



Making your voice heard

A guide to local government

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Introduction



What is local government?

National government is in charge of running the whole country.

Local governments are there to help national government run different parts of the country. Local governments are in charge of smaller local areas. They provide services like social services or collecting your rubbish.



Local governments provide many services that affect the lives of people with a learning disability and their family and carers. It is the local government that decides on the choice of services you get and how good services are.



You might want to talk to the local government because you want services to get better, or because you are unhappy with a decision they have made.



Local governments do not all work in the same way and they do not all have the same jobs to do. This means it can be difficult to understand how your local government works and who you should talk to.



This guide will help you to find out:

- how local government works and what it does
- what you can do to encourage your local government to improve services for people with a learning disability and their families and carers.

Section 1: Local government and social services

What local governments do

Local governments have **powers** and **duties**. A duty is something they **must** do by law. A power is something they can do if they **choose**.

Example:

- All local governments must provide education to children. This is a duty.
- Local governments can choose whether or not to charge for non-residential services. This is a power.

Local governments provide many different services in their area.

Some local governments provide **all** the services in their area. These are **single-tier authorities**.

In London, single-tier authorities are called **London boroughs**. In the rest of England they are called **unitary** or **metropolitan authorities**.

Sometimes the local authority only provides **some** of the services in their area. These are **two-tier authorities**.

Two-tier authorities are usually in the countryside. They are called **county councils**. County councils provide most of the big expensive services like social services and education.

Within the county council's local area are lots of smaller **district councils**. District councils provide smaller services in their area like housing and rubbish collection.

Social services department



Housing department



Local government departments

Because local authorities provide lots of different services, there are lots of **departments** within each local authority. Each department is in charge of a different service. There are social services departments, housing departments and many more.

Example:

A family with a child with a disability may need to be in touch with lots of different departments. This could include:

- the housing department for housing
- the finance department for housing benefit
- the education department for schooling.



The local authority should make sure that all the different departments work together. They should also make sure that people who have to deal with lots of different departments have 1 key person to talk to.

Social services



Social services departments provide most of the services that people with a learning disability use.

Social services departments have some control over what they do, but the government controls a lot of their work.

Links between social services and health services

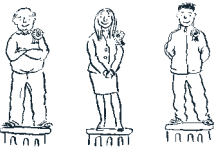


The Department of Health has overall responsibility for social services and the National Health Service (NHS). Health and social services are beginning to work more closely together.

Section 2: People in your local government

It is important to understand who the key people in your local government are.

Councillors



The local government is run by a group of people called **councillors**. Local people choose the councillors in their area by voting for them in local elections.

Councillors usually belong to a political party, like the Labour party or Conservative party.

What do councillors do?

Councillors do several different things:

- They represent local people in the area. This includes representing the views of groups like Mencap.
- They make important decisions about what services the local authority should provide and how much money each department should spend.
- They make sure that the people who work in the local authority are doing their job well.



Council officers

Council officers are employed (paid) by the local government. They do lots of different jobs. They include social workers, policy advisors and administration staff.

What do council officers do?

Council officers also do several different things:

- They carry out the decisions the councillors make.
- They carry out the council's day-to-day work.
- They some officers make decisions about policy.



Senior or chief officers

Senior or chief officers are in charge of local government departments. They are in charge of the council officers who work in their department. The most senior person in the local authority is usually called the **Chief Executive**.

What do senior or chief officers do?

They:

- give advice to councillors
- tell councillors what decisions they think they should make
- make sure that councillors' decisions are carried out.

Section 3: How you can have a say in decision making



Local governments make most of the decisions that affect the daily lives of people with a learning disability and their families. Remember that **you** can have a say in the decisions your local government makes. You can do this by yourself or as part of a group.

This section tells you about how to have a say in big decisions or ask for changes to the way local government does things.

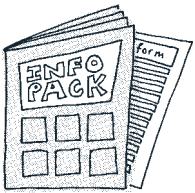
If you want to have a say in decision making, you will need to know 2 important things: **who** makes the decisions and **when** they make the decisions.



If you are unhappy about a particular service or are not happy with a decision you can **complain**.

You can find out how to complain in section 4.

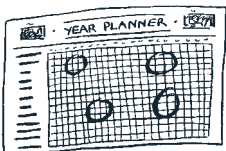
Who makes decisions?



Not all local governments make decisions in the same way.

Local governments must publish information that says who makes which decisions and how you can get in touch with them. Many local authorities put this information on their website.

When do they make decisions?



Local governments have to publish a **forward plan** saying what decisions they will be making over the next 4 months.

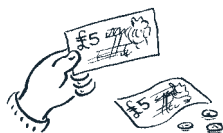
Some decisions are not in the forward plan because they have to be made quickly. The local government will give 5 days notice before they make these decisions. But if the decision is very urgent, they can sometimes make a decision straight away.

What you can do

You can talk to the people who make decisions and try to get them to see your point of view. This is called **lobbying**.



When you lobby people, make sure you have good information to back up your arguments. You need to be clear about the issue and what you want them to do about it.



If you want more money for a service it is important that you show clearly **why** you want more money.



- You can **write letters or briefing papers**.



- You can **get to know members of the council**. You could invite them to visit a project or day centre for people with a learning disability. This will help them to understand the issues facing people with a learning disability and their families and carers.



- You can **go to council meetings**. Sometimes you can ask questions, or you can ask a councillor to ask a question for you.



- You can **hold a public meeting**. This is where you and other people who feel strongly about something can talk about what you want and why you want it. You should invite councillors and council staff to come to the meeting. You can also ask someone from the newspaper to come.



- You can **join a voluntary sector forum**. Many local areas have a voluntary sector forum on learning disability. It is made up of people from different learning disability groups in the area. If you join, you will be able to find out more about what is happening in your area. Your voice will be stronger if you are working with other people.

You can find out more about how to campaign in the Mencap book *The good campaign guide*.

Section 4: How to complain



If your local authority does something you think is wrong, you can complain.

Each local authority should have a leaflet that explains exactly how to complain and who to talk to. To get a leaflet that tells you how to complain to **your** local authority you can:

- speak to your social services department
- look on your local authority website.



There are 3 stages to complaining. It is usually best to start at stage 1. If the problem is not solved, you can move to stage 2 and then stage 3 if you need to.

Stage 1: the informal stage



Telephone or write to your local authority. Tell them what your complaint is. They can often sort the problem out easily.

If you are still not happy, you can go to stage 2. ▼

Stage 2: the registered stage



This is much more formal. You must write to your local authority and tell them that you are making a formal complaint. Someone else can write for you if you find writing a problem.

The local authority has 28 days to answer your letter and try to sort out your problem.

If you are still not happy, you can go to stage 3. ▼

Stage 3: the review stage



3 people will listen to what you say. One of them must be somebody who does not work for the local authority. They will decide what should happen and write to all the people who are involved.

If you have been through all 3 stages and are still not happy, you can complain to the **Ombudsman**. ▼

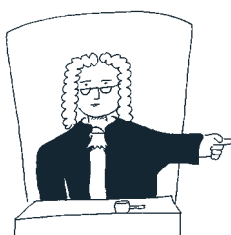
Complaining to the Ombudsman



The Ombudsman does not work for the local authority.

The Ombudsman will decide whether your local authority has done something wrong. It will say what the local authority should do.

But it cannot make the local authority do things. Usually, the local authority will do what the Ombudsman says. If they do not, the Ombudsman can make them explain why in the local paper.



Judicial review (going to court)

If you think the local authority has broken the law, you can take them to court. It can be very expensive. If you want to do this, you will need legal advice.

Complaining to the police



In some very rare cases, you might think that someone has broken the law. For example, you might think that a staff member has sexually abused someone.

If you have good reason to think that someone has broken the law, you should tell a staff member that you trust. You can also tell the police.

Section 5: Valuing People and learning disability partnership boards

Valuing People



Valuing People

The government published the White Paper *Valuing People* in March 2001. It says that services for people with a learning disability, their families and carers should get better. This includes services like housing, employment and day services. (*Valuing People* only applies to England).

Learning disability partnership boards



Every local government has a **learning disability partnership board**. Their job is to make sure that the local government does what *Valuing People* says.

On each partnership board there must be:

- 2 people with a learning disability
- 2 parents and carers
- 1 person from the voluntary sector.



The chair of the partnership board should be a senior council officer or a councillor.

What do learning disability partnership boards do?



- They plan services for people with a learning disability.
- They make sure people with a learning disability get help and support to choose the services that are right for them.



- They make sure people with a learning disability get the right support when they leave school so they can go on to college or work.

- They work with health trusts so people with a learning disability get better health care.

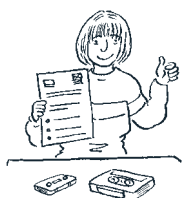


If you want to find out more about what your partnership board is doing, write (or send a tape) to the Chief Executive of your local government. You can find the address of the Chief Executive in the phone book or you can ask your Mencap district officer.

There are several things you can ask:



- Who is on the learning disability partnership board?
- How are members of the partnership board making sure that they speak with lots of other people with a learning disability, their families and carers? (They will need to do this to make sure they know what people need and want).



- Have they made sure their meetings and information are easy for people with a learning disability to understand?
- Is the local government planning events to bring together all local groups, carers and people with a learning disability to talk about the changes?

What you can do



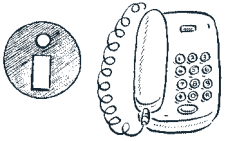
- Ask the learning disability partnership board to talk about something at a meeting. Find out who the chair is and ask them to put it on the agenda.



- You might be able to go to learning disability partnership board meetings.
- If you want to join the learning disability partnership board, ask how you can do this.



- Some learning disability partnership boards have small groups who talk about 1 thing, like housing or employment. Find out if you can join.



For more information about partnership boards, you can:

- look at the Mencap website
 www.mencap.org.uk/partnershipboards
- talk to the Mencap campaigns team
 telephone: 020 7696 6952
 email: campaigns@mencap.org.uk

Section 6: Money



Where do local governments get their money?

Local governments get money from:

- the **government** – local governments get most of their money from the government.
- **council tax** – this is the money that people who live in the area have to pay to the local government. People with a severe learning disability do not need to pay council tax.
- **charging for services** – local governments can charge for things like car parking and day centres.

Local governments can choose how they spend most of this money.

What you can do



- You can lobby your local government if you want them to spend more money on a service. It is best to do this in the summer when the council is deciding how to spend its money for the next year.
- It is important that you show clearly why you want more money for the service.



Useful words

Local authority

A local authority is another word for the council. A local authority runs the services for your local area.

Councillors

A councillor is a person we vote for in elections. They make decisions about how the local authority is run.

The Government

The Government makes decisions about how the country is run.

Learning disability partnership board

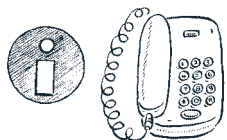
This is a group of people who work together to make sure the changes in *Valuing People* happen in each local authority.

The Ombudsman

The Ombudsman is an organisation. If you make a complaint about your local authority and you are not happy with their reply you can write to the Ombudsman.

Useful contacts

Mencap campaign's team:



- ☎ telephone: 020 7696 6952
- ✉ email: campaigns@mencap.org.uk
- 💻 website: www.mencap.org.uk

Local Government Ombudsman (in England):

- ☎ advice helpline: 0845 602 1983
- 💻 website: www.lgo.org.uk

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Mencap
123 Golden Lane
London EC1Y 0RT
Telephone 020 7454 0454
Fax 020 7608 3254

www.mencap.org.uk

Learning Disability Helpline 0808 808 1111

The illustrations used are courtesy of Change and Sue Hellard.