

A Handy Guide for community groups

How your Council Works



Introduction



HOW YOUR COUNCIL
WORKS

A HANDY GUIDE FOR
COMMUNITY GROUPS

A guide to how local councils
work for anyone currently
involved in, or interested in
getting involved in, local
community activity.

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IDeA works for local government improvement by providing a range of services, including the IDeA Knowledge website, the Leadership Academy, peer reviews and the Beacon council scheme. The agency also delivers externally funded projects, such as the Third Sector Commissioning Programme, Strategic Housing and Healthy Communities.

Urban Forum exists to influence national urban policy to bring about effective change for local communities, by acting as a bridge between policy-makers and the community sector. Urban Forum undertakes research and policy development, produces information and runs events, all designed to inform policy-making and to support community groups to influence decision-making.

NAVCA is a network of over 360 local VCS infrastructure organisations supporting more than 164,000 local voluntary and community groups throughout England. NAVCA promotes voluntary and community action by supporting its members and by acting as a national voice for the local voluntary and community sector.



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Overview

DID YOU KNOW?

- There are 400 local councils in England and Wales
- There are over 10,000 town, parish and community councils
- Local councils spend over £70 billion a year
- Local government employs over 2 million people working in around 700 different functions
- There are over 20,000 democratically elected local councillors in England and Wales

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL COUNCILS

Local government affects everyone's lives. Councils are responsible for delivering essential services in local areas and dealing with local matters and issues. They are also a cornerstone of democracy providing an opportunity for local people to directly shape local services and issues by electing local councillors.

This guide to local councils is for any one currently involved or interested in getting involved in local community activity. It sets out:

- Some general information about councils, their size and scope
 - The different types of councils in the UK
 - The role of elected councillors and the role of officers
 - How local councils work with other parts of the public sector
 - Community engagement and Government initiatives to encourage more people to get involved
 - Tips on getting to know your council and getting in touch
 - Where to get more information

OVERVIEW

The Government has made clear its determination to increase the involvement and levels of responsibility of local people in shaping the services they receive. All three of the main political parties agree that creating more opportunities for people to influence local decisions and service delivery is important. This comes at a time when there are also concerns



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everyone
understands it
better

about how much people are turning away from local politics – both as voters and as potential elected councillors.

This is important, because councils, led by democratically elected local councillors, provide many of the services that keep communities running. And if they don't provide all of the services directly, they are usually involved as active partners with others who do.

Local government is constantly evolving, with frequent changes to structures, roles and responsibilities. There is always an ongoing debate about the balance of power and control over service delivery between national and local government and the scope and responsibilities of locally elected councillors.

The scale and reach of local government, the complexity and degree of change taking place and the extent to which individuals, communities and voluntary organisations are being encouraged to get involved, makes it vital that everyone understands it better.

How local elections work



TYPES OF COUNCILS

Local government in England and Wales is organised in two different ways. In Wales and some parts of England, a single tier "all purpose council" is responsible for all local authority services and functions. These are called unitary or metropolitan councils or London boroughs. The remainder of England has a "two-tier" system - responsibility for services is divided between district and county councils. Town, parish and community councils, which cover a much smaller area also exist within some metropolitan, unitary and two-tier areas.

There are 410 local authorities in England and Wales. Table 1 shows the distribution of these councils across England:

Table 1: Structure of local government in England

County level	Metropolitan Areas (6)	County Councils (34)	Unitary councils (47)	Greater London	
District level	Metropolitan Councils (36)	District Councils (238)		London Boroughs (33)	City of London
Parish level		Civil Parishes			



HOW LOCAL ELECTIONS WORK

All local councillors are elected for a four year term by local people. Local elections take place in May and there are usually council elections somewhere in the country every year.

Metropolitan councils are divided into wards, normally represented by three councillors. Elections for one of these seats are held every three out of four years. This is called electing "by thirds".

Unitary councils can choose whether to hold whole council elections every four years or elections by thirds. The year when elections must take place will depend on the original year when they became unitary authorities.

County Councils are divided into divisions, with one councillor representing each division. Elections are held every four years in all county councils for all the seats.

District Councils are divided into wards and can also choose their election cycle. They can also elect by thirds, or decide to re-elect all councillors once every four years. Not all wards in such districts may be big enough to justify having three councillors and may have less.

Parish Councils – larger parish, town or community councils – are divided into wards with one councillor representing each ward. In smaller councils there is just a single parish election. Elections are held every four years.

London Boroughs are divided into wards, normally represented by three councillors. Elections are held once every four years.



Make sure you
know which
council or
councils cover
the area you
live or
work in or
where your
community
group is active

How local elections work



Under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 all councils will be able to change to a four year election cycle for all their seats if they wish to. Metropolitan districts which at the moment have three councillors for each ward will be allowed to change that number to suit local circumstances.

In 2000, the Government introduced an option for councils to have a directly elected Mayor, if a local referendum demonstrated local support for this. So far, only 12 referendums have resulted in a "yes" vote and a directly elected mayor.

London is the only region in England and Wales to have a directly elected mayor and assembly to govern city affairs.



It is a strategic authority and service delivery remains with the 33 London boroughs.

Many councillors stand for election on behalf of the main political parties in England and Wales. But some candidates stand as "independents" which means that they are not aligned to any political party.

After every election the group winning the largest number of seats takes control of the council. They will then decide who the leader of the council is and will allocate councillors to key positions within the council. If no one group wins a majority of seats the groups with the largest total number of seats will make arrangements with other groups to ensure the smooth running of council business, (this is known as "no overall control").

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So far, only 12 referendums have resulted in a 'yes' vote.

ELECTED COUNCILLORS, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Elected councillors are responsible for making decisions on behalf of their local community about local services such as land use, refuse collection and leisure services. They agree the council budget, set the policy framework, appoint chief officers and make constitutional decisions. They also represent those people living and working in their ward or division and act as advocates on their behalf while at the same time helping to provide leadership for the area as a whole.

The Council structure



HOW THE COUNCIL WORKS

All councillors come together at full council meetings, which usually take place about four times a year.

These meetings consider high level budget and policy decisions and review other issues of significance.

The Executive

The Local Government Act 2000 requires the decision-making (executive) powers of the council to be separate from its monitoring (scrutiny) functions. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 requires councils (except those with populations below 85,000 which can operate a structure in which the council leader heads a committee) to adopt one of the following arrangements:

- leader and cabinet executive
- mayor and cabinet executive
- directly elected executive.

The Cabinet (or directly elected executive)

The cabinet is the council's main decision-making body. It is made up of councillors with responsibility for particular aspects of the council's priorities, often carrying cross-cutting responsibilities (e.g. regeneration, environment or children's services). Together these "portfolio holders" recommend a budget for each year, which needs approval from full council. Once that has happened, the cabinet is generally left to make the decisions necessary to deliver council services - acting within the budget and the council-wide policies already agreed.



The cabinet usually reflects the political balance of the council as a whole. Where the council is made up of councillors from mostly one party, the whole cabinet will reflect this.

Meetings of both full council and the cabinet are normally open to the public to attend, and, with notice, to make short contributions. Where items of business are confidential, or relate to particular individuals the cabinet can exclude the public from some meetings.

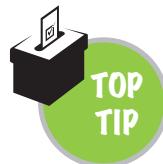
Overview and scrutiny

Those councillors who do not sit in the cabinet are expected to scrutinise and oversee decisions taken by the cabinet. They can also develop policy and investigate other areas of local service delivery, such as health services.

The main functions of scrutiny are:

(i) To hold the Cabinet to account, through:

- examining their proposals and decisions
- evaluating policies, performance and progress
- ensuring that consultation, where necessary, has been carried out
- highlighting areas for improvement



Find out who
your local
councillors are
and which
Cabinet Member
is responsible
for issues
you or your
community
groups are
interested in

Roles and responsibilities



(ii) To ensure services are of high quality and meet the needs of communities by:

- reviewing services
- developing policies to make services better
- ensuring that people are consulted when changes are proposed
- ensuring that services represent value for money

(iii) To consult the public on the services it wants by:

- making sure the council knows what communities really care about
- making sure they know about the scrutiny process and how to get involved



COUNCIL OFFICERS, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

While councillors set the direction of the council and create the policy framework for service delivery, council officers led by the chief executive, advise the council and are responsible for effective service delivery. The chief executive and senior managers are directly appointed by councillors.

The experience that officers gain over time about how local government works, about legislation and about the particular council and its communities is essential in helping councillors to do their jobs. This may mean that there are times when they have to tell councillors that they cannot carry out a course of action they are saying they want to. Officers have a duty to give unbiased professional advice.

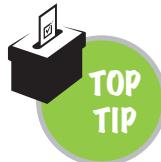
Apart from the council's senior managers, council employees include teachers, refuse collectors, social workers and others.

LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND POWERS OF COUNCILS

Unitary authorities and two-tier authorities do not have quite the same responsibilities, although the law requires that all services must be provided everywhere.

In general, the upper tier councils in two-tier areas (county councils) plan and provide the more strategic services like social services, education, children's services, and transport and road services. District councils deliver more local services such as council tax collection, local planning, licensing and rubbish collection. The division of responsibility between county and district councils for service delivery varies from area to area.

Unitary, metropolitan and London boroughs deliver all services in their areas.



All councils will have leaflets explaining how decisions are taken.
Visit your town hall to see what information they have available or look online.

Roles and responsibilities

Table 2 summarises the functions of the different types of local authority:

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	JOINT AUTHORITIES	MET COUNCILS	LONDON BOROUGHS	DISTRICT COUNCILS	UNITARY COUNCILS	COUNTY COUNCILS
Education		✓	✓		✓	✓
Housing		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Planning applications		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Strategic planning		✓	✓		✓	✓
Transport planning		✓			✓	✓
Passenger transport	✓				✓	✓
Highways		✓	✓		✓	✓
Fire	✓				✓ [#]	✓
Social services		✓	✓		✓	✓
Libraries		✓	✓		✓	✓
Leisure and recreation		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Waste collection		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Waste disposal	✓				✓	✓
Environmental health		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Revenue collection		✓	✓	✓	✓	

Source: Local Government Structure (LGA)

*Joint fire authorities operate in Counties with Unitary Authorities in them.



BUDGETS

Councils raise their income in a number of different ways. Council tax, paid by local households raises about 25% of revenue. The rest of the budget comes from central government grants and charges for local services. Business rates or non-domestic rates are set by central government and contribute about 25% of local revenue.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PARTS OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR

In unitary councils joint boards are responsible for police, fire and civil defence arrangements across the whole area. These boards have powers to set 'precepts' (the proportion of charges required for certain services) or raise council taxes, but they are not directly elected.

Elsewhere police authorities are independent bodies made up of local people. There is a police authority for each force in England and Wales – 43 in all. There is also one for the British Transport Police.

Provision of health services is generally carried out by the National Health Service through Strategic Health Authorities (SHAs) and Primary Care Trusts (PCTs). PCTs are responsible for arranging and delivering health care services in local areas and spend about 80% of the NHS budget. As well as providing funding for general practitioners (GPs) and medical prescriptions they commission services from the other trusts including NHS Hospital Trusts, NHS Ambulance Services Trusts, and NHS Mental Health Services Trusts.

These trusts are independent of each other but closely linked in the way they work. None of them is provided or controlled by local councils.

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Community leadership



Invite local councillors to community group meetings, or any activities you have planned. They may be happy to give a short speech about the council. They could be too busy to attend but the invitation will raise awareness of your group and the issues you are interested in.

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

As elected bodies and as providers of large numbers of services to local people, local councils have an extremely important role in leading their communities. Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements have been introduced since 2000 to support councils to provide effective local leadership and co-ordination.

(i) Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) and Sustainable Community Strategies

Following the Local Government Act 2000, councils are required to:

- develop a strategy for promoting "well-being"
 - the sustainable community strategy (sometimes referred to as the 'vision' for the area);
- work in partnership with other organisations;
- promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of the community.

Local Strategic Partnerships were originally established in the 88 most deprived local authority areas that were in receipt of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding. They are encouraged elsewhere and although there is no legal requirement to have one, they now exist in almost every area..

LSPs bring together representatives from all providers of services to local communities, including the council and others such as police and health services, the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and the business sector. LSP partners develop a Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) for the



whole area that provides a framework for them to deliver joined-up services for local people.

While it is for the partners as a whole to decide how the LSP should be run, the Government believes that local councils should take a leading role. This is because they represent, through the local councillors, democratic accountability to local people. There are also a number of specific legal roles that councils and elected members play that make this LSP leadership role important:

- (i) The duty to produce a Sustainable Community Strategy and Local Area Agreement (see below) rests with the council
- (ii) Members of the council's executive have a power to promote the well-being of their area (Local Government Act 2000)
- (iii) Councillors are elected representatives of their communities
- (iv) The duty of frontline councillors to scrutinize the council's own executive work has been extended through the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, and the Police and Justice Act 2006. New powers will relate in particular to scrutiny of partner contributions to the LAA, not just those of the council.

Duty to co-operate



(ii) Local Area Agreements (LAAs)

Local Area Agreements are agreements between local government and central government that set out the priorities for action in an area to deliver the Sustainable Community Strategy. LAAs are required for all county or unitary councils acting on behalf of their Local Strategic Partnership and others. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 places a legal duty on “partner authorities” to co-operate with local councils in agreeing targets and forming the LAA. Co-operation is seen as partnership working such as an LSP (not a one-to-one relationship) and a continuous process (not a one-off). However, councils have no powers to force partners to co-operate, and LSPs remain voluntary bodies. In two-tier authorities the district councils should play an important role in identifying priorities for their areas and shaping the county LAA.

Table 3 shows the bodies that the 2007 Act defines as “partner authorities”, required to co-operate to develop the LAA. They represent a wide range of public services that are not provided by councils.



Table 3: bodies defined as “partner authorities” by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 with a duty to co-operate in developing the LAA

Arts Council	Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
The Broads Authority	National Park Authorities
Chief Officer of Police	Natural England
English Heritage	NHS Foundation Trusts
The Environment Agency	NHS Health Trusts
Fire and Rescue Authorities	Police authorities
Health and Safety Executive	Primary Care Trusts
The Highways Agency	Probation Trusts and other providers of probation services
Jobcentre Plus	Regional Development Agencies
Joint Waste Authorities	Sport England
Joint Waste Disposal Authorities	Transport for London
Learning and Skills Council	Youth Offending Teams
Local Probation Boards	Any other organisations added by an order under section 104(7) of the Act
Metropolitan Passenger Transport Authorities	

Local Area Agreements



To develop their LAA each top tier (i.e. unitary authority, county council, metropolitan area authority) must prioritise up to 35 targets taken from a set of 198 national indicators. Each LAA must also include 17 targets for education and early years.

These 198 indicators are grouped into seven “outcome areas”, based on Government priorities. They are:

- 1. Stronger communities**
- 2. Safer communities**
- 3. Children and young people**
- 4. Adult health and well-being**
- 5. Tackling exclusion and promoting equality**
- 6. Local economy**
- 7. Environmental sustainability**

There are some key principles which underpin how councils agree the LAA indicators with the Government:

- (i) the LAA will include up to 35 targets (plus 17 education and early years targets). However councils will need to report on all the 198 indicators as part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (see below).
- (ii) where councils provide services that local people value, but are not part of the 198, they should continue to do so
- (iii) the national indicator set will be the only measures that Government will monitor or assess
- (iv) because successful partnership working is important to achieving the targets, the indicators overlap for many



different organizations. For example, the police, PCTs, community groups and the youth service may all share some of the same aims and be able to contribute to achieve the same targets.

(iii) Equalities and Human Rights

Under legislation such as the Human Rights Act 1998 public authorities must uphold and promote human rights in everything they do. An important element of LAAs is to ensure that proper consideration is given to equalities issues. LAAs should not have a negative impact on particular communities or groups within an area. Questions of equality and inequality are reflected in the 198 National Indicators.

In negotiating LAAs, central and local government are required to fulfil their legal duties relating to race, gender and disability. Their obligations within each area focus on:

- promoting equality of opportunity
- promoting good relations
- promoting positive attitudes
- eliminating harassment, and
- eliminating unlawful discrimination.

These obligations are set out in the Race Equality Duty, the Gender Equality Duty and the Disability Equality Duty. The Government has announced plans to combine these into a single Equalities Act in the future.

Accountability



Many councillors have surgeries where people can go for advice and information.

If you are a new community group or you have recently joined one, you can use this as an opportunity to introduce yourself and your group and raise any issues

HOLDING COUNCILS TO ACCOUNT

(i) Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA)

Every year CPA looks at how efficiently each council is run, and the quality of all the services it provides. Carried out by the Audit Commission, CPA looks across the whole range of council services and considers how well they have done overall.

(ii) Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA)

In April 2009 CAA will replace CPA. CAA will continue to look at how well councils perform, but will focus more on the area rather than the services. It will look at performance across the whole set of 198 indicators (whether or not selected for inclusion in the LAA) and the full range of services provided to meet them.

The CAA will comprise:

- an area assessment that looks at how well local public services are delivering better results for local people, such as health, economic prospects and community safety, and how likely they are to improve in the future; and
- organisational assessments for individual agencies which will assess their performance and use of resources.

The National Indicator Set of 198 indicators will be used to inform both the area and organisational assessments.

CAA will focus on what is achieved by local authorities working alone, and together with others to meet the 198



target. The CAA assessments and judgements will be based largely on information that already exists, in order to reduce the administrative burden on councils.

A greater emphasis in CAA on what local people think of the services provided for them will mean the process will have to be much more open and understandable to the public.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – GETTING INVOLVED

Duty to Involve – The Government wants to make sure that councils give local people more opportunity to play an active part in shaping local services. To achieve this the 2007 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act includes a new ‘Duty to Involve’.

All councils already provide lots of different ways for local people to get involved and there are legal requirements for them to do so in specific areas, such as the planning system.

But the Government wants greater involvement of local people in their communities and this new duty on councils will greatly expand this role.

There are three main ways the Government wants councils to involve their communities:

- (i) providing information**
- (ii) consulting**
- (iii) involving in another way.**

The Duty to Involve is a vital part of the “empowerment” plans the Government has for local communities

Community engagement



The Duty requires councils to ensure they involve representatives of local persons in any activities relating to changing, improving or otherwise making things different. Representatives of local persons' means the people who live, work, study, play or visit the area.

Many councils have leaflets and on-line information about opportunities to get involved and have your say. Find out what is going on and get involved!

Examples of what might come under these three categories include:

- influencing decisions (e.g. planning local budgets, through "participatory budgeting");
- providing feedback on decisions, services and policies (e.g. 'have your say' section on the authority website);
- working with the council in developing new policies and services
- carrying out some particular services for themselves
- working with the council in assessing services (e.g. local people acting as 'mystery shoppers').

The Duty to Involve is a vital part of "empowerment" plans the government has for local communities, and its Community Empowerment Action Plan was published in October 2007.

The government want to make it easier for citizens and local communities to hold councils and other public agencies to account for their decisions and performance. The Empowerment White Paper, published in July 2008, set out a range of proposals to strengthen the use of petitions, to give communities a say over how funds are spent and to require councils to respond to concerns of citizens.



HOW TO CONTACT YOUR COUNCIL

Anyone can contact their council on a matter relating to local services. You can speak to an elected councillor about matters that concern you.

Where your immediate contact is unable to help, or you need to speak to a different person or department, they will normally redirect you. Sometimes, for example, when you want to comment on a planning application that affects you, you may be asked to respond in a specific way, often in writing.

Through having used this guide to How Your Council Works, you should be able to see where best to make your enquiry (local council services, or elected councillor), and whether you need to speak to someone in the county council, or district council. For unitary or metropolitan councils there will be just one council office contact point.

See overleaf for more details.

Contacts and Top Tips

Want to know more?

- www.urbanforum.org.uk
- www.navca.org.uk
- www.aboutmyvote.co.uk
- www.communities.gov.uk
- www.audit-commission.gov.uk
- www.upmystreet.com/local
- www.lga.gov.uk
- www.idea.gov.uk
- www.theyworkforyou.com

The main ways to make contact with your Council

In person

You can visit the main council offices and speak to someone face to face

Online

You can directly access a wide range of council services online, from finding information on rubbish collection, to applying for school places, or paying bills.

You can do this either through the internet address of your council if you know it, or, perhaps more easily, www.direct.gov.uk/mycouncil. This service has been specially designed to make it simple for anyone to find and go to their council's website. All you need is your post code, or town or street name, to go directly to the relevant service page of the local council's website.

By phone

You can call the main telephone number of the council.

By letter

You can write to the council's offices.

You can also find contact details online, in the telephone directory or through local information points like libraries.



Top Tips for getting involved or finding out more about your Council

- Make sure you know which council or councils cover the area you live or work in or where your community group is active.
- Find out who your local councillors are and which Cabinet Member is responsible for issues you or your community groups are interested in.
- All councils will have leaflets explaining how decisions are taken, how people can stay informed and what opportunities there are for the public to attend meetings, ask questions and submit petitions. Visit your town hall to see what information they have available or look on-line.
- Many councillors have surgeries where people can go for advice and information. Find out when these are. If you are a new voluntary / community group or you have recently joined one, you can use this as an opportunity to introduce yourself and your group and raise any issues.
- Find out when the next round of elections is and make sure you are registered to vote.
- Invite local councillors to community / voluntary group meetings, the AGM or any activities you have planned. They may be happy to give a short speech at a meeting or the AGM about the council. They could be too busy to attend but the invitation will raise awareness of your group and the issues you are interested in.
- Many councils have leaflets and on-line information about opportunities to get involved and have your say. Find out what is going on and get involved!



A Handy Guide for community groups

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