

Politics of Health Group

Health Politics as if People Mattered

1. Working in Local Government

A Politics of Health Guide

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The Politics of Health Group is a non-profit making, loose network of people who are trying to build better understanding of the political causes and consequences of health and ill health. <http://www.pohg.org.uk/>

If you have any thoughts, comments or ideas for this guide please contact PoHG at contact@pohg.org.uk

Health Politics as if People Mattered:

1. Working in Local Government

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Power exercised through politics and its impact on public policy is of fundamental importance for health. If you are involved in local government as an elected member or an officer there are many ways you can work or interact with your authority to enable practice to reflect an approach to health and wellbeing that acknowledges this basic premise. This short guide provides ideas and a checklist.

A politics of health approach recognises that the opportunity for good health is the fundamental human right, without which other rights are diminished.

It is the responsibility of governments to strive for equitable social, economic and environmental conditions in which the health of all can thrive. In local government this is encapsulated in the duty to improve the health and wellbeing of the local population and there are many opportunities to

- promote and safeguard health
- champion the health of local people and work with them for improvements
- ensure the health of the people is centre stage in all policy making, practice and commissioning
- lobby other public and private sector and NGO bodies as well as national government, Assemblies, the EU and other international bodies, to create the conditions for good health.

This list reflects both the functions of local government as well as the evidence base for health improvement and protection, and reduction of inequalities

A politics of health approach acknowledges the key causes of ill health and inequality are rooted and perpetuated in the social and economic system. Research by Professors Sir Michael Marmot, Richard Wilkinson¹

¹ Sir Michael Marmot has led research groups on health inequalities for over 35 years. He was Chair of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH), which was set up by the World Health Organization in 2005 and has undertaken numerous national and international reviews on the subject. Professor Richard G Wilkinson has been a lifelong researcher into

and others shows that inequalities between rich and poor are a fundamental cause of ill health for all. Discrimination and prejudice based on difference, including gender, age, ability, size, sexuality and ethnicity, profoundly affect wellbeing independently of health behaviours. The most effective ways to impact upon ill health and inequality are to reduce the wealth gap, promote respect, redistribute resources and power to communities and individuals, and create conditions to ensure poorer people get more resources in order to lead a healthy life

Public health benefits from strategies that

- support the development of loving family, social, and community relationships based on respect and support
- promote mental health, healthy child development and child protection
- support vulnerable people
- deliver decent housing and environments free from pollution and degradation
- ensure the availability of good affordable food
- provide meaningful, safe, adequately rewarded work for all
- prevent violence and harassment
- support culture, green space and the arts
- maintain health protection
- encourage community cohesion
- Promote the health of the workforce.

income distribution and health. He is best known for his book with Kate Pickett *The Spirit Level*, first published in 2009.

A checklist for a Politics of Health approach

1. Use, develop and extend democracy, which is essential to foster good health by citizen and community involvement and influence. Although local authorities are run by democratically elected members, it is always worth championing the development and protection of democracy, to ensure the most marginalised can be heard.
2. Ensure equality and diversity is respected, protected and celebrated in all policies and practice; know the law and also best practice .There is no public health without equality.
3. Promote at all times that which has the most chance of reducing inequalities, discrimination and prejudice.
4. Anti poverty work, and work to reduce the income and influence gap between groups of people are vital to all radical practice. Make sure you get involved in economic planning and policy making to ensure it benefits the weakest and poorest in the area. Remember trickle down does not work!
5. Promote and practice work which builds communities and networks of place and of interest that support people's self determination .
6. Make sure what you advocate has an evidence base [but interpret this widely - go beyond 'health' /medical evidence, ensuring people affected have a chance to express their perception and evidence] and focus work on practical outcomes.
7. First do no harm—ensure policy and practice promote health rather than adversely affecting the health of people and the environment.
8. Argue strongly for sustainable development - that is work and development which does not harm human or environmental health now and for the future.
9. Promote a rights based approach - emphasise the right for all to health and the conditions that create it.
10. Protect effective public services - but first ensure services are effective! - in local government and the NHS, police and criminal justice system, voluntary and community sectors, and so on. Enable community, patient and user involvement and governance. Focus on outcomes, value for money, equity and accessibility.
11. If you are a manager or leader, or in a position of authority, make sure you take an authentic leadership approach, that is respect

others, serve others, show justice and honesty, reduce stress, promote the health of the workforce and build communities.

We can do all this by:

- 1 *Developing and supporting elected members.* The duty of an officer in local government is to respect and support elected members. All members can promote health , across all portfolios and in their wards.
- 2 *Developing the workforce.* Ensure everyone works to promote health. Public health specialists should support the whole workforce to realise their health promotion potential. Champions in each professional group and department can be highly effective.
- 3 *Policy and strategy making.* Health should be a focus in all policy and strategy. Work closely with the policy team and with political leaders, the whips and chairs of scrutiny.
- 4 *Performance management.* Ensure health is part and parcel of all performance systems and reporting.
- 5 *Communication!* Make sure the workforce, all members and the public and partners understand the approach advocated here and your plans and activities. Use all media as appropriate and communicate regularly as widely as possible. Take important issues to Cabinet on a regular basis and advocate debates at full council whenever possible.
- 6 *Planning.* The strategic plan is a vital area for health promotion and protection, as are departmental plans. Ensure health is integral to all of these. Ensure health is also a focus for land planning, both strategic and long term, and at regular Planning committees, so that health considerations are at the forefront of decision making
- 7 *Getting involved in supporting the regulatory functions of local government.* Licensing decisions, for example, are very important influences in neighbourhood and citizen and worker health.
- 8 *Commissioning and procurement.* All local authorities now commission and procure a vast range of services. Best practice would include a health protection and promotion focus to policies and procedures so that all suppliers adhere to council policy, e.g. in a living wage.
- 9 *Governance.* Councils take governance and ethical standards very seriously. Most decisions are in the public domain and open to

scrutiny. This is healthy. Respect and help develop good governance and accountability.

- 10 *Information*. The provision of quality information to members [across all parties] is a duty and their right. Information for the public and partners about health, and the causes of ill health, assists good decision making, democracy and the development of citizens and civil society.
- 11 *Education*. The relationship between education and health is crucial. Good education promotes health and good health helps educational attainment and reduction of inequality, so this is a vital area for public health work.
- 12 *Budgeting*. Determining the council's budget is a lengthy process culminating in a council debate and the setting of the budget. The health of the people should influence the decision making process. Good information and debate on the potential impact of the budget on wellbeing is crucial.
- 13 *Scrutiny and challenge*. The scrutiny process can assist as well as challenge the policy and practice of the council, the local NHS, police, Fire and Rescue and voluntary sector. Members and officers involved in scrutiny should be supported in their reviews and challenge processes.
- 14 *Working with and through others*. Partnership work is part and parcel of how a local authority functions. It is, however, important to prioritise effort where the most difference might be made. Partnerships should think and plan together, but act separately, thus maximising the efforts of their own organisation. Local government can energise others, but can also lobby others and scrutinise them, often holding the ring on local policy and action.
- 15 *Lobbying and collective action* by local government and their partnerships with central government, the EU, the private sector, and other bodies whose activities affect wellbeing in their areas, is an important activity to support and develop. In this respect local authorities may sometimes act collectively through the Local Government Association, or in ad hoc groups or alone. Sometimes this is behind closed doors or via the media, or by alerting the media to their lobbying. It is very important that local government, in representing local citizens, uses its power.