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Local Planning Systems This note looks at how Community Champions can work with local organisations to help them use local planning systems effectively. A quick guide to six three-letter-acronyms.

Planning has changed a lot in recent years and it won't be surprising if a group you work with as a Champion doesn't understand it all. This briefing is aimed at giving you the core information and the resources you need to guide them through the system. There are two different (but related) parts of local planning in England and Wales:

- Firstly there's the planning permission system, where someone applies for permission to build or develop something from a new garage to a motorway or a nuclear power station. You may find yourself working with organisations that are unhappy about a planning proposal e.g. to build houses on local open spaces: there are plenty of sources of advice and help available.
- The second aspect is perhaps more important not least because it affects the first one. This is the longer-term local planning which sets out plans for what can and should happen in any area. This is now based on Local Development Frameworks.

Local Development Frameworks (LDFs)

The planning system in England and Wales is 'plan-led'. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 introduced a new 'two-tiered' plan system, comprised of:

- Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) - prepared by the regional planning bodies which set out a broad strategy for how a region should look in 15 to 20 years time and beyond.
- Local Development Frameworks (LDF) – local development documents prepared by district councils, unitary authorities or national park authorities that outline the spatial planning strategy for the local area.

This means that planning authorities (local councils) create long-term spatial plans for how an area will develop. Once adopted, all planning decisions made by local authorities must follow the plan for the area.

At the core of this are the Local Development Frameworks. This is not just one document but includes Local Development Documents the development plan for the area; the Local development scheme can be seen as a roadmap for the LDF and the statement of community involvement, which sets out how the local authority will engage the community in the development of the Local Development Framework.

If you are going to get involved in this you need to take a look at the 'Planning Portal'. This is a major website set up by the government www.planningportal.gov.uk. It includes everything you need to know on both planning permission activities and the wider planning system see www.planningportal.gov.uk/uploads/ldf/text_ldfguide.html for a detailed guide to LDFs.

Local Area Agreements and indicators

It's not just planning that sets out what happens in any area. There are also Local Area Agreements (LAAs). LAAs are (according to the government) "about what sort of place you want to live in. They set out the local priorities that will make your town, city or community a better place to be". The aim is to ensure that local services reflect what local people want. They are negotiated between local authorities (and public sector bodies) and central Government. LAAs also set out how Public Service Agreements (PSAs) are delivered. These are agreements between councils and government that set specific targets for improving services.

These in turn relate to the National Performance Framework (NPF). This is based on a set of 198 indicators that cover everything from climate change and recycling to educational performance and knife crime. Every Council has chosen 35 of these that relate to priorities in their area. They are assessed on these by central Government. The indicators aim to reduce burdens on reporting - the single national set of indicators replaced around 1,200 measures in use before.

A good place to start on LAAs is the www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/ and click on Local Area Agreements. There's quite a range of other material that may be useful on this site. You can find out what your council has chosen as its 35 priority indicators at www.localpriorities.communities.gov.uk.

These indicators are important since the councils have to deliver on them. Therefore they will a) be spending money on them and b) be looking for interested groups to work with. For instance if your council has chosen indicator NI 192, which is the level of 'Household waste recycled and composted', then they may well be interested to support a local composting scheme. Many are measuring NI 4 - the % of people

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who feel they can influence decisions in their locality – and will thus be interested in projects that boost community engagement.

Sustainable Community Strategies (SCS) and LSPs

The Local Government Act 2000 and the 2007 Sustainable Communities Act places a duty on local authorities (county and district councils and unitary authorities) to prepare a Sustainable Community Strategy. This should set out a vision for a local authority's area along with actions and commitments to further economic, social and environmental well-being. This is the 'big picture' which the LAA is meant to help deliver.

Community strategies are usually prepared by a body called the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). LSPs are multi-agency partnerships, which work at local authority level to bring together the public, private, and community and voluntary sectors. The aim is to get the council and other public bodies such as the police and health services working together more effectively with local business and voluntary groups

Getting involved and the role of a Champion.

So how does a group get involved in all this? You can talk with councillors or council staff, but the key decisions on planning documents go through a formal process. You need to find out when your LDF, LAA and SCS are being reviewed and updated and work out how far you want to be involved. One thing is almost always true: The earlier you get involved, the easier it should be to influence the process.

Smaller groups may find this quite difficult. People need to find their way through all this jargon, read long consultation documents and attend numerous meetings.

As a champion you can help a local organisation get involved in several ways. You can:

- Make sure that they know what is going on (timings, deadlines, key documents etc.)
- Help build their confidence so that they feel happy about going to and speaking at meetings (you could accompany people on their first meeting at the Town Hall!)
- Help make contact with key staff and councillors
- Help make contact with relevant voluntary sector bodies.

LSPs are meant to include a representative from the voluntary sector, who then reports back to local communities. So you could start by finding out about the LSP in your area:

- What are your LSPs' priorities?
- Who are its members and do they represent a good cross-section of the community?
- Are environmental and community interests well-represented?
- Who are the community and / or environmental representatives?
- Are meetings open to the public (as observers and / or participants)?

You may also want to find out how well the LSP pursues environmental objectives (this varies greatly!). Your local Council for Voluntary Service should have some of the answers. They should know who the voluntary representatives are and how they report back. They should also know how specific issues (crime, environment etc.) are dealt with. Many LSPs have set up working groups on specific themes that report to the main LSP. Your local group may wish to get involved in the sustainability or environmental group if there is one. Most such working groups welcome new people! It may be that the working group has a place on the main LSP Board: you may be able to put yourself or a colleague forward as a representative for the partnership.

Getting things done

Getting involved in the LAA or working with the LSP may be a way of getting local (and national) issues on to a wider agenda. But be clear on who you want to influence and what you want to change. If your group wants to solve a local problem then talk to your local council representative: if it's a longer-term issue about the future of the area (or about how your city tackles climate change or transport), then feed that in to the LSP. It's certainly worth getting to know the council staff person with a responsibility for environment and community issues (there should be one somewhere!) because they will know about upcoming issues, possible financial support, new council plans etc.

If you want to know more about **how you local council works** a detailed but straightforward and very useful guide is available free from the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) – an EAC member www.navca.org.uk/publications/council