



## 30 Women in Local Government: Celebrating CLGF's 30th Anniversary

### Featured Interviewee #19: Cllr Lis Burnett

Llwydd (Presiding Member) Welsh Local Government Organisation (WLGA) and Leader of the Vale of Glamorgan Council



#### Profile

**Lis Burnett** is Leader of the Vale of Glamorgan Council and Llwydd (Presiding Member) of the Welsh Local Government Association. Over the past fourteen years she

has held the Cabinet portfolios for Finance, Education, Regeneration, Planning, Economic Development and Transport.

Formerly Head of Social Entrepreneurship at the University of South Wales, Lis has also acted as an advisor to the Welsh Government and the former Welsh Assembly on Social Enterprise and Cooperatives.

She has previously run her own business, worked for a major UK multi-national company and as a consultant to NESTA.

She has been involved in community-to-community aid projects in Uganda and is a Fellow of the RSA (Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce).

#### Lis Burnett

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### Interview Highlights

#### 1. How has the role of women in local government evolved over the past three decades, and how do you think women can accelerate action for gender equality today?

There are more women, female leaders and CEOs, more female cabinet members and senior officers now in Welsh local government than there was 30 years ago. Although there are more we are not yet at parity.

There is greater appreciation of the contribution women make to the successful running of councils and representing the views of our communities; there is less stereotyping about the roles women should play and less obvious sexual harassment in the workplace, but this is still there and needs to be continually tackled where and when it happens.

Women in positions of leadership should support and enable other women to achieve their goals and aspirations, this can be done through mentoring and giving women opportunities to widen their experiences. There is also the need to look at the intersection between gender and other protected characteristics as women can face many and varied barriers.



## **2. What inspired you to enter local government, and how has your journey advanced gender equality in your community or country?**

My career, before entering politics, comprised a range of roles where I became aware of the widely differing lived experiences of others. As a result, I took the opportunity to enter local politics. Like many others, my ambition was to contribute to change rather than to just be a politician. I have since been able to influence the provision of good quality, low-carbon homes, career opportunities for women and the development of new schools across the County.

As Leader of the Council, my Cabinet and the Council are gender balanced. In a recent corporate assessment, we were told that the Council is 'Value-led'. Something that had not been seen elsewhere.

As WLGA Llwydd, I and my fellow female leaders promote equality at every opportunity and provide support and mentoring to aspiring women politicians.

## **3. What has been your most rewarding experience as a woman leader in local government, and how did it contribute to promoting gender equality?**

It is difficult to single out one specific experience. Over the years I have watched many women gain confidence and find their voices. It never ceases to be an absolute joy to observe and support as people fulfil their potential. To hear that, even in a small way, I made a difference is rewarding enough.

As a Leader I am able to praise, thank or publicise the work of individuals, groups or organisations. That is a huge privilege.

## **4. What challenges did you face as a woman entering local government, and how did you overcome them? What can be done to accelerate overcoming these barriers for future women leaders?**

When I was first elected fewer than 20% of Councillors were female. Those first four years was spent as a back bench councillor, quietly learning my role and local government processes. Little prepared me though for the role of Cabinet Member or Leader. I was fortunate to work alongside experienced Cabinet Members and for a talented Leader. The value of exposure to higher levels of responsibility with support and mentoring from others is immeasurable. That is something I have tried to put into practice in the development of others.

As local government leaders in Wales we work collaboratively irrespective of political party. This is something I am particularly keen to continue providing support and development opportunities for current and aspiring female Leaders.

## **5. What advice would you give to other women considering a career in local government to help them accelerate gender equality in their communities?**

Local government is a great place to get involved and help shape your local community. There is a wide range of jobs and employment opportunities in councils across so many areas, from social work to planning, from finance to education, legal services and housing, engineering to construction. We must do more to reflect the opportunities available and ensure that working in local government becomes the first choice.

Cllr Lis Burnett (Wales)



Confidence may be a challenge for some women or awareness of the opportunities available of working for or being elected to the local council. Women often underestimate the wide range of skills and knowledge they already have. With more women playing leadership roles in their communities, we will ensure that the voices and experiences and wishes of women are heard when decisions are made.

## **6. How can we encourage more women, particularly young women, to enter leadership roles in local government, and what actions can governments take to create more inclusive environments for women?**

There is a need to do more to highlight opportunities in local government, both as officers and elected members with young people. We need to change the negative or limited views about the roles of councils and make them place of choice for employment opportunities for young people coming out of education at all levels, including offering more apprenticeships.

Councils have taken a variety of steps to support women in the workplace. The introduction of employment policies that do not discriminate against women but aim to support them. This includes policies covering domestic abuse, adoption leave or time for IVF treatment and clear policies against discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. As in other parts of society, this does not mean incidents don't happen or are always acted upon in the best manner, but awareness is increasing and toleration is decreasing.

## **7. Why is it urgent to increase the number and influence of women in local government, and how will this contribute to positive change in governance?**

Women bring a diversity of views and experience, and their input helps shape policy and services, ensuring the needs of women are fully considered. While progress has been made, this has not been fast enough so with more women there is an increased opportunity to ensure the voice of women is heard at all levels and for more women to reach positions of influence.

Women in leadership positions are also role models (whether they want to be or not), showing others that achieving such positions is possible (and enjoyable).

## **8. How has digital technology helped or can help accelerate women's political inclusion in local government, and what steps should we take to make it more accessible to women in leadership?**

Digital technology can improve accessibility and the provision of information.

One area of technology that brings both benefits and concerns is social media. While a great way to communicate with people and constituents, provide information and seek views and feedback, it also provides a channel for abuse and threats that are targeted at elected members, at all levels, but also specifically directed at women.

The WLGA is committed to the Civility in Public Life Campaign with our sister local government organisations and is working with the police. This is an area where more action is needed as we challenge abuse and campaign for healthy debate on social media.

I am already aware of some women who have stood down from being an elected member or standing for election due to the level of abuse they, their children and their families have received.



## **9. What innovative practices or strategies have you used to accelerate women's participation and leadership in local government in your region or country?**

The WLGA recently held a seminar for female Councillors in leadership positions to reflect on our shared experiences and to consider what more we can do to support each other and other women in local government, as well as enabling other women to also achieve positions of leadership and influence. There was so much energy and enthusiasm in the room to do more to support other women, while also recognising and celebrating the achievements of others. We've got a follow up session already booked to discuss what we will do next, individually and collectively.

## **10. As CLGF celebrates 30 years, what actions must be taken in the next 30 years to ensure the continued empowerment of women in local government?**

- Keep gender equality on the agenda, ensure workplaces are safe spaces for women where they can achieve their potential.
- Continue to collect, analyse and use data to identify areas for actions where inequalities (and differential experiences) still exist and monitor and report progress in a transparent manner.
- Involve women in all decisions that directly affect them, with proactive engagement and coproduction.
- Keep believing and striving for more progress – we have made progress over the past 30 years and progress we can see, but over the next 30 years, even more progress is needed. We need parity and women in leadership positions, as well as in all other areas until local government, fully represents society and no one is surprised as this has become the norm.

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### **CLGF 30th Anniversary Commemoration**

In celebration of CLGF's 30th Anniversary, we are honoured to spotlight the inspiring stories of 30 trailblazing women in local government from across the Commonwealth, all members of the Commonwealth Women in Local Government Network. These interviews celebrate their groundbreaking contributions to gender equality and their transformative impact on building inclusive, empowered communities.

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### **Stay Connected**

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#AccelerateAction | #ComWLG | #LocalGov | #IWD2025 | #CLGF30Years | @CLGF\_News

Visit CLGF's [website](#) for more inspiring stories and to stay updated on the 30th Anniversary campaign. Thank you for being part of this important movement!