



The local agenda - How to get your voice heard

Introduction

Most of us are aware of the increasing devolution of decision making from Westminster to local areas, but what does this actually mean for women's organisations? How can women's organisations use Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements? Darlene Corry, Policy Officer at Women's Resource Centre, outlines policies and local mechanisms women's organisations need to know about.

Background

With the new coalition government's 'Big Society' agenda, community empowerment is more important than ever as the focus will be on local rather than regional engagement. Funding cuts and the recession also mean that it is vitally important that local women's organisations consider their engagement with their **Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)**

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/localstrategicpartnerships/> and how they can influence their local priorities.

Most women's groups are not engaged in any formal way with their LSP. **Research by WRC, Urban Forum and Oxfam (2006)**

http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2008/w/womenlsp.pdf found that only 1.8% of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) representatives on LSPs were women's organisations – despite making up 7% of the VCS.

As well as lacking capacity to engage formally, some women's groups have experienced frustrating barriers to participation - the time and energy needed to be part of the LSP mechanism, and lack of understanding of gender inequality and discrimination by LSP partners. However, there are a range of ways groups can influence local priorities, according to their capacity. And with **local elections** starting in 2010 across much of the country, next year is the time to make noise and get your voice heard.

Local Strategic Partnerships, Local Area Agreements and National Indicators

LSPs, made up of representatives from local authorities, health, police, local business and the VCS, are now the key mechanism for deciding on local priorities, determining where the majority of the local funding will go and delivering the work outlined in the **Local Area Agreements (LAAs)**

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/localareaagreements/>. LAAs are three-year agreements about the priorities and work of each local area and are made up of a number of **National Indicators (NI)** <http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/nationalindicators/>. They are now the only mechanism that central government uses to monitor local government. Out of a total list of 188 indicators each local area has to include 17 compulsory indicators (primarily on education) and chooses a further 35 indicators, in consultation with local people and groups.

150 LAAs were signed off for June 2008 - 2011. They are subject to annual reviews called 'refreshers', to monitor progress. While targets can technically change during these refreshers, guidance indicates that this is unlikely. However, in the run-up to local elections, calling attention to urgent issues not included in the targets is definitely worthwhile.

A useful strategy for women's organisations is to clearly outline how their work benefits the local community. Groups can determine how their work and their issues 'fit' across the national indicators and compare this to the **NIs chosen within their own LAA** <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=8399555> If groups can show how, for example, violence against women (VAW), is a key issue for local women, they can challenge their LSP to include targets on VAW within their LAA (across health, community safety, economic well-being, as well as the few indicators specifically relating to VAW). They can also use these arguments to challenge the **Gender Equality Schemes** or **Single Equality Schemes** http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/forbusinessesandorganisation/publicauthorities/gender_equality_duty/pages/enforcingthegenderequalityduty%E2%80%93toolkitsforindividuals.aspx of local bodies such as the local authority and the Primary Care Trust (PCT).

Local Policy Opportunities

Community engagement is pivotal to the local empowerment agenda, focusing primarily on how local people can have more of a say, and be more involved in democratic process. While this is often focused on individuals, policy clearly highlights the importance of the VCS's involvement in developing local priorities, choosing local targets for the LAA, and ensuring the voices of those marginalised in decision making (e.g. women).

Councillors have new responsibilities placed on them to respond to community calls for action through a new 'Duty to Respond' to community 'petitions', under the white paper released by Communities and Local Government in June 2009, '**Communities in Control: real people, real power**'

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/briefings_and_consultations/current_briefings.aspx

Since April 2009, local authorities now have to make sure they inform, involve and engage with local communities properly, under the new 'Duty to Involve'. This includes ensuring they engage representatives of local people, socially excluded groups and the VCS. Women's organisations work with some of the most marginalised communities of women, and can assert their right to be involved.

The new **Comprehensive Area Assessment** <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/caa/>, coming in to force in early 2009, will be the main tool used to inspect and regulate public services. It will focus on organisational performance, including how well councils are working in partnership and the quality of community engagement. Whilst there is a focus on addressing inequality it is still unclear as to how this will be measured.

Lobbying tactics

There are a range of ways to make noise about local priorities and targets, including:

- Meet your local councillor, your local MP, your local CVS, your VCS representative on your LSP, the chair of your LSP and / or your local LAA lead.
- Think about who is likely to get in power in your local area, and start building alliances.
- Develop your own 'manifesto' and try to get all political parties to sign up to it in advance of any elections.
- Find out about any local or regional hustings and have your say there.
- Find out how your local area is committed to engaging with the community; how funding decisions are made through the LSP; how long your LAA lasts for and when the annual refresher is due.
- Join or start a local or regional women's network to feed into your LSP.
- Join your LSP as a voluntary and community sector representative.

WRC can provide support through our 'Stronger together' project for local women's networks. We can also support individual organisations to influence their LSPs and local priorities.

Tools you can use to hold public bodies to account

There are a number of useful tools women's organisations can use to build their case, support their lobbying on local priorities and hold public bodies to account.

The primary tool is the **Gender Equality Duty (GED)**

http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/forbusinessesandorganisation/publicauthorities/Gender_equality_duty/Pages/Genderequalitydutydocuments.aspx. All public bodies (like local authorities, PCTs, police, etc) now have to show how they gather evidence, consult stakeholders, and determine their key priorities for action to challenge gender inequality. While the LSP itself is not subject to the GED, partnership work is, so public bodies' work on LSPs is still covered.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) have produced **A practical guide to revising gender equality schemes**

http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/PSD/a_practical_guide_to_revising_gender_equality_schemes.pdf

WRC have developed a **Gender Equality Scheme template for local bodies**

http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2008/g/1_geslocaltemplate08.pdf, and **our why women? research**

http://www.wrc.org.uk/what_we_do/campaigns/why_women/default.aspx

provides evidence to back up arguments about the value of women's organisations.

The **End Violence Against Women coalition**

<http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/> have developed a **toolkit**

<http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/pages/resources.html> on challenging local bodies to work on violence against women, using the Gender Equality Duty.

EVAW's **'Map of Gaps'** 1 and 2 <http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/>

research shows the lack of services for women experiencing VAW. The Equality and Human Rights Commission is writing letters to 100 local authorities which do not have adequate VAW services for women, because they are not meeting their obligations under the Gender Equality Duty. There are tips on how VAW can be tackled locally in EVAW's blueprint for an **integrated strategy on VAW**

http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/data/files/realising_rights.pdf.

The Government Equalities Office and Communities and Local Government have

funded **'Women Take Part'** <http://www.changesuk.net/women-take-part.php>,

research into the participation of women, in governance and decision making. The

final report, **'Closing the Gap'** http://www.equalities.gov.uk/publications/7841-TSO-Women_Take_Part_WEB.pdf,

has developed useful models of stages of the journey for women wanting to get involved in public life; and for how well organisations understand and tackle gender inequality.

Public law <http://www.publiclawproject.org.uk/whatispublaw.html> is another highly

effective tool – look at the success of the **Southall Black Sisters landmark case**

<http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/>. Public law principles state that public bodies

have obligations to make sure that they act fairly at all times; are reasonable; are legal (including that they meet all of their legislative duties), and that they administer properly, which includes things like following procedure, making good quality decisions, and providing correct information. Organisations do not have to take unfair funding decisions lying down, and can challenge local priorities that are not based on evidence, for example.

The Women's Resource Centre is undertaking a feminist participatory action research project, working with a number of women's groups across the country to explore how women's groups can better engage with their LSP and influence local priorities. If you are currently working with your LSP, or would like to, get in touch with Darlene at WRC. We're hopeful that the findings from this research will support women's groups to better lobby for change at a local level.

Please see www.wrc.org.uk for an online version of this article, with hyper-links to relevant policy and resources.