Building and maintaining relationships with your Local Authority (incorporating Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements)

Local Authorities are likely to be one of your top funders so it’s really important that you work at building and maintaining a relationship with them. They are generally big and complex organisations so it is worthwhile prioritising those who have direct influence over your work (e.g. funding) and those who can act as ambassadors for your services.

Your Local Authority is also a core member of, and often host of, the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), which leads on Local Area Agreement (LAA) target-setting. Through the LSP you can exercise influence over the local agenda and position yourself as an important part of the solution to local problems.

Who

Local Authorities vary in size and organisational structure, though there are some roles that are likely to be replicated throughout all authorities. Below are a few job roles we believe you should be communicating with. This list is by no means exhaustive, however it is a good starting point:

• The leader of the council;
• The relevant cabinet/ portfolio holders;
• The Chief Executive;
• Relevant strategic directors e.g. social services or young people;
• Director/ Departmental head responsible for funding;
• Senior officers responsible for services which involve/ are of interest to the advice sector such as housing, housing benefits, council tax.
• All councillors;
• Grants officer or other officer who liaises with your agency;
• Lead officer responsible for Local Strategic Partnership; and
• Lead officer responsible for the Local Area Agreement.

Officers working in information-gathering services and/ or policy and performance can provide useful information about how to most effectively target and time the messages and accompanying data you want to share.

If you don’t know who these people are, your Local Authority’s website should be a useful source of information for you to identify your key contacts, or alternatively you could ring to find out.

Why

It is probable that you receive funding from your Local Authority in some form or other – perhaps a core grant or project funding. If you don’t you may wish to seek funding
from your Local Authority in the future. In both cases it is vital that you build and
maintain a strong relationship with them, but there are also other more specific and
time-sensitive reasons to invest in such a relationship.

There has been a general trend over the past few years for statutory funders to move
towards commissioning. This means re-examining the need for and current supply of
services, and then procuring future services through a bidding framework. The idea is
to ensure communities get the right services at the right cost to the tax payer. But the
move away from grants (which are often given on a historic basis) has placed advice
agencies in active competition with private companies as well as other voluntary and
community sector organisations, making an advice agency’s relationship with its Local
Authority more important than ever.

Your Local Authority is also a core member of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP),
which brings together public, private and voluntary sector organisations to develop
local solutions for local problems. It is commonplace for Local Authorities to lead
their LSP (though they can be led by any member of the partnership) and every Local
Authority has one, though they may be known by another name such as an ‘Anytown
Partnership’¹. LSP members look at the issues their community is facing, how they
can work effectively together to address those, and where public resources are most
appropriately directed. Advice agencies are ideally placed to help the LSP understand
what the local issues are. Getting involved with your LSP also allows you to position
yourself as part of the solution, which could result in extra funding, and additional
benefits include a better understanding of partners’ agendas and valuable networking
opportunities.

Among other things, LSPs are usually responsible for setting agreed common targets
and ensuring they are being met. These targets are agreed between central and
local government and are called Local Area Agreements. In the future, more funding
streams are likely to move under the control of the LSP to help meet the LAA targets.
It is probable that, at some stage, funding for voluntary and community bodies will
be made through the LAA process and will be highly dependent on agreed, and
measurable, outcomes and indicators. If your agency isn’t on your Local Authority’s
radar, particularly in respect of its LAA and LSP, then you could find that funding and
support come to a halt if and when this happens.

For more information on LSPs and LAAs see the final section of this document.

Opportunities and challenges

Having an active dialogue and involved working relationship with your Local Authority
opens up many opportunities, but equally it presents several challenges.

Opportunities

1. At the time of publishing this guide, the demand for advice services has
   increased due to the recession as people have encountered problems relating
to, debt, redundancy, mortgage repossessions, and more. Local Authorities are
   looking for ways to help their communities recover. In this climate, and with their
   unique understanding of the local population and its problems, advice agencies
have an unparalleled opportunity to raise their profile and demonstrate how important they are, both to the Local Authority and the community as a whole.

2. Every Local Authority has to develop a Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS)\(^2\) and engage with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). It is hugely important that the advice sector plays an active role in these, not only because they are key pieces of work that the Local Authority are involved in, but also because they involve other public services. By getting advice on the agenda of these key documents/ partnerships, public services in your local area (including the PCT, police etc.) will begin to recognise the contribution that the sector can/ does make.

3. Perhaps the biggest opportunity that an advice agency has to embed itself as being indispensable to its Local Authority is the LAA. It contains up to 35 targets drawn from the current National Indicator Set of 188 indicators. You can find out the targets for your local area by visiting this website www.localpriorities.communities.gov.uk. Unfortunately there is no indicator related specifically to advice. However, there is scope to make advice services integral to the achievement of LAA targets by thinking creatively about some of the other indicators. For example:
   - National Indicator 6 is the level of participation in regular volunteering (included in 29 per cent of LAAs).
   - National Indicator 7 is the environment for a thriving third sector (included in 40 per cent of LAAs).

Even if a particular National Indicator has not been chosen by your Local Authority as one of the ‘up to 35’ targets for improvement, data will be recorded on it and reported to Central Government. So all 188 National Indicators are of significance.

**Challenges**

1. The effects of the recession are still being felt, therefore it is widely expected that public expenditure will be cut. This will dramatically affect Local Authorities as the majority of their money comes from a central government grant. Any cuts in spending will inevitably have an impact on funding for advice services so it is vital to present your agency as an investment that can deliver cost savings elsewhere.

2. With so many possible contacts within the Local Authority, there can be a temptation to communicate with only the handful of people who you have immediate links with, for example a Councillor on your trustee board or your local grants officer. But these people are not necessarily key players; they may have limited influence within the Local Authority to change policy or increase funding. Getting the right balance between (strategic) links with Councillors and senior officers and (operational) links with those officers able to provide practical advice and guidance is crucial. A multi-layered approach to contact means you are better placed to cope with any changes that might take place in the Local Authority.

**How**

This is the most important section of this guide. It offers practical suggestions as to how you can build and maintain a relationship with your Local Authority.
The first thing to do is identify all the key players within your Local Authority (some job roles were suggested at the beginning of this guide). Here are a few questions to think about:

- How does the Authority work?
- How are policies and strategies developed?
- How do you influence the policies and strategies?
- Who has influence over the LAA?
- Who leads the LSP?

All of your key contacts need to be informed and influenced through planned and sustained communications. Once you’ve decided who you’re going to build and maintain relationships with, you need to think about the ways you’re going to reach them. A mixture of personal networking; managed communications; media presence; and indirect influencing through other bodies is usually best.

Don’t assume your key contacts know all about you – their knowledge could well be limited. Instead, ensure you send regular information, which clearly informs them about what you do and why you are important to them (as well as the wider community).

Consider adding Local Authority contacts to your distribution list for publications such as:

- Your annual report (as long as it is interesting and well presented);
- Quarterly newsletters;
- E-alerts that might include your latest statistics/ issues arising locally;
- Subject-specific evidence reports you may have published; and
- Any media coverage you have received.

Always ensure that the publications you send are targeted correctly for that contact, i.e. ward information for Councillors, statistics relating to National Indicators for the LAA contact. For useful examples of some of these, please see chapter three of this pack: ‘Best practice examples’.

You could also invite your key contacts to:

- Visit your agency to see your work. A good time to do this is immediately after local elections.
- Your AGM (as long as it is interesting and informative).
- Advice Week events that you have organised.

Ensure that you accept any opportunities to attend meetings or functions where your key contacts will be present – this will provide you with a great chance to network. (For more information of how to network, please see the ‘Communications guidance notes’ in chapter one of this pack.) When you meet with your key contacts, remember to push your key messages (see ‘Key messages’ below).

It is likely that your area already has an LAA in place, however, you can still engage with the process if you are not currently doing so, as there should be six monthly review meetings. Initially you could arrange a meeting with the lead officer responsible for the LAA to learn: what the LAA is focused on; how it is progressing; and what
consultation processes exist. Explain what your service does and be ready to show how it can help meet the LAA targets. Make it clear that you are keen to be involved and ask for any relevant papers to be forwarded on to you. If you have identified a subject you believe should be in the LAA that hasn’t been taken on board, then don’t be afraid to ask why not.

Take a similar approach to getting involved with your LSP – request a meeting with the lead officer. Involvement with the LSP doesn’t have to mean direct representation. It could mean indirect representation through your umbrella CVS, for example, or participation only in subject-specific LSP forums. There are lots of options, the most important thing is being aware of the LSP’s existence and ensuring, in some way or other, that the partners are aware of yours.

**Key messages for Local Authority contacts**

The Local Authority will be more impressed with, and supportive of, your advice agency if you have clear links with, and contribute to, their priorities and objectives (whether their LAA, Sustainable Community Strategy, or Comprehensive Performance Assessment). It is vital to provide hard evidence of the difference you make, and to demonstrate exactly how you do it. Remember that a history of previous funding does not necessarily mean that the Local Authority knows or understands all that is involved in the services you provide. So, make an effort to communicate the breadth and volume of your work so that they are able to fully appreciate its impact and value.

We’ve come up with a range of key messages that you could use with your Local Authority contacts, providing they are appropriate for your advice agency. You will need to modify them with local detail:

- We provide advice services which represent cost savings to the Local Authority, and much of our work maximises our clients’ incomes, boosting the local economy.
- We are improving our efficiency (we’re doing more with less year on year).
- We are working in partnership with other public, private and third sector bodies to reduce duplication and improve the experience for our clients.
- We develop and maintain a strategic plan for our community.
- We can help you meet your LAA targets by…
- We are able to access, through a partnership approach, funding streams that may not be open to statutory agencies.
- We have a wealth of data about the problems being faced in our area.
- We contribute to improving community cohesion and social exclusion in a number of ways, including outreach services and partnership work.
- We are viewed as independent and so able to work with some of the ‘harder to reach’ groups in the local community.
- We have a strong focus on the needs of service users.
- We train volunteers for free, who often go on into paid employment.
- We have the knowledge and expertise to meet complex personal needs and tackle difficult social issues.
- We have an ability to be flexible and offer joined-up service delivery.
- We act as a ‘weather gauge’ for the important issues in a local area.
Important information about LAAs and LSPs

LAAs are becoming increasingly important in how local public services are designed and delivered. LAAs set out a relationship between Central and Local Government and what each expects from the other.

LSPs are increasing in significance following backing from the Department for Communities and Local Government.

An LAA is essentially an action plan detailing what improvements will be made in an area over a three year period. It includes a balance of both local and national priorities. These priorities should reflect the concerns and aspirations of local people.

Under current regulation, local public services have to work together (under the ‘Duty to co-operate’). This does not apply to the voluntary and community sector, but it isn’t an oversight; the Government simply doesn’t have the authority to force community groups to work on the LAA. This does not mean that they are lesser partners, though, and their participation should be ensured through the ‘Duty to involve’.

LAAs normally focus on four blocks of central government funding, they are: children and young people; safer and stronger communities; healthier communities and older people; and economic development and enterprise. LSPs usually have sub groups that echo the above blocks. These sub groups then focus on local solutions to local problems, but specific to their area of expertise.

Your agency can influence the LAA and LSP and use that to the advantage of your clients: demonstrating the current and potential role of advice services within the shared agenda will open up access to funding and support, which will ultimately improve the quality of life for local people, especially those in greatest need.

To find out more about LAAs look at the LAA toolkit developed by AdviceUK. You can find it at www.adviceuk.org.uk/projects-and-resources/resources.

Footnotes:
1. In two tier authorities the arrangements can vary. There may be separate County and District LSPs
2. The Sustainable Community Strategy is the overarching document for partnership working in an authority area. It sets out the vision and aspirations of the local communities and the agencies who serve the area.