



Duty to Involve

What is it?

The Duty to Involve will come into force on 1 April 2009.

It requires all best value authorities in England¹ (except the police) to take those steps they consider appropriate to inform, consult and involve 'representatives of local persons' (e.g. women's organisations) in the exercise of any of their functions, where they consider that it is appropriate to do so.

How does it work?

The duty requires authorities to take steps they consider appropriate to involve 'representatives of local persons' (e.g. third sector organisations, service users, people working, living and/or studying in the area etc).

The following key characteristics are taken directly from the Department for Communities and Local Government's 'Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities: Statutory Guidance' (emphasis our own):

Authorities should provide representatives of local persons with **appropriate information about services, policies and decisions which affect them or might be of interest to them**. The provision of information should support representatives of local persons to have their say and get involved in authority functions where appropriate. This therefore **goes beyond the simple provision of information on how to access services** (including locations, opening hours, eligibility criteria etc), although this remains an important aspect of effective delivery. Authorities should ensure information is provided in a way that representatives of local persons can **easily access and understand, tailoring it as appropriate to different audiences to support involvement**.

Authorities should offer representatives of local persons appropriate opportunities to have their say about the decisions and services that affect them through consultation. Some examples of consultation include formal (including mandatory) consultations, satisfaction surveys, as well as direct dialogue with representatives of local persons, for example through deliberative panels and focus groups. Consultation needs to provide **genuine opportunities** for people to be involved so authorities will

¹ Those authorities listed in s.1 of the Local Government Act 1999 including local, county and district councils

want to **draw on widespread evidence of what constitutes good practice in consultation.**

Authorities should consider where it is appropriate to provide representatives of local persons with opportunities to have their say and get involved in activities over and above being informed and consulted. 'Involvement' will be the most interactive form of engagement, giving representatives of local persons greater influence over decisions or delivery. Authorities should consider providing opportunities for representatives of local persons to:

- influence or directly participate in decision making (e.g. in helping to shape local priorities via citizen panels, service advisory panels, neighbourhood management, participatory budgeting; citizen juries)
- provide feedback on decisions, services, policies and outcomes (e.g. 'have your say' section on the authority website; service-user forums; petitions; and feedback forms being made available)
- co-design/work with the authority in designing policies and services (e.g. being involved in the commissioning of services)
- co-produce/carry out some aspects of services for themselves (for example having responsibility for the maintenance of a community centre; the transfer of the management of assets; communities taking part in 'street clean up' or environmental conservation work)
- work with the authority in assessing services (e.g. citizens acting as mystery shoppers, user evaluators and as co-opted members of Overview and Scrutiny Committees)

....Many authorities are well aware of the need to **engage a diverse range of groups within the community** and to take action to ensure that all groups within the area are engaged. This is particularly important in the discharge of this new duty. Authorities will need to consider carefully who might be affected by, or interested in, a particular function and ensure any information provision, consultation or involvement opportunity effectively reaches the relevant parts of the community – **including those who can often be marginalised or vulnerable** people (sometimes referred to as 'hard to reach'). It is important that information provision, consultation and involvement opportunities are **not limited to those with the 'loudest voice'**. Authorities should be aware that **equality requirements** will apply to the duty to involve.

Why is it important?

The duty is another tool which women's organisations can use to highlight why local public bodies must engage with groups of women and women's organisations, given that this will be the primary mechanism by which they can gather feedback about the needs of local women and girls.

Experience and evidence shows that women and minorities are largely marginalised in decision making processes. Therefore, it is crucial that councils deliver on their duty to involve (i.e. promote democracy) by asserting the engagement of these excluded groups in local government.

What can I do?

Because discrimination against women and women's equality are often not prioritised in government policy, may be invisible, seen as irrelevant ('women now have equality'), or seen as 'private' or individual problems (such as domestic violence), it is vital that we have 'women's champions' engaging and influencing local decision making.

Make yourself known: Ensure your organisation is on the 'radar' of appropriate departments within the council, your Local Strategic Partnership and other local public bodies, such as Primary Care Trusts.

Identify key issues: We know from experience how easily women's equality can be overlooked or seen as unimportant by others who have no experience or knowledge of what's happening for women in local communities. Being prepared with good information and evidence about women's needs may enable you to have more constructive conversations with others who are unaware of how and what issues are having particular impacts on women.

Encouraging public bodies to go beyond the usual 'consultation event' format: You could ask the consulting body to come out and meet with your organisation (and service users if appropriate) to get feedback on a particular policy issue, especially if you do not have a lot of capacity to engage with the many policy consultations that take place (reading the consultation document, travelling to an event etc),

Keep in touch with local infrastructure organisations: Local infrastructure organisations often produce briefings on policy consultation issues which summarise the key issues, or provide information in other ways.

Where can I get more information/support?

Your **local infrastructure organisations**, umbrella bodies and second tier organisations (such as your Council for Voluntary Service (CVS), Rural Community Council (RCC), equalities networks and forums etc) are likely to know about the Duty to Involve:

- www.navca.org.uk (to find the details of your local CVS)
- www.acre.org.uk (to find the details of your local RCC)

Department for Communities and Local Government (July 2008) 'Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities: **Statutory Guidance**':

- www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongsafeprospersous

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

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

- www.wrc.org.uk

See Oxfam, Urban Forum and Women's Resource Centre (2007) '**Where are women in LSPs**' for more information about the marginalisation of women and women's organisations in local decision making mechanisms:

- www.wrc.org.uk/resources/wrcs_research_and_reports.aspx

Urban Forum is the umbrella body for community and voluntary groups with interests in urban and regional policy, especially regeneration. They produce policy briefings on a range of issues affecting local organisations:

- www.urbanforum.org.uk