



How to.....

**engage with the Localism
Agenda**

**A guide for women's voluntary
organisations**

April 2011

Understanding and supporting
women and their organisations

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Disclaimer

This guide is not intended to provide definitive information and advice regarding engaging with the Localism agenda. At the time of printing, all care was taken to ensure the information contained in this guide was accurate and correct. However, websites, organisations, strategies, policies, laws, contact details etc do change or become outdated. Please always check information to ensure it is correct and up-to-date at time of use. The WRC cannot take responsibility for changes to references or information in this guide.

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About the Women's Resource Centre

The Women's Resource Centre (WRC) is a charity which supports women's organisations to be more effective and sustainable. We provide training, information, resources and one-to-one support on a range of organisational development issues. We also lobby decision makers on behalf of the women's not-for-profit sector for improved representation and funding.

Our members work in a wide range of fields including health, violence against women, employment, education, rights and equality, the criminal justice system and the environment. They deliver services to and campaign on behalf of some of the most marginalised communities of women.

There are over ten thousand people working or volunteering for our members who support almost half a million individuals each year.

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Introduction

Following the election of the Coalition government in May 2010, there has been a raft of policy changes alongside drastic public sector spending cuts. One of the key strategies introduced by the government is Localism, a series of policies designed to decentralise power and devolve decision making to a local level.

The objective of the Localism agenda is to empower communities and give local councils greater responsibility for meeting local need. The Localism agenda is founded on the principle that a centralised approach to politics has been unsuccessful and that local people have greater understanding of local needs. Localism seeks to promote civic responsibility and greater public engagement in local politics.

The Decentralisation and Localism Bill, currently passing through Parliament, captures the principles of Localism and is set to make a broad range of new powers available to citizens and voluntary and community groups.

The purpose of this 'how to guide' is to highlight the opportunities and challenges presented by the Localism Bill and offer practical tips on how women's organisations can engage with the Localism agenda.

Understanding the Localism Bill

The Decentralisation and Localism Bill was presented to Parliament on the 13th December 2010. The Bill is a very broad piece of legislation designed to give more freedom to local authorities to meet the needs of communities and grant citizens more ways be involved in local-decision making.

A wide range of measures are set out within the Bill. These include plans to:

- Limit social housing tenure;
- Introduce directly elected Mayors;
- Publish local authority spending; and
- Establish new planning powers for communities.

For the purpose of this how to guide, we shall focus on the key items of the Bill, which are of particular interest to women's organisations.

Local authorities general power of competence

A key measure also contained within the Localism Bill is the plan to award local authorities a general power of competence. This power will allow councils to do anything that is not specifically forbidden by law (rather than the current system that only allows them to do things that are specifically allowed by law).

Challenges - This measure is of immediate concern to the women's sector as it grants greater powers to public bodies that often lack gender awareness. Many local authorities failed to meet their obligations under the Gender Equality Duty and do not effectively engage with the women's voluntary and community sector.

Opportunities - Whilst women's organisations might be apprehensive about approaching their local authorities, it is crucial that we engage with local politicians to raise the profile of women's issues and promote the vital work of the women's sector. The flow of power to a local level means that local authorities will have increasing influence over the work of the women's sector. For example, local government will be awarded new powers to support local NHS Commissioning.

Where possible, all organisations should identify a strategy for local engagement. This does not need to be complex and could include basic steps, such as inviting local councillors to attend your next event. With the increased use of participatory budgeting tools, which allow local citizens to vote on funding for charities, it is essential that organisations raise local knowledge of their work and the value that it provides to your local community.

For further information on how to influence and engage locally, please visit the following link on the WRC website:

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/tools_to_engage_and_influence/default.aspx

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) - a non-statutory partnership, which bring together councils, other public sector agencies, the business sector, and voluntary organisations.

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 be working on, or know about, Local Strategic Partnerships. For further information please contact:

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

www.acre.org.uk (to find the details of your local RC)

Engaging with the Localism Agenda: Tips on getting started

Identifying decision makers

- To find out who your local councillors are visit: <http://www.writetothem.com>. By entering your post code on this website you can access a comprehensive list of your councillors, London Assembly Members and your local Member of Parliament.
- To find the contact details for your local council visit: http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DI1/Directories/Localcouncils/AToZOfLocalCouncils/DG_A-Z_LG This site provides an A-Z list of county councils, borough and district councils across the UK.
- To find out which member of staff specifically works on equalities issues, visit your local council's website or call your councils switchboard and ask to speak to the Equality and Diversity Team. Equalities staff can have a range of job titles, .e.g. Diversity and Inclusion Officer or even 'Opportunities Manager', if staff are unsure who to forward you to; try these titles and be persistent!

Engaging with local authorities

In order to build a strong relationship with your council; it is important to have open channels of communication, don't wait until you have difficulties with a council before you get in touch! Simple steps you can follow are:

- Sending your local council a copy of your new or most recent reports
- Inviting local councillors/staff to your next event
- Asking local councillors to support your campaigns
- Participating in Local Strategic Partnerships or other decision making forums, where possible.

Raising the profile of your work

Another way of capturing the attention of local authorities is by publicising the positive impact of your work at a local level.

- Make the most of social media - Facebook and Twitter are a great way to share information about your work and to get lots of people to support it.
- You can also set up a blog, using a simple programme such as Tumblr: <http://www.tumblr.com>, to write about the work that you do.
- Contact local newspapers about campaigns you might be running or submit comments on articles they've written on issues impacting on women. By doing this you can help to establish your organisation as a local expert on women's issues.

The Community Right to Challenge

Under the government's proposals, voluntary and community organisations will be given the ability to bid to take over local public services. Where organisations believe that a service is being run ineffectively- they can submit an expression of interest to run the service. Their local authority will then decide whether to approve their request. In the event that the organisation is successful, a commissioning process will commence.

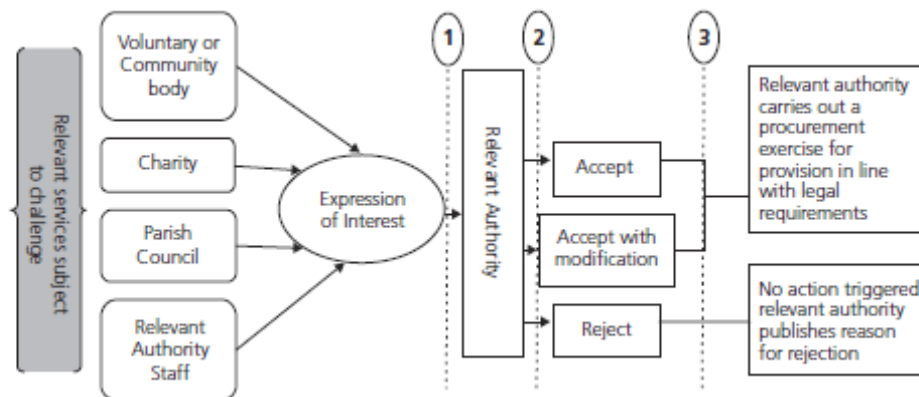


Image 1.1: visual illustration of the stages of the right to challenge¹

Challenges - Whilst voluntary and community organisations may prompt a commissioning process; they may not be awarded with the final contract. Critics have expressed concern that the right to challenge may allow 'back door privatisation' of public services, as voluntary organisations will not be able to effectively compete with private organisations on price.

Opportunities - Many women's organisations already provide public services and may wish to capitalise on opportunities to provide new services at a local level. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) plans to fund infrastructure support programmes in the future to encourage organisations utilise this new right.

DCLG is currently consulting on their proposals on the Community Right to Challenge; those wishing to find out further information should visit their website: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/righttochallengeconsultation>

¹ Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011, Proposals to Introduce a Community Right to Challenge: Consultation Paper

The Community Right to Buy

Another key measure contained within the Bill, is a new right giving community organisations the power to save local facilities by bidding to take over their ownership or management. Local Authorities be required to keep a list of public and private assets of value to communities and communities will be able to buy these buildings and land if they are put up for sale.

Figure 1.2 below provides a visual illustration of the Department for Communities and Local Government's current proposals regarding the right to buy procedure.

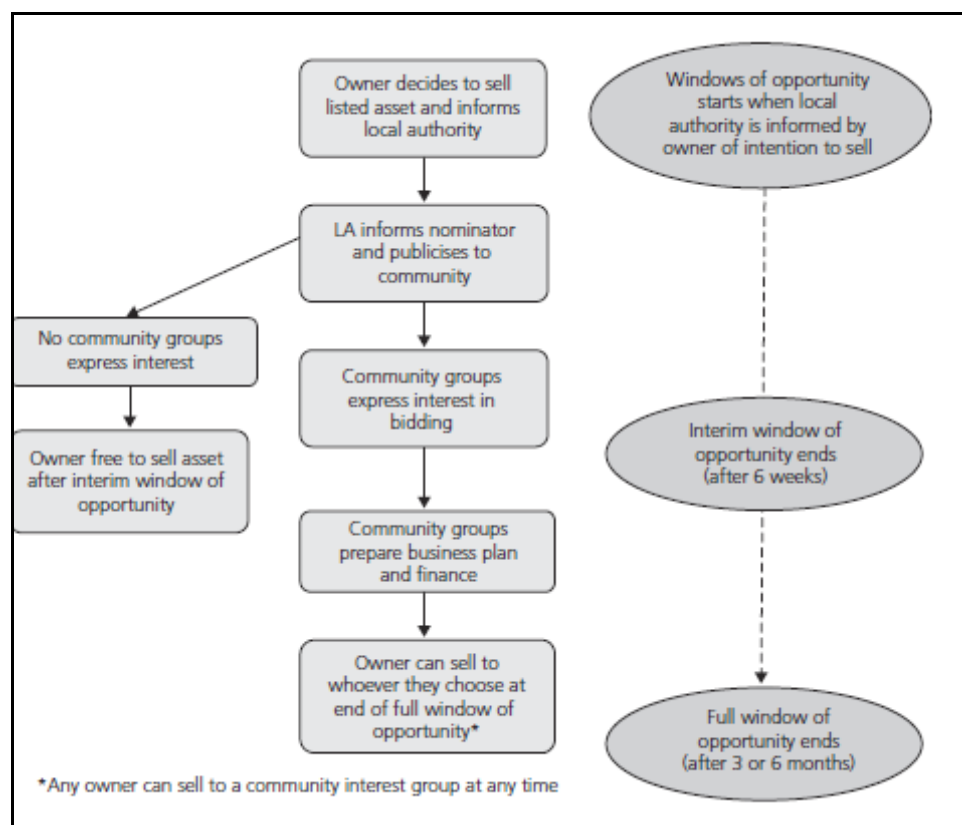


Figure 1.2: Visual illustration of the Community Right to Buy²

Opportunities- Women's organisations may wish to work with other sections of their community to save assets of community value. The right can be used to save buildings that are of direct benefit to women within community, for example a local centre that hosts mother and baby classes.

Challenges- Whilst many women's organisations may wish to exercise the new right; they may lack enough funds to compete with other buyers. Many women's organisations are facing severe financial hardship and smaller organisations may not have capacity to take up this opportunity.

² Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011, Proposals to Introduce a Community Right to Buy: Consultation Paper

Duty to hold local referendums

Part 4, Chapter 1 of the Bill outlines plans to allow residents to call for referendums on local issues. A local authority must consider any petition for a referendum which is signed by 5% of the electorate in their local area. Local authorities are not legally required to act on the results of a referendum; however the outcome is expected to inform local decision-making.

Challenges- If local authorities fail to promote diverse participation in referendums the needs of certain groups, such as women and people from minority communities, may be overlooked. In practice the duty may only be used by those who are already engaged in decision making and may further the agendas of a vocal few. This is an active risk; given the low level of number of signatures required.

The WRC is extremely concerned about plans to introduce local referendums, due to the under representation of women in local decision-making. We fear that efforts to empower local people may simply reproduce existing power structures and continue the exclusion of women from local politics. It is essential to represent the diverse voice of whole communities, particularly those of marginalised women.

Opportunities- Women's organisations could use the new plans as a way of raising the profile of women's issues at a local level. The duty could be used as a mechanism for engaging with local government and identifying other opportunities for influencing locally. Referendums could allow women's organisations to connect with different sections of their community and raise local awareness and support for the work that they do.

Homelessness/ allocation of social housing

Part 6, Chapter 1 of the Bill outlines plans that local housing authorities will be awarded new powers to decide which groups of people qualify for council housing.

Challenges- WRC is extremely concerned about this proposal as some local authorities may wish to exclude certain vulnerable groups from council housing. For example, single mothers from migrant communities who have large families. The Bill also gives the Secretary of State powers to direct local authorities as to the use of these powers. WRC will be monitoring the government on this issue (and encourages other organisations to do the same) and how they plan to protect access to social housing for vulnerable women and other groups in housing need.

Opportunities- The National Housing Federation is actively lobbying politicians on proposals contained within the Bill relating to housing. Women's organisations working in the area of housing who wish to find out more about this issue, should read the National Housing Federation's latest Localism Briefing, published in March 2011:

http://www.housing.org.uk/publications/find_a_publication/legislation/localism_bill_members_briefng.aspx

Clause 124 of the Bill will allow local authorities in England or Wales to discharge the main homelessness duty to secure accommodation with an offer of suitable accommodation from a private landlord, without requiring the applicant's agreement.

Challenges- This measure is very worrying and WRC is extremely concerned that this may have a direct and damaging impact on extremely vulnerable women. This problem is reinforced by the Government's proposals to change housing benefit payments and introduce a cap on housing benefit payments in the private rental sector. This will compromise the affordability of rental accommodation and may leave vulnerable women without settled accommodation and subject to a cycle of homelessness.

Opportunities- Homelessness charity Shelter is actively lobbying politicians on proposals contained within the Bill relating to homelessness. Women's organisations wishing to find out more about this issue, should visit Shelter's website, <http://england.shelter.org.uk/> to read their most recent briefing on this topic: http://england.shelter.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/321331/Localism_Bill_-_2nd_reading_briefing.pdf

Gender and the Localism agenda

Whilst this guide draws attention to many of the opportunities associated with the Localism Bill, the WRC feels that members must be aware of the limitations to the Localism approach outlined below.

Limitations of Localism

Women are more likely to experience violence, less likely to be involved in local decision making and are generally more economically disadvantaged than men. Gender inequality is an ongoing problem in society however many local authorities fail to treat it as priority or meet their obligations under the Gender Equality Duty.

Women will also experience greater disadvantage as a result of the Government's approach to reducing the deficit, for example, their plans for Welfare Reform, the public sector cuts, changes to the NHS and the watering down of Equalities legislation will have a particularly detrimental impact on women and children.

- **Without an equalities focus within the Localism Bill it is unlikely that local authorities will treat gender equality as a priority.** Already at the beginning of public spending cuts an increasing number of essential women's services have been placed under threat.
- **The WRC believes that a local approach will increase inequality and lead to a postcode lottery for life saving violence against women services.** It is essential that checks and balances are put in place regarding commissioning to make sure essential women's services are funded at a local level.
- **National government needs to monitor the actions of local authorities to ensure that women are engaged in local decision making.** Local government lacks a strong reputation on engaging diverse groups in decision-making; e. g. women's organisations represent just 2% of VCS representatives on Local Strategic Partnerships³. It is essential that authorities are overseen to make sure that marginalised women within their communities are empowered.
- **It is essential that a gender focus is integrated into the Bill** to ensure women are included in wider community issues such as neighbourhood planning and ownership of local assets.

WRC is concerned about the Bill's emphasis on 'local democratic accountability'-encouraging local people to monitor local authorities and hold them to account. We have concerns that this localised approach places too much responsibility on residents, and may lead to patchy audit and inspection of local authorities.

Whilst authorities may publish information, citizens may not have the capacity to examine or analyse the information or be fully aware of the implications of the information made available. Civil servants develop expert knowledge on policy topics over the course of their careers; members of the public may not have the

³ Urban Forum, Oxfam, Women's Resource Centre, 2007, Where are the women in LSPs?
http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2008/w/womenlsp.pdf

background and experience needed to understand the broader implications of published data.

WRC is particularly concerned about the issue of local authority audit and inspection, in light of the closure of the Audit Commission and the Government's decision to end Comprehensive Area Assessments. As more power is passed to local authorities it essential they are monitored to ensure they promote equality.

Toolkits and resources

Urban Forum and BASSAC, 2010, Local Action - a handy guide for communities working with councillors.

http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/files/ufpublic/local_action_2010_07.pdf

Urban Forum, 2008, How Your Council Works – A Handy Guide for Community Groups, <http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/handy-guides/how-your-council-works-%96-a-handy-guide-for-community-groups>

London Civic Forum, IZWE Mobilization tools, How to speak up,

<http://www.londoncivicforum.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/downloads/resources/resources-catalogue/lcfpub-14.pdf>

WRC, 2010, Tools to engage and influence locally

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/tools_to_engage_and_influence/default.aspx

WRC, 2010, Factsheets on local government policy,

http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/tools_to_engage_and_influence/local_government/default.aspx

Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010,

Decentralisation and Localism Bill: an essential guide

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1793908.pdf>

Further information

Please note that the WRC is currently responding to government consultations regarding Localism and monitoring policy developments on behalf of its members. We plan to produce additional briefings later on this year to provide women's organisations with accessible information on this topic. Please keep an eye on our website www.wrc.org.uk for future briefings and consultation events.