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Derek Myers: "I know I couldn't do another 13 years"

Sarah Marsh

The outgoing Kensington and Hammersmith chief executive on his plans, diversity in local government and moving tenants out of London



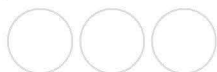
Derek Myers, outgoing chief executive, London boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea, and Hammersmith.



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Derek Myers does not have many regrets, but the thing that he has found most difficult in his role – as joint chief executive of two London boroughs – has been telling people they no longer have a job. "That never got any easier," he says.

All the other decisions Myers made were as a member of a team where responsibility was shared, and he says that reassuring himself that he made the best choice in the circumstances was what allowed him to sleep easy at night. "I have always slept," he adds.

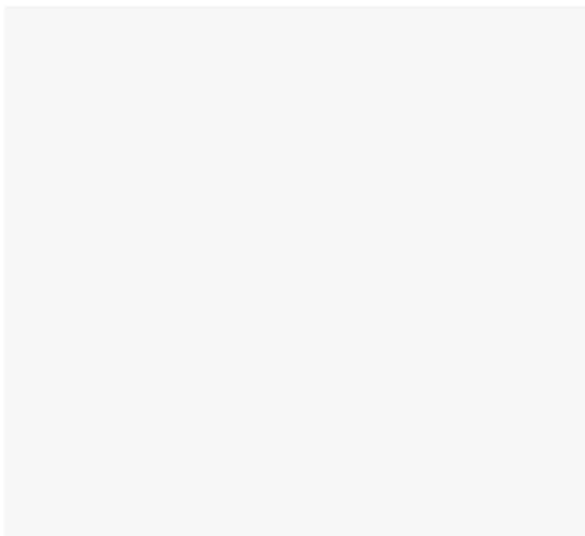
Myers announced this month that he will step down as chief executive of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the London borough of Hammersmith and Fulham at the end of the year. He says that the average tenure for a chief executive in London is four and a half years, and he has stayed for 16. Myers was also the first chief executive to head up two unitary councils.

"I didn't know if I could do it to be honest ... but I think that is true of most people who go into a new job," he says.

Two years later, Myers has settled into the job and laid the groundwork for the tri-borough agreement, a pledge between Westminster, Kensington and Hammersmith councils to share services.

Myers describes his route into local government as being due to "a lot of luck and a bit of enthusiasm". Having started his career as a mental health social worker, his rise to the top was in part down to gender stereotypes that persisted in the 70s.

"If you were a male with a degree [in social work], you were very exotic and unfairly marked out for early promotion. I was accelerated through the ranks, which seems frankly ridiculous now," he says. "I got early promotion and the rest followed really."



The worrying imbalance between men and women at the top of local government still exists, Myers says. "In London, there was a period where there was a group of women chief executives who were very strong, both in number and in terms of their individual impact. We have come away from that high point now and men seem to be getting hired rather more often than women."

Working as a social worker taught Myers about making judgments. "To drive across Essex in the middle of the night and meet someone who has acute schizophrenia and decide whether they should be bundled into an ambulance and locked up is quite scary."

Today, he doesn't get as much hands on experience in the community – although he says he tries to commit 10% of his diary to staff, customers and partners. "To be a leader, you need a repertoire of skills," he says. "You have to be a slightly different person in different circumstances."

Myers' departure from the council comes at the same time as the leader of Kensington council, Sir Merrick Cockell, and Westminster's chief executive Mike More also announced they would be stepping down. He says this marks a new chapter for leadership in the tri-borough area.

"I've worked with Sir Merrick every step of the way and, although I think I could work perfectly well with another leader, I know I couldn't do another 13 years", he says. "It seems the right time to allow a new leader to take over." However, he adds that More's departure at the same time is a "mere coincidence".

Myers is optimistic about the future of local government. At the beginning of his career in the 1980s, he says the government was "committed to spending less money and public services had to get smaller", but by the late 1990s "the pendulum had gone the other way and the government wanted to improve services". His advice for those in the sector? "You have to take a long view – we are in a period of adjustment for the economy, there is less money to be spent but the time will come again when people realise what an important contribution public services make."

Kensington council has been criticised for its plans to build homes in Peterborough for its tenants – a scheme which Peterborough MP Stewart Jackson described as "social cleansing". According to Myers, these plans are in an early stage, and "no one is going to be compelled to move".

"It is not just about waving people goodbye and saying 'we understand there is cheaper housing in Peterborough; good luck', he says. "This is about talking to people who are in cramped accommodation and saying, 'I know you want another

bedroom, but our waiting list is long and you cannot get a third bedroom here – what about moving out of London?"

"We want to look into this, and this wouldn't be the only choice but it could be offered if people wanted to explore it as an option," he says.

As for his future, Myers has taken on a board position at Public Health England, and hopes to make a contribution to the charitable sector when he steps down. He says he'd be happy to assist anyone interested in exploring the tri-borough model.

Myers feels that whoever replaces him will need to understand and love local democracy, and be energetic as the job often requires commitment outside working hours. He draws energy from his staff, pointing out that, for all the problems in local government, his staff are full of enthusiasm.

"Even at the worst of times, there are people who are having the best of times," he says. Like all natural leaders, where others see a problem Myers sees an opportunity.

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