

Influencing Local Government

Action guide

The best way to influence local government is to start long before you have any specific campaign. This guide is therefore in three parts:

1. Build your power base: contacts and relationships
2. Focus on power points: decision-making structures
3. Take action: what to do when all else fails

Building your base can avoid the need to mount a public campaign, because you influence the council so that issues don't arise, and when they do you can take effective early action. To influence the council you need to know where decisions are made, on what basis, and who has the power. If an issue does arise and you've built your base and identified who has the power, you are much more likely to win when you do take action.

If you need to take action and you haven't built a base, you can do a rapid base-building exercise as part of your campaign, so read the first part anyway.

1. Build your base

If local councils have any influence on things that concern you:

- Be clear about your aims and how the council can help or hinder
- Understand how your local council works
- Build relationships with key people in the council and other local agencies

Local councils have a wide range of powers, including many things they have to do by law ([statutory duties](#)). Councils can also do anything they want that is not illegal through the "general power of competence".

Every local council is different, so do not assume your council will behave the same as another. Although the laws are the same and their structures may look similar, how councils do things depends on their organisational culture, traditions and individuals in your area. In one area individual council officers, councillors or whole departments may be very helpful, while their counterparts in another area may be obstructive. With local knowledge and contacts you can influence even the most hostile council. One helpful person can help you find a way round obstacles very quickly – it could be an officer, an

elected councillor, a community activist or a local resident who knows how things really work and who matters when decisions are made.

The first steps to building your base are to

1. identify which bits of the council are relevant to your aims
2. get to know who can help and cultivate allies
3. make contact with officials and councillors responsible for things that concern you.

Use your council's website to find out which Departments and officers are likely to be relevant. It is also worth reading the **strategic plan**, which sets out the council's priorities for one to five years (not to be confused with land use planning, which is only part of its overall strategy). If your issues are in the plan, refer to it when you want action on them. If it would help to have your issues in the plan, make sure your voice is heard when it is revised.

But the formal council structure is only part of the picture: to know who really matters you need to talk with people who can help. Many areas have a [Council of Voluntary Service](#) (CVS) which provide information and support to community and voluntary organisations, so talk to them about how and what in the council or other local agencies are relevant to your aims. Many areas also have **umbrella groups** for different issues, such as the arts, childcare, community safety, environment, ethnic minorities, health, housing, etc. Some umbrella groups are run or funded by the council, and many work in partnership with councils. Use these networks to find out how your council actually works and who to go to about issues that concern you.

One quick way to do this is to go to meetings relevant to your aims:

- ✓ make yourself known
- ✓ tell people about your aims
- ✓ ask questions in a friendly way
- ✓ and make contacts:

Find out which meetings are relevant from local organisations with similar interests to yours, from your library service, CVS or umbrella groups.

If you are clear about your aims and build positive relationships with people, you are likely to get invited to meetings at which your concerns are discussed and increase your influence.

Tip 1: keep your issue on the agenda by asking relevant questions and making your presence known, so that you and your organisation are widely recognised and associated with the issues you care about.

Tip 2: build positive relationships, particularly with the officials and councillors who oppose or don't understand your issue. If you treat them with respect, while clearly saying what you want changed and why, they will be less resistant and may even become helpful. To get the change you want, focus on the decision-makers with power (see part 2, Focus on power points).

Tip 3: stay focused on your aims and purpose: it can be very easy to get sucked into local meetings and advisory groups, so be clear about which can help your cause and are worth going to for information, contacts or decisions, and which meetings are a waste of time.

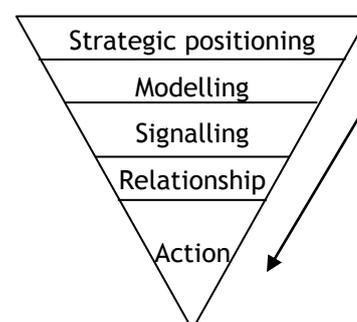
Above all, **build your base in the community** through relationships with local people and organisations. If you are part of a small organisation concerned with a specific issue it is worth being part of a larger umbrella groups to increase your influence.

For lessons on building a base in civil society, study [community organising](#):

- [Citizens UK](#) provides training and support for local organisers
- Locality runs Government funded [community organiser training](#)
- [Leading Change Network](#) is one of many US community organiser training networks
- The [Asset-Based Community Development Institute](#) (ABCD) offers online resources for building on community strengths (assets)

To summarise, build your base by putting yourself and your organisation in a position where it can act effectively:

1. Find a place to influence the change you want (eg local networks and forums)
2. Be the change you want to see: show people what you want through actions
3. Say why, what and how you want it done;
4. Connect with people: build relationships
5. Make every action a success



2. Focus on power points

To get action on issues that concern you, you need to

- be very clear about the results you want
- know what action is needed to bring about those results
- find out who has the power to take action

Having a clear objective is often the most powerful and difficult part of any campaign. Powerful because it gives you focus. Difficult because most people and organisations have many aims, so that it takes time to clarify the outcome you want and the action needed to achieve it.

Speaking up for your issue and building a base will strengthen your power to advance your cause. Building your base will also give you the local knowledge needed to find out who to influence to get the result you want.

Local power structures

There is usually a difference between formal and informal power structures, which may vary between parts of the council. In some areas a small group of local councillors decide everything; in another a few officers may be more powerful; elsewhere a group within the ruling party, trades unions, a business association, golf club or other body may wield most power. In some places no one seems in control and what happens depends on who is most determined at a particular moment. To influence decisions you therefore need to understand both the formal and informal or shadow power structures.

Use local contacts and networks to understand and build relationships with key people in the informal power structures (see previous section).

For information on the formal powers and structures of your council see:

1. Gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/understand-how-your-council-works>
2. Your [local council website](#) or your [parish council](#)
3. Your [local library service](#)

It is also worth knowing if your council has legal duties to act on the issues you care about. There are about 1,300 legal duties on local government, listed in the following spreadsheets:

- Duties owned by the [Department for Communities and Local Government](#) (DCLG)
- Duties owned by [other government departments](#)

The [Local Government Association](#) (LGA) is the national voice for local government in England and Wales. It can give an insight into issues which keep local councillors awake at night.

[Info4Local.gov.uk](#) provides easy access to information from more than 60 government departments, agencies and public bodies relevant to local councils.

What to look for

Find your [local council website](#).

The **Council Constitution** sets out its structure and rules how decisions are made and the procedures which are followed.

Elections for local councillors are key opportunities to influence policy: if you want your council to do something they are not doing (or to stop doing something), lobby the parties and candidates standing for election to make a commitment to it as part of their election campaign.

The political make-up of elected councillors can be critically important to how easy or difficult it is to influence the council on different issues.

Use your local councillor for local issues: www.writetothem.com/ enables UK citizens to send emails or faxes to their local councillors, MP, MEPs and other elected representatives

The **Council Leader** is the democratic head of the council, who chairs a Cabinet of Portfolio Holders responsible for different areas of the council's work. A few councils like London and Bristol are run by a directly elected **Mayor** (not to be confused with the ceremonial mayor who is elected for a year to chair the full council).

The political party which gets most councillors elected runs the council and councillors from other parties form the opposition. If no party has a majority of councillors the council may be run by a minority or a coalition of one or more parties.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee can challenge decisions and delivery of public services through:

- reviews into individual topics
- “call in” scrutiny of decisions of the cabinet before they are implemented

- “councillor call for action” – consideration of ward matters brought by individual councillors
- Call to account of officers on receipt of a petition of 500 or more signatures from the public
- Interviews with individual cabinet members.

Council assembly or full council meeting

This is a meeting of all ward councillors, held every one or two months. Its main function is to approve decisions made by council committees and is sometimes the last chance to get action on an issue. In most cases it is very difficult to get a decision overturned at full council, so it is vital to influence councillors and officers long before your issue comes to the full council.

Community or Parish Councils

Community or Parish councils consist of councillors elected to represent a smaller area and take decisions on much more local issues.

Council staff are the permanent full-time officials who usually have most influence on what a council does, so it is important to work with the officials most closely involved in your issue. If they support you, you may be 90% of the way to achieving your aim. Look for the **management structure** and **staff directory** to find out who’s who and the lines of accountability

Council plan

These documents and processes can be very useful when asking for action on things that concern you: it is easier to get action linked to a policy in the plan. If your issues are not in the plan you may have to be more persistent. You can also campaign to get it into the plan when it is revised.

Budget

The Council Budget is key for anything which needs money or staff. If no money has been allocated for what you want the council to do, it won’t do much, even if a councillor supports you. If you want the council to do something that involves money it has to come from another budget line, reserves or an outside source such as central government, the EU or revenue.

Most councils can find money to do something they really want to do, so the main thing is to persuade councillors and officials to support your project. If they say no money is available, look at the budget to find budget lines in the same department that are underspent or reserves that could be used, or ask about external sources of money.

Where and how to get information you need

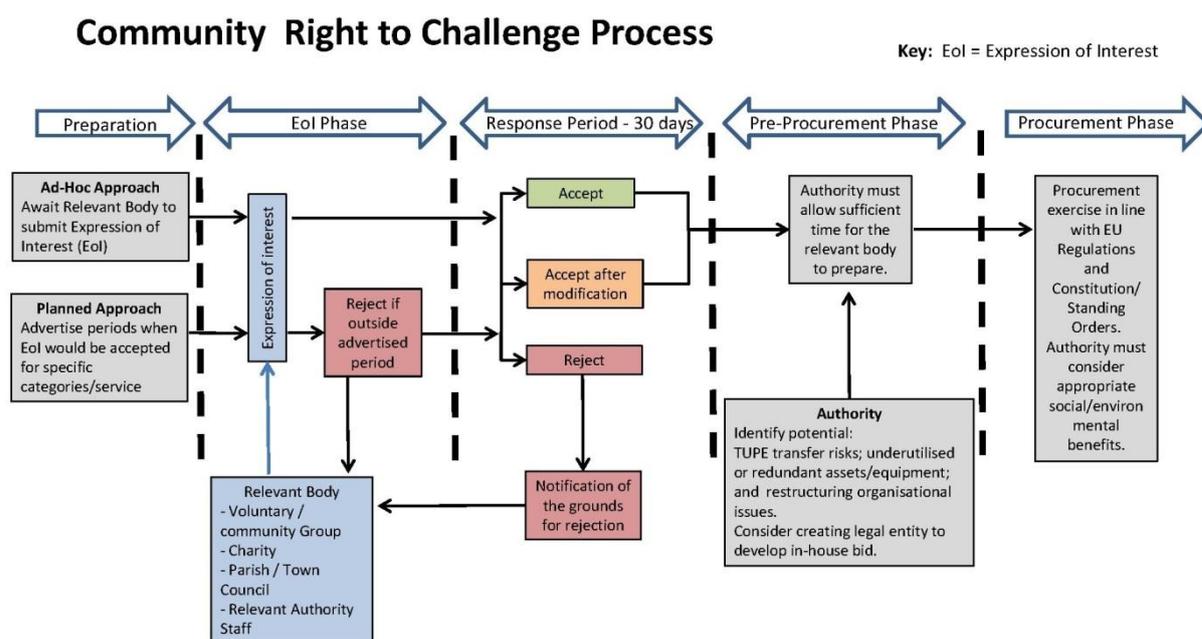
Data transparency laws mean your council must provide a wide range of information including payments to external providers for £500 or more, details of chief officer pay and contracts.

Council websites also provide a wide range of information about spending, plans and policies. If you can't find what you want, ask: ring the relevant department, the CVS or your library to help if necessary. If the council won't give you information, make a **freedom of information request**: details on your council website.

If you have a problem with a service, complain to the council first. If you are not satisfied, use the [Local Government Ombudsman](#): [click here on how to complain](#) or call the Advice Team: 0300 061 0614

New powers in the localism act

The Community Right to Challenge allows community groups or council staff to bid to run local authority services. The process starts with a written Expression of Interest (Eoi) to the Council:



Other new rights include:

- [Community Right to Bid](#)
- [Community Right to Build](#)
- [Community Right to Reclaim Land](#)
- [Design support for communities](#)
- [Neighbourhood planning](#)

For more information go to: [My Community Rights website](#).

3. Taking action

If all else fails, take action to put pressure on a councillor or the whole council. For effective action you need to

- ✓ Be clear what you want: a specific “ask”
- ✓ Lobby everyone who has the power to give it
- ✓ Know when and where they will make the decision

If you have tried and failed to persuade councillors and officials about your cause, you will know their arguments why they are rejecting your proposal. Don't ask for something that is not in their power to give: if the issue is out of their hands, win them over to support you in putting pressure on which ever authority has the power over the issue.

If your campaign is about the council's failure to provide a service for which it has a statutory duty, or it is planning to cut a service that affects vulnerable groups, you may have a case under **public law**. The [Public Law Project](#) is an independent, national legal charity which aims to improve access to public law remedies for those whose access is restricted by poverty, discrimination or other similar barriers. They also run [training events](#) and help people [get advice](#) on public law issues.

Build your support in the local community and other agencies relevant to your cause, and provide evidence to support your case (see other sections of this site). Get sympathetic coverage in the [local press](#) and [local radio stations](#) ([BBC](#) and [commercial](#)).

Lobby every single councillor involved in the decision and show them the benefits of supporting your cause from their point of view. If they won't support you, encourage them to abstain or develop an alternative proposal which they can support.

If you organise a demonstration, it is usually counter-productive to be hostile to individuals opposed to your cause. It is much more effective to be humorous and fun, using costumes, props, cartoons and witty slogans to make your point.

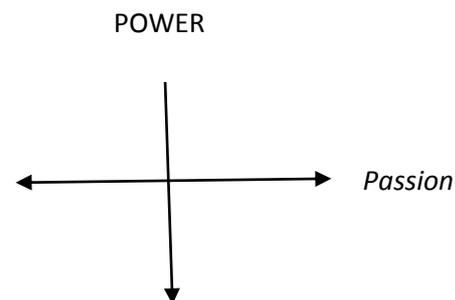
When organising your campaign, study the key people involved in the decision and understand their motives: what keeps them awake at night? What is more

important for them than your cause? Who do they listen to? Use the following matrix to map the key people you need to influence.

Power / Passion matrix

Identify all key people who can influence your issue
Put each one on the “Power / Passion” matrix (right):

- put powerful supporters in the top right quadrant
- powerful opponents in the top left quadrant
- politically powerless supporters in bottom right



Then plan how you to move your most powerful opponents from the left to right quadrant. Use the questions in the following table to understand each one.

Influence analysis: Key actors and agencies

NAME, organisation,	Satisfy	Engage
	Monitor	Inform
	power/interest matrix	
Relevant beliefs & values (paradigm/frame)	Changes in belief desired:	
Red: Blocker / Orange: Supporter / Green: Advocate		
Relationship to you: High ← 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 → Low		
Question	Response	Action/messages
What emotional or financial interest do they have in the issue / your work?		

What motivates them most of all?		
What keeps them awake at night? (What are their sleep distracting worries?)		
What does your issue / solution offer them?		
What common ground is there between you?		
What is their current opinion of your work? Is it based on good information?		
What information do they want/need about you?		
How do they want to receive information from you? What is the best way of communicating with them?		
Who generally influences their opinions? (Who do they listen to?)		
Who influences their opinion of you?		
Which of these influencers are key people in their own right, if any?		
If they are not likely to be positive, what will win them round to support you?		
If you don't think that you will be able to win them round, how will you manage their opposition?		