



Greater devolution of decision making from Whitehall to local authorities and local people: opportunities for influencing

What is it?

Increasingly, decision making powers and responsibilities are being devolved from central government departments to local areas (e.g. councils). The government also wants to improve the participation of local people in the decision making which affects them, as part of their 'community empowerment' agenda.

Why is it important?

There is a very clear link between policy and the subsequent funding that will be available for your organisation. For example, if maternity health is not identified as a priority at the policy forming stage, then it is unlikely that services for pregnant women will be funded. This would have impacts on, not only organisations that deliver these services but also local women generally.

How does it work?

The different (formal) mechanisms by which third sector organisations can influence local decision making can seem (and be!) overwhelming and complex. Often, the different mechanisms are inter-related. The key mechanisms are:

- Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). These are decision making partnerships in each local area, made up of local government, health, police, voluntary and community groups and businesses.
- Local Area Agreements (LAAs). These are the targets, set by the LSP, which are used to determine local priorities and service provision at a local level. LAAs are agreed by the local area and signed off by central government, and run for three years.
- National Indicators (NIs). This set of 198 indicators is now the only mechanism central government uses to measure local government. Each area chooses up to 35 of these NIs, and can define their own local indicators as well (which are not measured centrally).
- Sustainable Community Strategies. This strategy, developed by the LSP, outlines the local priorities for an area and feed into the LAAs.

Voluntary and community organisations wanting to influence local decision making can also make use of these mechanisms below:

- Duty to Involve. This is a new duty on public bodies from April 2009 to have to inform, involve and engage 'representatives of local persons', including marginalised or vulnerable members of the community.
- Participatory budgeting. This directly involves local people in making decisions on the spending and priorities for a defined public budget, and it should be offered or adopted in all local authority areas by 2012.
- Councillor Call for Action. This will allow all councillors in England to refer matters to their council's overview and scrutiny committee for consideration. The aim of this new measure is to help frontline councillors raise matters on an authority's agenda on behalf of their constituents.
- Local Petitions. This is a new duty on local councils to respond to all petitions relating to local authority functions or other public services where the council shares delivery responsibilities. If an overview and scrutiny committee decides that the council's response to the petition is inadequate, there is the opportunity for petitioners to secure a debate of the full council. If 5% of the local population sign a petition, a full council debate will be compulsory.

In addition, there are many other 'tools' that can be used to influence local decision making, such as:

- Gender Equality Duty (gender impact assessments and gender equality schemes)
- Directly lobbying elected officials (such as councillors and MPs)
- Challenging local public bodies using public law
- Compacts (agreements between government and the voluntary sector)
- Engaging other third sector organisations with your issue/s
- Providing robust evidence about the positive impact of your organisation on women's lives, such as the economic impact
- Engaging the local press

What can I do?

If you receive funding from your local authority or other local public body, then it is crucial that you know which of these mechanisms can help you to achieve a specific goal (e.g. get gender on the agenda, or ensure you will have the opportunity to apply for funding in the future). Often, you may need to be engaging with multiple mechanisms and using other 'tools' to ensure that 'women's issues' and women's equality are on decision makers' agendas.

Where can I get more information/support?

The **Women's Resource Centre** can provide practical help and advice and training on influencing local (and regional or national) decision making and the Gender Equality Duty:

- www.wrc.org.uk

Public law is the set of legal principles which govern the exercise of power by public bodies. It is crucial that women's organisations know what the law is so they can challenge unfair decision making:

- www.publiclawproject.org.uk

Information about Local Strategic Partnerships, Sustainable Community Strategies, the Duty to Involve and participatory budgeting is available in the 'Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities: **Statutory Guidance**':

- www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongsafeprospous
[US](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongsafeprospous)

Information about current local government policy, including new duties, is in the community empowerment white paper '**Communities in control: real people, real power**'

- www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol

Compacts are agreements between (local, regional and national) government bodies and the voluntary and community sector in England. They recognise shared values, principles and commitments and sets out guidelines for how both parties should work together. The Compact Advocacy Programme can help third sector organisations who feel a public body has breached the Compact:

- www.thecompact.org.uk
- www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/compactadvocacy/

Urban Forum is an umbrella body for community and voluntary groups with interests in urban and regional policy, especially regeneration.

- www.urbanforum.org.uk