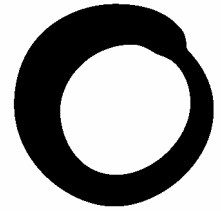


October 2002



**Friends of  
the Earth**

# Briefing

# Beginners Guide to Local Authorities in England

## Summary

Whilst it is not necessary to become an expert on the workings of local government in order to engage with and influence your local authority, a basic understanding is invaluable.

Recent years have seen many significant changes to local authorities, the intention of which has been to streamline and modernise their political and administrative functions and to put them in 'touch with the people'. The next few pages are designed to provide an introduction to the types, remit and organisation of local authorities in England.

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## **An Overview of local authorities in England**

### **National Government and local authorities**

Responsibility for regional and local government in England lies with the UK Government and specifically within the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM).

Useful sources of information on local government are the **Local Government Association (LGA)** and the **Local Government Information Unit (LGIU)**.

- The stated aim of the LGA is to promote better local government. It acts on behalf of local authorities and serves as an intermediary between them and national government.
- The LGIU is an independent research and information organisation that works on behalf of its member authorities towards the realisation of strong local government.

### **What are the different types of local authorities in England?**

The structure of local government varies in different parts of the country. There are five different types of local authorities in England, these are divided into single-tier and two-tier authorities.

Single tier authorities are

- Metropolitan Authorities
- London Boroughs
- Unitary or Shire Authorities

Two tier authorities are comprised of a

- County Council, and
- District Council

In addition to the nearly 400 local authorities in England there are some 10,000 parish and town councils. These are mostly, but not exclusively, in rural areas. **The National Association of Local Councils (NALC)** represents and works on behalf of these community councils and is a useful contact point.

In London, the Mayor and his Greater London Authority (GLA) take responsibility for strategic issues over the area. However, the Government Minister for London retains most power over policy.

### **Changes ahead for two-tier authorities**

The establishment of elected Regional Assemblies as outlined in the Government white paper *Your Region, your choice: revitalising the English regions* (May 2002) has the potential to profoundly change the structure and powers of two-tier local government. Currently there

are a number of Regional Assemblies that take a mainly strategic planning view of their area. These assemblies are made up of representatives from the communities in the region including local authority councillors and members of the voluntary sector. The Government will decide whether there is enough interest in each region to hold a referendum on the establishment of an elected assembly. Should such a referendum result in a vote in favour, a level of the two-tier authority in that region, either council or district level, will be removed. The Government is due to decide on whether they'll be a referendum in the north east during Summer 2003, so late 2003 is the earliest any such change to local government will occur.

### **What do the different authorities do?**

According to the LGA local authorities in England and Wales employ over 2.1 million staff and spend £70 billion a year, which accounts for around 25% of total public spending. These resources are used to provide many of the services that effect our daily lives. Responsibility for the provision of the services varies depending on the local authority type.

Single tier authorities provide all local authority services to the population in their area. These services include:

- Education
- Social services
- Planning
- Waste disposal, recycling and collection
- Trading standards
- Emergency planning
- Roads, highways and transportation
- Housing
- Environmental Health
- Parks, open spaces and countryside
- Markets and fairs

In two-tier structures responsibility is split between the two levels with around 80% of the services being provided at the county level and the rest at the district. The split in service provision between the two is broadly:

Counties:

- Education
- Social services
- Farming/Agricultural tenancy
- Trading standards
- Waste disposal

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- Highways and transport
- Strategic land use planning

Districts:

- Housing
- Parks, sports, arts etc
- Land use planning permission
- Environment Health
- Waste collection and recycling
- Street cleaning

Even if you are trying to influence a policy area held by your County Council, targeting the District level could be very beneficial – having them on-side will send a strong signal up to the County.

The GLA is responsible for:

- Transport
- Planning
- Environment
- Health
- Culture
- Housing

More information on authority responsibilities is available from the LGA and the LGIU.

### **What type of local authority is in my area?**

The type of authority will vary in each area and whilst there aren't absolute criteria to determine which types will be where, the general pattern is that large urban areas are most likely to be represented by single tier authorities whilst two-tier authorities are more likely exist in rural areas. A definitive list is available from the LGA, alternatively your local library or your local authority enquiry desk should be able to help.

### **What about town and parish councils?**

Where they exist, Town and Parish councils stand within larger local authorities which provide most of the services. These smaller councils however can provide local services such as community centres, arts and leisure facilities, parks and play areas. They also have a right to be notified about planning applications in their area.

Whilst their powers are strictly limited these local councils are very close to and representative of their communities. Consequently, as in the case of District Councils above, it is worth seeking their support for your campaign as it will send a strong message to the parent authority.

## **How are local authorities organised?**

### **Political structure**

The Local Government Act 2000 imposed changes on local authorities that were designed to streamline and modernise their political structures. The act was intended to end the old committee system of local government which, it was argued, was slow and ineffective although, others may counter, democratic and accountable. These committees were to be replaced with a new streamlined cabinet system. Each local authority was asked to choose from one of the four options below:

1. A mayor elected by the electorate, with a cabinet of between 2 and 10 councillors.
2. A leader elected by the council, with a cabinet of between 2 and 10 councillors either selected by the leader or the full council.
3. An elected mayor with an officer appointed by the council known as a council manager.
4. A modified committee system could be chosen by district councils with a population below 85,000 (or for some exceptions when it was deemed 'most suitable' eg Brighton and Hove).

The most common option chosen was a council elected leader and cabinet system. A smaller number of communities have voted for a publicly elected mayor and cabinet. A small number have gone for the modified committee system, and only one (Stoke on Trent) for option 3.

### **The Constitution**

Each local authority has adopted a constitution that sets out how the authority operates, how decisions are made and the procedures that are followed to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. Each authority's constitution should be available on their web site, at the local library or directly from the authority (a fee will most likely be charged for the latter). While constitutions don't make exciting reading they do clearly set out the structure and political workings of the council as well as the responsibilities of the leaders and of the members and the rights of the citizen and, consequently, are worth being aware of.

Below are two examples of how an authority might be structured - your authority is very likely be similar to one or the other. For full information on a particular authority contact them directly or look at their constitution.

### **Council leader and cabinet**

Where a council has opted for the leader and cabinet system, the leader and a number of executive councillors (those with decision making powers) become the powerhouse of the council's decision-making process. Anybody wishing to influence local authority policy must penetrate this inner sanctum. It is worth noting that this cabinet may be made up solely of members from the ruling political party group within the council ie that party which has the most councillors.

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The executive councillors are appointed either by the full council (ie all of the authority's councillors) or by the leader. Each possesses a portfolio or responsibility for a particular part of the council's services - such as education, social services or the environment. Decision-making on each policy area may lie either solely with the executive councillor or with the cabinet as a whole, depending on the constitution.

An authority may have upwards of fifty elected councillors so what do the rest of them do? The Local Government Act 2000 requires the appointment of **Overview and Scrutiny Committees**. These are made up of non-executive backbench councillors and members of the public, such as people from the business sector and voluntary groups. There may be a number of these committees reflecting the portfolios assigned to the executive cabinet members such as education, environment and social services. The role of these committees is to hold the executive to account and scrutinise the decisions that the executive is about to take or has already taken. These committees are more likely to have politically balanced cross-party representation.

**NOTE: An elected mayor and cabinet system operates in a similar way with a significant difference being that the mayor may not necessarily be from the political party holding the majority in council.**

### **Modified Committee system**

A modified committee system represents a balance between the old committee system and the executive cabinet system. Such a structure will still have a council leader but decisions are made by politically balanced executive committees representing key policy areas such as education, social services and environment rather than by individual executives. There may well be an overseeing committee chaired by the leader of the council, such as a Policy and Resources Committee, but this will not have the power held by the cabinet in the previous example.

A modified committee system will also have an **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**. There may well only be one committee (rather than several reflecting different portfolios) but it will have the power to set up panels to look at specific issues.

### **Decision Making**

Most decisions will be taken by the executive councillors, debated and voted on at public meetings and based on publicly available reports produced by council officers. The full council has to adopt and agree the broad policy framework of the council including the budget, Development Plans, Best Value Performance Plans, Community Strategies and Local Transport Plan.

Your council will have a rolling plan outlining which decisions will be taken over the next few months and by whom.

In addition, policy can be agreed by passing Motions (once they are passed they are called Resolutions). Motions can only be proposed by councillors.

### Administrative structure

Whilst the democratic power lies with the elected councillors, the day to day running of the authority is the responsibility of the paid employees, that is the Chief Executive, the Directors of each service area and the Council Officers. It may well be that the administrative and political structures of the council are to an extent reflections of each other. In addition to providing and running council services council officers also act as advisors to councillors providing expertise and information where required. Council officers will write the reports on which policy decisions are based.

If you are to influence your local authority you need to be familiar with both the political and administrative structures as well as the key individual elected councillors and council employees.

### Where does the power lie?

The key to successful campaigning is identifying and influencing key players and decision makers, these will include both councillors and officers.

### Cabinet system

The first key elected representative is the **Elected Mayor**, if there is one, or the **Leader of the Council** if there isn't. A council leader or mayor representing the ruling party in the council is a potent ally, if the leader can be convinced the rest of the party and with it the majority in the council may well follow behind.

The next are **cabinet members** (executive councillors) with responsibility for the areas affected by a particular campaign. Alongside these it may well be worth identifying the chairs of the **Overview and Scrutiny Committees** in these areas.

### Committee system

In a modified committee system the key decision makers are likely to be the **Leader of the Council** and the councillors who chair the various **committees**. Again the **Overview and Scrutiny Committee** may be useful.

### Opposition leaders

In addition it may be worth identifying the leaders of the political parties other than the ruling party. This is particularly important when trying to persuade the council to pass a resolution, as there may well be more chance of success if the resolution has cross party support.

### Administration

As well as elected representatives it is also worth identifying and trying to influence key **council officers** in the relevant departments as it may be they who the councillors rely upon for their advice.

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### **Non-elected mayor**

Although they have no special political powers, they are important figure-heads and can help get things onto the agenda.

### **Local Strategic Partnerships Community Strategies and Best Value**

Recent years have seen the emergence of a number of new initiatives aimed at extending community involvement and improving service quality.

**Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP)** are partnerships bringing together stake holders in an area and may include representatives from the Local Health Authority, community groups and the voluntary sector as well as local business. The purpose of the LSP is to facilitate community involvement in council policy making, in theory, if an LSP raises an issue the council is duty bound to listen.

The purpose of **Community Strategies (CS)** is 'to enhance the quality of life of local communities and to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK'. They are intended to be the overarching umbrella under which other local plans and strategies sit.

**Best Value (BV)** affects all council services; it places upon local authorities an obligation to continuously improve their effectiveness. Councils must prepare annual **BV Performance Plans** that set out the services they will provide and the indicators by which their performance will be judged. These indicators will include those set by Government plus locally relevant or voluntary ones. Find out how your council performs in areas relevant to your campaign from its **Best Value Review**. This review also provides the opportunity for the public to comment on and suggest new performance indicators.

Whilst the extent to which local authorities have developed and take note of these individual initiatives will vary they all provide potential avenues for the campaigner to explore. Contact your local authority to find out about their work in these areas, at the very least if the community start asking about them councillors are more likely to take the concepts seriously.

### **When are elections held?**

Elections are great opportunities to get issues on the political agenda. Some political parties are very keen to be "seen to be green" and elections are an ideal opportunity to draw commitments from politicians – particularly if it doesn't cost them anything and it takes away the ground on which the opposition may be campaigning.

Political parties like to approach an election with a 'big idea', which they perceive is a vote winner or a vote saver.

Local authorities are elected every four years although this may be staggered with half the councillors elected every two years or a third elected every year with no elections held in the fourth year. A full list of council elections in May 2003 is on the OPDM local regional government web site, alternatively contact your local authority.

## **Useful Contacts**

### **Your Local Authority**

Your council should have an information desk which will help with a wide range of enquiries and provide details for your own councillors and the executive. Contact details will be in the telephone book or available from your local library.

Web sites contain a wealth of information and will generally be in the form of:  
www.authorityname.gov.uk eg. [www.lancashire.gov.uk](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk)

### **Office of the Deputy Prime Minister**

Local regional government web site: [www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/index.htm](http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/index.htm)

**Tel: 020 7944 3000**

### **Local Government Association**

[www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk)

**Tel: 020 7664 3131**

### **Local Government Information Unit**

[www.lgiu.gov.uk](http://www.lgiu.gov.uk)

**Tel: 020 7554 2800**

### **National Association Of Local Councils**

[www.nalc.gov.uk](http://www.nalc.gov.uk)