpful in some personal circumstances however there are many occasions where the talk from the male side is unhelpful and downright rude. We are better than that. However as it is acceptable to the most in the workforce - posturing is also a common trait. Moving forward I believe we need to practice what we preach so that we can all fulfil our potential without a feeling of being made to feel inferior when an objection is made."

To make detailed recommendations as to how the culture of the GMB impacts on the issue and crucially what can be done about this we intend to supplement the work we have done so far with further detailed research (including talking to selected male officers).

Organisational practices are learned through socialisation at the workplace. Work environments reinforce culture on a daily basis by encouraging employees to exercise cultural values.

Organisational culture is shaped by multiple factors, including the following:

- External environment
- Industry
- Size and nature of the organisation's workforce
- Technologies the organisation uses
- The organisation's history and ownership¹

A major component of the culture of the union derives from its purpose as a campaigning organisation. Like many other such organisations it is externally focussed and how people behave within the organisation towards each other are secondary to the 'struggle' to defend and represent the members. This is understandable and to a degree inevitable. As we have stated elsewhere there is much about the culture of the union that is positive and we believe that it further work could ensure that the core values of solidarity and fighting injustice are harnessed behind the change process here.

¹ Schein (1992)

"There is a stark difference in the way we act when we are working for our members and how we behave with each other. We just don't talk to each other enough."

3.2 Need to measure reality as well as perception

In order to support the change process the union needs to be able to point to a robust evidence base. Gathering information about perceptions (which we have done in the course of our research so far) is necessary. But this needs to be supplemented with hard data on the representation of women at all levels. This should include every level from members, to branch officers, to regional committees through to the most senior level. A lot of this information does exist but it is not examined and does not form the basis of current reporting systems.

3.3 Identifying opportunities

The relatively few opportunities for career progression within the union was cited as a significant barrier. Of course this is not intrinsically a gender specific issue, but together with other barriers it exacerbates the problem for women. There is limited scope to increase the opportunities for formal career progression but there may be opportunities to improve reward and recognition, specialisation and professional development that would go some way to satisfying the desire to progress. This would help retention and morale.

Other organisations have created positions and amended job roles to provide opportunities for career progression for underrepresented groups. Indeed, the creation of top up places for GMB Congress has resulted in freeing up places that have actually been taken up by a higher proportion of women.

Creating additional positions would need to be considered as part of the union's human resources strategy (and may have to be funded through rationalisation in other places). Furthermore, any such initiative would have to be accompanied with other measures to support the people who undertake the roles and the process.

"From my experience being involved with campaigning and being encouraged to use skills beyond my job description has made me want to move on in GMB. Without being praised or recognised for what I am capable of I would not be moving up. I think if some of my colleagues had this opportunity when they started at a younger age they would have had more ambition to move on in the organisation. Some colleagues are quite happy to have the security of a job with good benefits but others who have great potential have been downtrodden for too long. Some women also do not have a desire to be an officer in the future but have the opportunity to progress in "staff" roles."

3.4 Support for women members

Support for women members – whether in the form of formal mentoring or a more informal approach does provide a key opportunity. A large number of women spoke about how they had been informally mentored and supported to apply for posts (often in the face of explicit discouragement) and how this had been decisive in achieving success. Informal support already takes place (not exclusively by women – there are many examples of men acting in mentoring roles), but not in a systematic fashion that makes it available to everyone who can

make use of it. Indeed, more than one woman we spoke to acts as a mentor to someone outside the union. We believe that there is a strong case for strengthening informal support networks and processes for all staff of the union but particularly for women.

3.5 Training and networking

It is worth highlighting two regionally driven training/networking events by way of example – one is focussed purely for women and other for all active members. These were highlighted by Regional Secretaries, Officers and lay members as exemplar events in assisting women to grow in confidence and effectiveness. They are the North West Regional Women's Conference and the Yorkshire Region Residential Branch Weekend. Both events are firmly focussed around the core objectives of the union and provide both formal and informal means for women to participate, learn and develop networks. We heard much anecdotal evidence that these events were hugely beneficial to progressing women in each region.

3.6 Branches

Whilst an increasing proportion of the union's members are women, this is not reflected in the number of women coming through to attain branch officer positions or indeed undertake training through the union². Branches are the base building block of the union and the gateway into further activity and progress. There are of course many shining examples of strong, effective and powerful women who have succeeded in securing prominent positions, but we believe further work needs to be undertaken to understand in detail the precise state of play in a quantitative sense. We heard stories of women being helped greatly through branches (and by both male and female officers), but we heard just as many stories of women being deterred by the culture and practical arrangements in branches.

We would recommend that the issue of how the structure, practice and culture of branches can be harnessed to support change should be central to the work of the proposed Task Force. We would propose that an asset-based approach (where we seek to identify best practice and then spread and amplify it) should be adopted. The union may wish to consider the scheme used by other unions whereby branches are given a bursary to support pro-active interventions.

3.7 Career into employment from activism

Some women activists (and women officers) talked about the gulf between the role as an activist and working for the union. We talked to women on both sides of this issue – those who are currently activists and considering potential opportunities to move into employment with the union and those who had already made the move.

Women yet to make the move expressed concern about the level of support that would be available. Some described an, 'us and them' feeling, that is probably inevitable in any member based organisation (but something the union should be mindful of). This will be explored further in the proposed survey with members. There may be hidden barriers that are discouraging women activists from considering applying for jobs with the union that would be relatively easy to overcome.

² This is anecdotal and requires further detailed research to establish the facts.

3.8 Tackling sexism

It would be remiss not to include in the report reference to instances of overtly sexist behaviour by members and colleagues in the union that have been reported to us. There have been some notable cases where such behaviour has been challenged and successfully dealt with, but others where those we spoke to believed it was not. Our view is more needs to be done to ensure a consistency of approach. Action to implement the recommendation we make about reaffirming the Union's commitment to zero tolerance towards sexism is already underway. Ensuring it applies across the union is an important next step.

"We are a large organisation and in some ways reflect society as a whole. There is sexism in society and therefore threads of this also run through the union. Because of what we claim to be (a trade union which promotes equality in the workplace) we have to be the best at setting an example and our employees but also our members must be left in no doubt as to exactly what types of behaviour constitute sexism particularly when they represent the GMB in their workplace. More targeted, detailed training materials may be one way forward.

"I have received sexist abuse from members in the course of our work, for example when supporting members on a picket line. The number of women coming forward may not improve until such incidents are regarded and dealt with in the same way that an incidence of racist abuse for example would be.

"The union is a safe and positive place to work but there is still progress to be made while women can be made to feel objectified or vulnerable when working for a trade union. Making a complaint about a member/colleague doesn't always feel appropriate or possible therefore it may be necessary to find a way to create a culture where such treatment isn't acceptable before raising issues with individuals."

3.9 Staff to officer programme

The recently instituted programme where staff can try officer positions on a secondment basis was universally popular. Awareness of the scheme was reasonable although patchy in some areas.

Some drawbacks were mentioned such as:

- Limited availability of places
- Possible resentment of others
- Resentment from lay members and potential external candidates
- Accusations of tokenism

But these were far outweighed by the positive feedback we received from both women who have benefitted from participating and reports of their progress from line managers. Indeed, there is nothing that has had comparable impact in terms of accelerating the proportion of women in more senior roles.

The changing role and operating environment of the union's staff is itself an opportunity and a threat. The extent to which the union is able to embrace the use of new technology will be key

in efficiency and effectiveness. The means are now available for Officers to be significantly more self-servicing than ever before. Whilst such change may cause problems and training needs it should also open up opportunities for those (predominantly younger and more likely to be female) who are more comfortable using the technology. Indeed, although this goes beyond the scope of the work we have done so far, it is easy to imagine that the union will need to transform the way it works (including roles and responsibilities) if it is to meet the needs of its members in future. A rigid staff/officer division of labour in 10 years time will surely be outmoded.

“There is a glass ceiling between administrative roles and attaining a proactive position within the GMB organisation - staff will always be disadvantaged by being office based and activists working outside the organisation will always be better placed to get the jobs due to their 'on site experience' which it is impossible at present for an administrative person to attain. There are also very limited administrative roles that have a progressional route - i.e. there's nowhere to go.”

3.10 Career opportunities

Like many trade unions, the GMB has only limited opportunity for career advancement. There are probably fewer than 20 positions at the top of the organisation. This creates a bottleneck for all staff – not just women. This is compounded by the pattern of relatively long service in senior positions. The union therefore has the problem of retaining those with ambition and aspiration.

There may be some scope to create additional posts (but these would have to be justifiable in delivering the union's objectives). But there may be even more scope through facilitating personal and professional development aligned to performance management. Consequent reward and recognition of enhanced contribution to the union would help to improve job satisfaction and go some way to satisfying the currently unmet need for advancement.

“An annual one-to-one with the line manager, giving an opportunity to discuss aspirations, work programme, and future plans and possible opportunities. A professional analysis of a person's qualities and skills rather than assumptions based on gender, age and appearance. “

3.11 Lay structures

The lay structure and democracy of the union is one of its great strengths. Any change must be consensual and enjoy the formal and informal support of the membership through the CEC, Congress and the Regional Committee. We believe there is a compelling case for change – and indeed a case that change is urgently needed if the union is to live up to its expressed core values of fighting for fairness and against injustice. Ultimately there needs to be a rebalancing.

Regional Committees will play a pivotal role in the maintenance of the status quo or effecting change. Active steps should be taken to engage regional committees in the process.

3.12 Equality processes and procedures

The issue of ensuring that there is transparency of process around job advertisements and appointments was raised in all quarters. This perceived lack of transparency exacerbates the underlying view that there may not be a level playing field. It potentially undermines morale and acts as a disincentive for women to take what they believe to be a risk in applying for jobs when they arise.

“Jobs have to stop being earmarked for individuals before they are advertised. The mates system of appointing has to cease and jobs should be given on merit rather than the politics behind it.”

3.13 Internal communications

Poor internal communications featured prominently as a barrier and a source of discontent. This was mentioned particularly in relation to information about opportunities to apply for posts but also more broadly in terms of knowing what is going on within the union (staff moving on, etc). As stated elsewhere, this can lead to the perception (rather than necessarily the reality) that certain people are 'in the know' and others not.

The idea of an internal staff bulletin was very well received and could form a key part of the communications strategy. It could be a vehicle through which to spread best practice, counter 'misunderstandings' and advertise opportunities for jobs but also other professional development. It would enhance the sense of team for the union's staff.

We have moved on considerably over the last 5 years but women are still under represented and where promoted seen by colleagues as token. Until we address the imbalance by providing roles within the structure as a transition from staff roles to officer roles and organisers to seniors and regional secs we will always be seen as token. Could do more on advertising the success stories within the GMB for women which in turn motivates others to apply for senior positions.

3.14 Differences between regions

The five regions we focussed on gave us a broad sense of how women across the union feel about the issue of representation. There were inevitably key differences. Each of the regions has developed its own strategies and procedures within the nationally set framework. Some regions have had major upheavals to contend with and others have had a more stable operating environment. Broadly speaking we found the most consistency in the views and attitudes of staff. Probably in part because there are fewer women officers, working in more isolation we found greater variance here. There is also more difference in the way each region operates in an operational sense.

There were quite marked differences in the way regions are operating the appointments process and how the regional committees are involved. There would be merit in candid discussion at senior level as to how greater consistency can be achieved and also how this consistent approach should be communicated throughout the union. Moreover, any set of

interventions to tackle representation of women should be applied with consistency across regions.

3.15 National Administration Unit (NAU)

Our findings from the NAU were significantly different from most other areas. This is partly a product of the distinct function of the unit and the consequent staffing implications. But it is difficult to ignore the high levels of morale and job satisfaction expressed from the women who work there.

There was a 50/50 gender split at NAU right from the beginning. There was a concerted effort to make it happen from senior management. We also made sure we had a mixture of age groups as well by hiring in staff from elsewhere in the GMB and recruiting externally.

3.16 Task Force or Commission to see through the changes

When we asked about the change process needed we found a consensus of support around the proposition of a Task Force or Commission to oversee the process. This was in recognition of the scale of the change necessary. There was also a strong view that if there is appropriate external representation on the Task Force that would send a strong message that the union was committed to the process. It would be a sign of confidence that the change process would be robust, far reaching and stand up to external scrutiny.

3.17 Social networks

Social networks are a key feature of how any organisation works and are a dimension of the culture. Mapping, understanding and analysing the social networks in the GMB is an area that would be useful to undertake further work in and we intend to carry this out in the next phase of the project. Anecdotally we found that there was a pronounced view that the social networks that tend to dominate within the union are excluding to most women.

“the region used to be a boys club, but our regional secretary has gone out of his way to challenge that. He is comfortable around women. He always has time for you. He makes sure that in social situations he acts appropriately at all times. He is a role model for other male officers. You wouldn’t think it to look at him but he has done more for women in this region than anyone”.

Dealing with this aspect of the issue is complex and difficult. It will require behaviour that is excluding to be challenged but in a constructive and reasonable way. It will also need support to be given to create new, inclusive networks.

3.18 Equalities Structures

There is considerable variance in how effective and relevant the equalities structures of the union are seen to be. In some regions they are being actively used to align equalities work with the mainstream aims and objectives of the union and in others greater emphasis is being put on other measures.

The following quotation from the CEC Progressing Equality Report to the 2007 Congress appears to be relevant and accurate today,

To be direct, the equalities structures are seen by some (including some members of the key groups who they are designed to represent) as a distraction and tangential at best. This is not to take a view as to the merit of this perspective, but to state that this is an issue that the union should address as considerable resource is devoted to the equality structures and there is a political imperative for the union to be actively promoting the equalities agenda.

It is perfectly legitimate for the union to seek to ensure that the work of its equalities forums and other structures supports the main objectives and priorities of the union. Indeed, to do so would only increase their relevance and status.

3.19 Performance management

This is a complex and challenging issue for the union. And performance management is clearly broader than the scope of this project. But it is so fundamental to the success of any measure that we must include some reference to it. Clarity, transparency and good communication around the management and measurement of performance was cited at all levels as a key issue.

*“Having support and backing from other colleagues, given confidence and feedback, given a clear structure of what is expected from you and a clear path of how you can progress into another role with support and backing from the appropriate line manager - and communication between staff and seniors on a regular basis. “
I’ve never had an appraisal or a line manager or had a meeting about my performance. I have never actually had a formal job description since I was in the admin support pool, which is one reason why I’ve been moved up and down so easily – there’s nothing formal in there.*”

3.20 Flexible employment practice

There are issues – not unique to the GMB – around caring responsibilities that fall to women. We heard many instances of flexibility being exercised and it creating space and giving confidence to women to flourish in officer and staff roles. But this was felt to be counter to the culture that predominates.

There is a case for capturing these examples and evidence of the impact they can have on productivity. Again a universally applied and transparent approach to how the particular caring responsibilities that affect women (but also men) would be beneficial.

“Although for me caring responsibilities are not a real issue at the moment I do believe they are a massive barrier to women accessing role within the union at workplace level let alone becoming employees. Mentoring programs are really important - there needs to be a move away from the macho culture - more of a recognition that the old way of union officials having to be aggressive and macho and never showing their flaws is not helpful to encourage women (and some men) into the organisation and isn’t actually healthy.”

3.21 Quotas

We tested the possible application of some form of quota system (notwithstanding political and legal constraints). This was overwhelmingly rejected as way forward by most women, even those who were most strident in arguing that there needs to be swift and concerted action on the issue.

“Lots of male officers will never tell you what is going badly. More recognition of the emotional drain the job can have on you I think if there are not formal quotas there should be real pressure put on regions to be at least appoint 50% of all new job to be women. At the rate are going our organisation will continue to be old, male and pale for a very long time.”

The full range of options for positive action in terms of employment and representation should be explored further by the task force.

3.22 GMB@Work

GMB@Work is the key driving force for the union. Any plan that seeks to address the issue of under representation of women must be relevant to GMB@Work. Indeed it must become Intrinsic to it and be part of the everyday life of the union. If it is not, it will be seen as an additional objective that will inevitably become secondary.

4 Recommendations

Decades ago GMB identified significant problems with the under representation of women. Various reports have been produced, such as a major policy document “Equal Rights for Women” in 1972 and “Women within the GMB 2002” and recommendations have been brought to Congress consistently over the years. Whilst there has been some progress it is limited and the issue remains one of the most serious facing the Union.

The set of recommendations below signify a commitment of the scale necessary to make fundamental lasting change. We set out a process that will transform the representation of women in the union. Like any large-scale change process it will be challenging and difficult. But the potential benefit to the union is immense.

- 4.1 There needs to be a full change management programme that embeds the necessary changes at all levels of the organisation. The General Secretary should champion the change and oversee an annual equalities audit (to be included each year in a report to Congress), to ensure that all appointments, procedures, initiatives, services etc. should be accompanied by an equalities impact analysis. This should be replicated within each Region.
- 4.2 A Task Force, reporting to the General Secretary, should be established to implement the recommendations. This should have the full authority of the SMT to see through the implementation and should be sufficiently representative to ensure credibility. It is essential that the Task Force has a clear time-line, senior management and lay-member involvement and external representation. The work of the Task Force should include the following elements:
 - a) Working with appropriate officers and members to ensure that effective education, training and/or skills development are integrated into the core programme for the organisation such as GMB@Work training, branches, regional committees as well as staff induction and training.
 - b) Identify, encourage and support women activists to take up opportunities to work for the union.
 - c) Receive the submission of existing best practice around support for women within the union and then promote and publicise it.
 - d) Research, develop and promote a programme of support for staff and officers that recognises the specific barriers that women face.
 - e) Develop a programme based on insight from women members and activists to ensure that the union is addressing issues that are key concerns for women members (at all levels particularly at branches).
- 4.3 Whenever a vacancy occurs for a full time post all post holders in the union will be notified.
- 4.4 Existing equalities procedures around appointments at national and regional level including further training and support to be refreshed to ensure universally consistent application.
- 4.5 The union must actively pursue the objective of establishing universal performance management processes throughout the union.

- 4.6 Examine how reward and recognition and professional development can be enhanced particularly for staff. Moreover we will seek to introduce measures that break down the outmoded division between staff and officers within the union.
- 4.7 Institute an internal staff communications bulletin and process throughout the union including each region.
- 4.8 Gather data and use this to measure progress in areas such as the gender breakdown of such as workplace reps, GMB@Work training participants, other training undertaken, branch officers, regional committees, officers, senior officers, CEC, national officers, regional and national secretaries.
- 4.9 Explore the equalities impact of the various training programmes that the union provides and commissions and the potential for amplifying the successes.
- 4.10 Maintain, develop and expand the staff to officer programme that has been undertaken.
- 4.11 Re-emphasise the union's zero tolerance for sexism policy including effective communications strategy around it.
- 4.12 Consider structural changes to create more posts (possibly including assistant or deputy positions).
- 4.13 Build upon existing positive action programmes such as the established top-up seats mechanism and examine other forms which can be implemented.
- 4.14 Implement external monitoring and evaluation of the appointments process.
- 4.15 Conduct a review of branch structures and operations to foster inclusive practices through an asset based approach.
- 4.16 Conduct further research into how Regional Committees can be supported to foster a more representative union.

5 Conclusions

In conducting this project we have been asked to analyse the undeniably low level of representation of women at senior levels within the union. We have found that the reasons for this are several – some of them are simple and other more complex. Solutions will necessarily need to encompass all tiers of the organisation. There is almost nothing of any substance that we can recommend that will not be challenging in some quarters or easy to implement.

We are also keenly aware that this is not the first report or initiative that has been undertaken to tackle the issue of promoting equality and women's representation specifically within the union. So we have tried to be comprehensive but practical in what has been recommended. We also anticipate – and indeed recommend that the best course of action will be for the recommendations to be viewed as a menu of options that should be selected from with some key priorities chosen first. Any attempt to implement every recommendation at the same time will be a recipe for failure. Implementation needs to be focussed, targeted and properly evaluated.

The undertaking of the project has already had an impact. Inevitably expectations have been raised. It is also true to say that there is a degree of scepticism in some quarters as to whether significant action will flow from the report.

There needs to be a concerted, high-level and long-term intervention. But the requirement for a long-term perspective does not mean that there are not actions that should be taken immediately. Indeed, we would argue that the immediate measures we have highlighted could and should be taken now to signal commitment.

Our research has identified the 'culture' of the union as a central issue. This needs further exploration, as organisational culture is fundamental to the success of the union going forward. There is much about the culture of the union that is positive – indeed something to be proud of. The challenge is to develop enhancements to the predominant culture to ensure that it is inclusive rather than exclusive. This will require accurate insight and forensic implementation.

Fundamental change will only realistically be achieved in the long-term. For example, even with swift action, achieving an SMT that is representative of the union's membership in terms of gender is a decade away (and by then this may mean at least five of the nine regional secretaries being female as the union's membership is already over 50% female). The women who are going to challenge for those positions are possibly in their thirties and may not even currently work for the union – although they are probably in membership and learning their trade at the grass roots. It is therefore vital that pathways currently available are widened, others are created and kept open and that they are encouraged and supported as they take steps along them.

Progress towards this goal must become as embedded and universally accepted in the union as GMB@Work – indeed it must become an integral component of GMB@Work. The leadership of the union at every level must be completely aligned behind not only the high level objective, but also the practical steps (some of them difficult and controversial) that will be necessary to achieve it.

This could be crucial in securing the benefit of the doubt with internal and external stakeholders as to how seriously the union is taking the process. Drawing both groups into the process so

that they are acting as change agents – working with the union – rather than being critical and potentially destructive from afar could be decisive. Finding roles and ways of engaging them will be important.

We believe that the change process has already begun with the launch of the project. Indeed, we have engaged with most women who work for the union in the course of the research. The internal communications strand that we recommend above should be applied to the implementation of the report – being seen to do and well as doing. The fact that this process is going to be taking place in the run up to the election of a new General Secretary is an opportunity rather than a problem as it should be seen as a significant issue for the agenda of any aspiring candidate. Improving the representation of women in the union will become part of the campaign narrative and securing the commitment of all interested parties to follow through on changes will help cement the necessary improvements.

Finally, the business case for these changes is overwhelming. The union has recently demonstrated creativity and resilience in overcoming big financial, political and organisational challenges. This represents a key component of the next phase of that struggle to equip the union to thrive as a modern 21st century organisation.