



Friends of the Earth

PULL-OUT

The Rough Guide to the new-look local government

There are changes afoot in local government and any local group working to influence its local authority needs to know about them. London Campaigns Co-ordinator Paul de Zylva and Local Campaigner Anna Watson outline the basics and provide some tips for getting the best out of the new system

Since Labour came to power in 1997, it has passed legislation intended to “modernise” local government and put it in “touch with the people”. The three big ideas are:

- **New local government structures**
- **Best Value**
- **Community Strategies**

These will affect the way your local authority operates and could change the way you work with or try to influence them. These changes only affect local authorities in England and Wales, and not Northern Ireland. There is, however, a planned review of the structures and functions of local authorities in Northern Ireland. To find out more, contact FOE Northern Ireland on 02890 664 311.



New local government structures

The Local Government Act 2000 killed off the old committee structure of all local authorities in England and Wales. Councils used to be run by a series of committees – one for each service department – made up of elected councillors. Decisions made by the committees or subcommittees had to be ratified at full council meetings before the decisions could be acted on. This was seen to be a slow and ineffective way for decisions to be taken. From now on, local authorities have to adopt a new political structure that splits councillors into those that sit on a decision-making executive and those who are backbencher councillors. The new decision-making executives differ from the committee structure as: a) they do not need to reflect the political balance of the council and b) they cannot contain more than ten councillors. These executives can take one of three forms – see the box below.

Before a local authority can adopt a new structure it must consult the local electorate on their preferred option, although the final decision rests with the authority. The options are:

- A mayor elected by the electorate, with a cabinet of nine councillors appointed by the mayor
- An elected leader, elected by the council, with a cabinet of nine councillors either selected by the leader or the full council
- An elected mayor (as above) with an officer appointed by the council known as a council manager.

David Jay, former Hammersmith and Fulham FOE member, reports from the front line

"I attended four or five meetings of the Hammersmith and Fulham Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny committee, my main agenda was to improve the borough's unenviable recycling rate. As a member of Hammersmith and Fulham FOE I was a co-opted member of the panel, invited to join the table for discussion of some points. I had to sit through many other issues of varying degrees of relevance from fly tipping and concerns about the reliability of street lights to provisions for children in local parks and local development but I also had a chance to discuss other important issues such as air quality. I was left feeling that the process was much more useful in theory than in practice. Certainly it was good to be able to raise concerns before a panel of councillors and participate in the ensuing discussion. This also helped to enthuse some of the councillors on certain issues, and do so in a forum where they could push the point themselves. However many responses ultimately took the form of "That's a good point, but unfortunately our current situation is ..." and most outcomes seemed to involve the production of a report at best. But I did feel that I had increased the level of awareness and concern within the council about recycling, which can only be a good thing. I don't think Scrutiny panels are the best way to change the world, but they are a useful addition to the campaigner's toolbox, as well as a good way to make contacts within local government."

Decision making

The Government's thinking is that these arrangements will lead to speedier decision making, as not all decisions will have to be ratified by the full council. It will also be clearer who the decision makers are so there will be more accountability.

The main day-to-day decisions of the authority will be taken in the executives. They will implement the authorities' policies from schools and housing to waste and transport issues. The full council will still have to adopt and agree the broad policy framework of the council, including:

- **The Budget**
- **Development plans**
- **Best Value performance plan**
- **Community Strategies**
- **Local transport plan**

Planning applications will be dealt with as they are now by a cross-party committee.

Influencing decisions taken by the executive will still be a key opportunity for campaigners. Under the 2000 Act, an authority must draw up a four-month rolling plan outlining which decisions will be taken in this period and by whom. This will be an invaluable source of information to campaigners.

For more detailed information about the executive structures see the Useful Reading section on page 14 at the end of the pull-out.

What role does this leave for backbench councillors?

The 2000 Act 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 local businesses or from voluntary organisations (see box on the left).

The main role of these committees is to hold the executive to account and scrutinise decisions the executive is planning to take or has taken. Membership of these committees provides local groups with an opportunity to promote issues of concern and to keep track of these issues. Even if your group cannot commit to being part of a relevant committee, the meetings of the committees are open to the public and agendas and minutes of the meetings are publicly available.

Consultation

The new structures give non-executive councillors more time to consult with their constituents about local authority issues and to represent their views to the authority.

Consultation is the current buzz word in local government and is a key process in both Best Value and the preparation and implementation of Community Strategies. It will be hard for local groups to ignore these two local government initiatives.



Best Value

Best Value (BV) will affect all councils' services, from housing repairs and parking services to Local Agenda 21, the drawing up of Community Strategies and planning decisions. The new duty of BV requires authorities to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which they carry out their functions. In short, BV is about:

- raising the effectiveness of council services
- demonstrating that the £80bn local government sector is making good use of its money
- dealing with people's detachment from local government, shown in voter apathy, by building new confidence in local authorities.

What are councils doing about BV?

Councils must prepare annual BV Performance Plans setting out what services they will provide; how; and who will be responsible for them. They must use a range of indicators to assess

performance including locally relevant ones and standard ones set by the Audit Commission and by Government. At the heart of dealing with BV is the BV Review which all authorities must carry out for all services and functions. In each BV Review a council must show it has:

- 1 challenged itself on why and how a service/function is provided
- 2 consulted the local community on what it wants and is prepared to pay for
- 3 compared itself and its services with other authorities and with private and voluntary sector bodies providing similar services/ functions – and compete to provide the service.

If you want to get the best out of BV locally, get to know what indicators your council is using. Perhaps you could influence it to use sustainability indicators. Also let your council know either through Best Value Reviews or through the Best Value Scrutiny Committee what services you want them to deliver eg - waste collection must include doorstep recycling.



Community Strategies (CS)

Under the 2000 Act there is now a duty on every local authority in England and Wales to prepare a CS. The CS is a strategy drawn up between a group of "partners" which aims to "enhance the quality of life of local communities and to

contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK". To draw up a CS your council will have to find out what people want. It is an ideal opportunity for campaigners to reinforce the message of sustainable development with their councils. The Government sees CSs as the overarching umbrella under which all other local plans and strategies sit.

Strategic makeup

The four key components of a Community Strategy are:

- A long-term vision for the area
- An action plan setting out short-term activities to reach the longer-term vision
- A commitment to implement the action plan and proposals for doing so
- Arrangements for monitoring the action plan and for reviewing the strategy.

Partners

The partners who will prepare and implement the strategy are:

- The local authority – both executive and non-executive councillors
- Public bodies – such as health authorities and the benefits agency
- Regional bodies – such as, Government Offices, Regional Development Agencies, English Nature and the Environment Agency
- Local businesses and chambers of commerce
- Community and voluntary groups
- Local people.

Local opportunities

- As there is no deadline for councils to draw up a CS, some councils may not see it as a priority – make sure your council commits to preparing one
- Use your contacts in the community to get consent on what action is needed in your area
- Run your own visioning exercise for the area – inviting councillors to attend (see Useful Reading for more information)
- Take forward any work you have done on LA21 and apply it to your Community Strategy.

We will all have to keep a watch on how decisions are made under these “modern” approaches and whether authorities are really heading towards a better deal for the environment and local communities. We have tried to cover the basics here but if you want to know more see Useful Reading (below) or contact Anna Watson on 020 7566 1693



Tips & ideas for working with local authorities

- Before getting involved with any local authority process be clear about what you want to achieve and how it will benefit your local campaigning. It may just mean more work and no gain.
- Invite one person in your group to take responsibility for tracking local authority work.
- Get to know the key officers of the council, such as the Planning Officer and Economic Development Officer.
- Know which councillors are on the executive and which councillors are on the different Overview and Scrutiny Committees.
- Produce a special edition of your newsletter, aimed at local councillors and council officers – outlining your Group’s views on council decisions and policies and your solutions and ideas.
- Explore ways to work with and influence the other partners in the preparation and implementation of the Community Strategy.
- You could present awards for best councillor and worst councillor – or the best council decision and the worst council decision.
- If neighbouring councils are performing better on environmental or social issues, you can use this information to push your council to do better. The Audit Commission monitors local councils’ performance – you can compare different authorities on the Commission’s website (see Useful Reading).



Useful Reading

Your local council should be able to answer any queries you have about information in this Rough Guide, but here are some other sources worth a try:



New local government structures

- *New political structures and access to local government information* – a FOE briefing; contact Anna Watson 020 7566 1693 or annaw@foe.co.uk
- *New council constitutions* – a guidance pack; see www.local-regions.detr.gov.uk/ncc/index.htm
- www.idea.gov.uk/routes/survey.htm has responses from more than 50 per cent of local authorities in England and Wales to the new structures



Best value

- The Audit Commission; 0800 502030 or www.audit-commission.gov.uk
- www.local-regions.detr.gov.uk/bestvalue/bvindex.htm



Community strategies

- *Preparing community strategies: government guidance to local authorities*; see www.local-regions.detr.gov.uk/pcs/guidance
- *Preparing community strategies – Local Government Association advice*; see www.lga.gov.uk
- *What’s community planning all about?*; see www.idea.gov.uk/dizzy/
- Sustainability Indicators can be found at www.sustainable-development.gov.uk
- The complete Local Government Act 2000 can be found at www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2000/20000022.htm
- Ideas on involving your community can be found in *Participation works* written by the New Economics Foundation; ISBN 1 899407 17 0