



Government
Equalities Office

Government response to the Women's Business Council

June 2013

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We very much welcome the report of the Women's Business Council. We would like to thank them for their hard work and for the constructive approach they have taken.

The Council's report demonstrates clearly the economic importance of ensuring that those women who want to work, or want to work more hours, are able to contribute fully to the economy of this country. We simply cannot afford to ignore the additional economic contribution that women could make if some of the problems identified by the WBC can be resolved. This is not just an equality issue; it's a very important economic issue for the country. The facts are striking:

- By equalising the labour force participation rates of men and women, the UK could further increase economic growth by 0.5 percentage points per year, with a potential gain of 10% of GDP by 2030.
- If women started businesses at the same rate as men we could have an extra one million female entrepreneurs.
- There are over 2.4 million women who are not in work but want to work, and over 1.3 million women who want to work more hours.

We are delighted that in many areas the Council has endorsed the Government's approach. We very much believe that everyone should be able to fulfil their potential and we aim to help by removing those barriers which stand in the way. That's why we:

- are extending the right to request flexible working to all employees, so that the benefits of this, for both employees and employers, are available as widely as possible;
- are introducing a system of shared parental leave, so that parents can choose how best to share caring responsibilities
- have announced tax free childcare for working families, which will be worth up to £1,200 per child per year; and
- are driving greater transparency around women in the workplace through our *Think, Act, Report* initiative – which now has more than 100 companies supporting it.

The Council makes recommendations that build on the Government's approach. They focus on four key areas they have identified where girls and women face particular challenges or difficulties. Implementing their recommendations will therefore help us to go even further, to help more women realise their potential.

So today I am announcing that I will be chairing a **Ministerial Taskforce** to drive forward delivery of the Council's recommendations. It will publish an action plan in the Autumn. I am also announcing a series of early actions for Government, which will make a real difference in each of the four key areas identified by the Council.

Starting out

Broadening girls' aspirations and careers choices by creating a greater partnership between schools, business and parents

The government supports the Council's focus on helping to raise the aspirations of girls and young women as they prepare for the first stage of their career, including through the choices they make about school subjects, jobs and getting themselves ready for work. There are important recommendations here for schools and businesses in terms of ensuring that girls (and boys) have access to high quality careers advice; are offered work experience across a range of different industries; and are provided with role models which demonstrate that women can be successful in all walks of life, especially those which girls do not currently chose in high numbers.

The WBC emphasises the role that businesses can play in dispelling myths around stereotyped occupations and encouraging girls to consider a broader range of career opportunities, including through partnerships with schools to promote diverse opportunities for work experience. The Government supports this approach. However, there is clearly a role for Government as well. In particular, the report highlights the low numbers of girls studying science, technology, engineering, and maths (the STEM subjects). This is nothing to do with ability – girls do as well as, or better than, boys in these subjects – it is about the choices that girls make. The Government recognises, and accepts, the importance of encouraging more girls to study STEM subjects at all levels.

We are therefore announcing the following actions. The Government will:

- work with the British Chamber of Commerce (BCC) to establish self-sustaining local partnerships between schools and business, to help raise aspirations and improve the workplace skills of young people. The BCC will work closely with organisations such as the National Careers Council and the Education and Employers Taskforce to deliver these
- work with key stakeholders to support the development of a campaign aimed at providing parents with the tools and information to help their children make well-informed career and subject choices
- continue to work with the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering and other stakeholders to develop further the Government-funded STEM Diversity programme, including looking at issues which specifically have a large impact on girls and young women. Future planned work includes the initiation of a senior industry representatives group to address issues such as recruitment, retention and access to work experience. The outcomes of this work and other research currently underway will shape and inform development of the programme and will ensure positive outcomes for all groups under-represented in STEM, including girls
- work with leading companies who have agreed to lead the way in increasing the number of STEM apprenticeships for young girls within their organisations, and have set themselves aspirational targets to work towards. Government will work with these companies to promote their good practice and evaluate how successful these aspirational targets have been

Getting on

Business culture needs to embrace the benefits of flexible working and support for working parents

The Council identifies that women face a significant set of challenges as they seek to get on in the second stage of their careers. The issues here are well known and centre on the challenges for women of taking career breaks to have children, getting back into the workplace after a break, and balancing advancing their careers with childcare responsibilities. The key issues highlighted are talent management, childcare and flexible working.

The Council endorses the Government's proposals for extending the right to request flexible working to all and sees this as vital to supporting women's progression in the work place. However, flexible working should not be a gender specific issue, and increasingly it is not. This is an area where this Government has taken genuinely significant steps forward, and we are delighted that the Council has recognised this. The introduction of shared parental leave and the right for everyone to request flexible working will radically improve the ability of parents to share childcare responsibilities. The Council rightly identifies these as key steps that will help to reshape social and business attitudes to recognise that childcare is a parental responsibility, not a maternal one.

The Council has also recognised the important steps that the Government has taken to make childcare more available and affordable, including the recent commitment to allow parents to claim 20% of childcare costs. This will be of real benefit to working parents. The Government has also recently made £2m available for grants to support people setting up new childcare businesses. The first grants have been made this week. This scheme will boost the provision of childcare whilst providing a business opportunity for thousands of women (and men) to start their own enterprise.

The Council calls on business to make a step change in terms of flexible working and support for working parents, and makes clear that this is a cultural issue we need to change. The primary responsibility now rests with businesses to understand the value of flexible working and the benefits that it can offer. However, there is a role for Government also to support businesses in doing this, through the provision of clear guidance, sharing sample contracts, best practice and role models. There is also a role for Government, as a major employer, to lead by example.

I can therefore announce today that the Government will:

- incorporate the messages and approach of the Council in our guidance and supporting information on flexible working, ahead of the launch of the extension of the right to request flexible working
- publish the actions each Government Department plans to take to improve the percentage of women in senior posts, in response to the Cabinet Office research in to the 'Top 200' civil servants

Staying on

Women in the third part of their working lives offer tremendous untapped potential and opportunity for economic growth.

The WBC have rightly drawn attention to the fact that older women can face particular challenges. It recommends that Government training and employment support services should recognise and address the needs of women in this stage of their career. The Government agrees. To ensure that these can utilise their skills and fully contribute to economic growth, the Government will:

- appoint a business champion for older workers
- engage with expert organisations to trial new approaches to support the skills development of older workers
- look at ways to promote the work of the National Careers Service to older workers, to support them in making decisions on learning, training and work opportunities
- work with partners to publish a range of effective 'how to' guides and toolkits for employers, with practical solutions to help businesses adapt their recruitment and retention practices for older workers
- work with local authorities to test assistive technology and IT support for carers, to increase the support available to carers who want to remain in the workplace

Enterprise

There is enormous potential in women's untapped entrepreneurialism, and a strong case for providing more support for women who want to set up their own businesses.

The Council highlights the importance of encouraging more women into enterprise. We can ill afford to ignore the potential that is currently going to waste from women who could start their own businesses but don't. The work of the Council has identified that if women started up businesses at the same rate as men we could have one million more entrepreneurs in the UK. This is a staggering figure. The Council has also identified some of the reasons that keep women from starting their own businesses, which we need to address.

To ensure that women are better supported to set up and grow their own businesses, the Government will:

- improve its web-based support to entrepreneurs, through a portal for advice/support, which provides a route map into enterprise, highlighting opportunities in sectors women work in and providing a skills self-assessment
- broaden messages on enterprise to reflect gender differences in entrepreneurs, and be more inclusive, ensuring help reaches all sectors
- work with the British Banking Association to deliver the actions in the Access to Finance report, published today. The report sets out the steps the banks have agreed to take to improve women's awareness of the financial support available, and to tackle the perception that women are less likely to get financial support than men

