

Getting Women into Local Strategic Partnerships:

Knowing your community, improving public services



Mary McGee(left) with Patricia Devlin, Jean Arthur and Caroline Mockford(right) spend time at the "Tea in the Pot" womens drop-in centre, Govan, Glasgow. Credit: Andy Hall/Oxfam

This paper, based on two pilot projects conducted by Oxfam with LSPs in Sunderland and Thurrock in 2008-9, looks at how local authorities can increase the representation and participation of women in LSPs, and how needs differ by gender. The evidence from the pilot projects clearly shows that LSPs can, and must, take concrete steps to involve women more effectively in local decision-making – and take their particular needs into consideration in setting targets for services such as transport, unemployment, and housing – in order to improve their economic and social well-being and tackle the poverty and social exclusion they face. The paper makes a series of recommendations to those involved in LSPs as to how to do this, and gives examples of good practice.

Summary

Women in the UK are poorer than men: women working part-time earn nearly 40 per cent less than men, while the incomes of female pensioners are 40 per cent lower than those of male pensioners. Oxfam believes it is essential that policies and services provided by local authorities take account of the particular needs and circumstances of women – and help to address the poverty and exclusion they face.

But research commissioned by Oxfam in 2007 revealed that on Local Strategic Partnerships, increasingly responsible for much decision-making on local issues, women are underrepresented and that, where they are represented, women are not able to participate effectively. The research also found that gender is insufficiently embedded in the monitoring, target setting, strategic planning, and service delivery of LSPs. This means women's voices are not being heard or taken into consideration in the planning and delivery of local services and that those services are often failing to address their needs.

This paper, based on two pilot projects conducted by Oxfam with LSPs in Sunderland and Thurrock in 2008-9, looks at how local authorities can increase the representation and participation of women in LSPs; and how women and men's different needs with regard to services such as transport, housing and employment, can be made more visible in Local Area Agreements. The evidence from the pilot projects clearly shows that LSPs can, and must, take concrete steps to involve women more effectively in local decision-making to improve their economic and social well-being – and the paper makes a series of recommendations to those involved in LSPs as to how to do this.

Introduction

Oxfam works to end poverty all over the world, including in the UK. We have worked in the UK since 1996, empowering people living in poverty to have an impact on the policies that affect their lives and highlighting the impact of gender and women's inequality on poverty and social exclusion.

In 2007, Oxfam commissioned research into the role played by women in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), and whether the plans and strategies of LSPs effectively mainstream gender and the needs of women, particularly poorer women¹. *Where are the Women in LSPs?* revealed that throughout England women are underrepresented on LSPs and not able to participate effectively in their decision making.

The decision to undertake this research was triggered by the introduction of the Gender Equality Duty in April 2007, which requires all public authorities to promote gender equality and eliminate sex discrimination. Since LSPs were becoming increasingly important in developing, coordinating, and improving services to local areas, Oxfam

wanted to find out how well they were responding to the GED. The research helped to build a more accurate picture of women's involvement in LSPs, and to raise awareness of the need for greater representation and participation of women, particularly at the most senior level. We also found that there was little appreciation that a gendered analysis can highlight how policies and practice impact differently on women and men, enabling the design of better public policies and services.

Following this research, pilot projects were conducted with LSPs in Sunderland and Thurrock in 2008-9 to look at ways of increasing the participation of women and women's organisations in the partnerships, ensuring that gender is mainstreamed in the work of LSPs on Local Area Agreements, and that policies and services designed by LSPs effectively address the needs of local women. This briefing paper details the good practice that has emerged from the pilots in Sunderland and Thurrock and makes recommendations as to how LSPs can improve their responsiveness to local women's needs and concerns.

Local Strategic Partnerships

LSPs bring together public sector organisations, voluntary and community organisations, and local businesses to work to improve how local services are planned and delivered and thus improve the quality of these services. This model of working is intended to help join up public services more effectively and allow greater flexibility for local solutions to local circumstances.

Local authorities with their LSP partners are responsible for:

- Producing a **Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS)**, which sets out priorities for an area, and outlines how services can be improved and delivered in a way that increases the environmental, social, and economic wellbeing of communities. The SCS is based on data and evidence from the local area and its population to establish a shared local vision and priorities for action.
- Producing a detailed unitary/county-wide **Local Area Agreement (LAA)**, based on the priorities identified in the Sustainable Community Strategy. The LAA sets out specific priorities and targets, and therefore impacts significantly upon the delivery of public services in a local area.
- **Reviewing and performance managing** progress against the priorities and targets agreed in the LAA.²

Why be concerned about women's engagement in LSPs?

- **Without it, local services will fail to tackle women's poverty.**
Women continue to experience severe disadvantage in UK society: they are more likely than men to live in poverty and to be socially excluded. This has major implications for how public services are designed and delivered; service design that does not consider gender and women's inequality will fail to meet the needs of a significant sector of the population, and will thus be inefficient and ineffective.
- **There is a legal requirement to do so.**
Since the introduction of the **Gender Equality Duty (GED)** in 2007, public services that fail to consider the impact of gender in planning their services and measuring their impact may be open to legal challenge. The new **Duty to Involve**, which came into force on 1 April 2009, also requires many public authorities, including all local councils, to 'inform, consult and involve' local people – including women – in decision-making.³

Performance against both of these duties will be assessed as part of the **Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA)**, under the new area-based performance framework that focuses on outcomes delivered by councils working alone and in partnership. The CAA will examine how well local residents are served by their local public services and what the prospects are for the improvement of quality of life in their area, and how well local partners are working to reduce inequality, disadvantage and discrimination in their communities.

- **Gender disaggregated data is necessary to identify needs and priorities.**
Within the CAA, gender analysis is identified as a very significant element in enabling local authorities and their partners to understand local needs and what works in local areas. The CAA framework explicitly warns of the dangers of inequality being 'masked by averaging out data into a single measure'⁴. It is only from looking at variation and difference in statistical data that LSPs can begin to understand the problems of an area, and only from talking to people who are close to the problem (in this case women and women's organisations), that LSPs can achieve better understanding and identify workable solutions.

The pilot projects in Thurrock and Sunderland

Oxfam's pilot projects with LSPs in Thurrock and Sunderland, conducted in 2008 in partnership with Urban Forum and the Fawcett Society, attempted to embed gender equality across monitoring, target setting, delivery and strategic planning of the two LSPs, and to secure the participation of women in all LSP processes at every level. The pilot projects revealed:

Lack of gender awareness in both LSPs

Gender blindness within LSPs was identified in both pilot projects, manifested in a widespread lack of understanding that all issues affect women and men differently.

A lack of shared understanding of the term 'gender' was also identified. In one pilot, half of those interviewed took the term 'gender' to describe biological sex rather than the social conditioning and differing expectations created by being male or female and there was little analysis of power and inequality in the definitions of gender given. By contrast, participants in Sunderland who had worked with the LSP's advisory group on gender were more knowledgeable and able to discuss and understand gender analysis and women's issues. This demonstrates the value of having such a specialist body as part of the LSP arrangements.

Casestudy: increasing the understanding of men

When a focus group of men in Thurrock sat down and discussed women's involvement, it resulted in increased understanding and commitment.

The Thurrock pilot included a focus group with both men and women from the LSP structures. The men's focus group were keen to get a better understanding of the relationship between women's attendance (their representation) and their contribution in meetings (participation), and to what extent the timing, location, and procedure of meetings were barriers. They came to understand that women often felt unable to present issues affecting women as they were present representing their organisations, or felt intimidated by formal, bureaucratic processes, or were discouraged by how the issues they raised were minuted but not actioned.

Having heard some of the difficulties, the men's focus group recommended as a minimum that a half-day session should be held to bring out the gender perspectives on all the main Local Area Agreement targets and that the LSP stakeholder groups should focus on the different needs of men and women on specific themes (such as housing, transport, children, and safety) for agreed periods of time to ensure they had protected space.

From *Women's participation in local partnerships and gender equality in local area agreements*, South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, Shaping Thurrock, and Oxfam, 2008.

Insufficient gender analysis

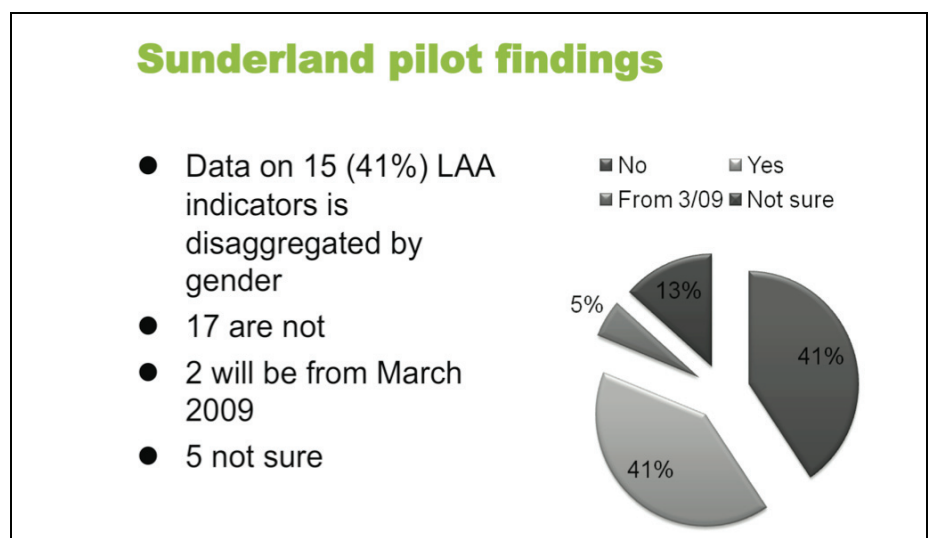
The pilot projects revealed that there was insufficient gender disaggregation of data and statistics, and gender analysis, in both LSPs.

According to statutory guidance, public bodies leading on the different themes within the Local Area Agreements should be collecting and interpreting gender disaggregated data against each of the locally relevant national indicators, in order to support LSP executive boards to make knowledgeable strategic decisions. This approach would enable LSPs to:

- Understand how issues affect women and men differently;
- Find out which interventions work best for women and for men;
- Set different targets and gear interventions differently for women and men.

The pilot projects looked at whether and how gender is considered in monitoring, target setting, delivery and planning in LAAs in the two LSPs, and how far the data collected is sufficient to do this in relation to the particular needs of women. They found that within the current performance management framework, existing data is not always adequate for gender analysis.

In Sunderland, it was only possible to establish clearly that data was gender disaggregated on 14 out of a possible 39 LAA indicators. The use of gender equality impact assessments was not standard procedure in LSP meetings and many of the public agencies who were responsible for delivering LAA targets did not appear to be fulfilling their responsibilities under the Gender Equality Duty. The pilots also found that gender-disaggregated data was not used in performance management. One exception to this was the indicator on 'all-age mortality rates' in Sunderland, which was disaggregated by gender. The LSP had put in place an effective strategy, which took into account the differences in the life expectancy of women and men. The need for the strategy was identified by the gender advisory group, again showing the value of having a body that specialises in gender analysis and action as part of the wider LSP.



Where LAA targets clearly relate to women's specific needs (e.g. pregnancy or women's well-being), the need to create and use gender-specific information is more visible and obvious. However, women and men have different needs and expectations in mainstream service delivery areas such as employment, transport, and housing. Disaggregating data will enable a greater understanding of different groups and will enable the setting of different targets and interventions where appropriate.

Women's participation in LSPs

The pilot projects found that women were under-represented and not participating effectively on both the pilot LSPs.

Although there is no formal structure set out for LSPs, the statutory guidance does outline some key principles, such as the engagement of voluntary and private sector representatives, the need to take account of minority community interests, and the requirement to draw on environmental, social, and economic expertise through its core membership and its thematic partnerships.⁵ Oxfam's 2007 research had found that women's representation on LSPs, was disproportionately low, especially at senior level, and recommended that LSPs set targets for improvement.⁶

Neither of the pilot areas surveyed in 2008 showed an equal representation of women and men throughout the partnership boards. Barriers to women's representation identified included: a perception that women being present made no difference to the decisions made, the attitudes of men on LSPs, boredom, the volume of the papers to read, inaccessible language, timing of meetings, cost and availability of childcare, the venues chosen, car parking, and lack of access to public transport.

In the Thurrock pilot, women's unease with the formality of LSP process was a clear barrier to participation. The women's focus group felt that the culture within the LSP was autocratic and 'target driven'. They felt that the structure of meetings should be changed to respond to how women communicate; and that bureaucratic procedures and processes leave no space for creative processes, 'feelings', 'real people evidence' or the presentation of case-studies in discussions or action plans.

The report from the Thurrock pilot, recommends the setting up of focus groups to look at the specific needs of men and women across different themes, including establishing women-only space for community stakeholder groups to enable gender specific discussion. In Sunderland, the gender independent advisory group (IAG) was seen as important in demystifying the process and making women feel more confident in their participation.⁷

Casestudy: hearing the voices of BME women

A focus group with ethnic minority women in Thurrock discussed their particular needs and concerns and the barriers they experienced in accessing public services.

The women talked about widespread misunderstanding of their needs by professionals: health professionals, for example, often failed to identify forced marriage or female genital mutilations as an issue of violence against women. One woman felt that her support worker was culpable in her continued abuse as she addressed her needs through her husband. The women also felt it ironic that they were asked questions about whether they had a voice in Thurrock as their husbands, brothers, and local community leaders (usually men) were consistently allowed to speak for them, especially in health settings:

Their recommendations for better practice included:

- The importance of addressing the fact that violence against women is the least-reported crime, and that most feared by women and girls;
- The need for a peer advocacy programme for vulnerable ethnic minority women, to support and train them to speak out on their own behalf and enable LSPs to appreciate the value of the information they provide on poverty and vulnerability.

From *Women's participation in local partnerships and gender equality in local area agreements*, South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, Shaping Thurrock, and Oxfam, 2008.

Involvement of women's organisations in LSPs.

Both pilot projects found that women's organisations were under-represented in LSPs and that the organisations represented did not adequately raise specific women's issues.

Women's sector organisations work in a wide range of fields, including violence against women, employment, education, rights and equality, the criminal justice system and the environment. They deliver services to, and campaign on behalf of, some of the most marginalised communities of women. Such organisations could bring specific expertise about women's issues and gender analysis to LSPs, yet Oxfam's 2007 research identified that less than two per cent of voluntary sector representatives on LSPs were from women's organisations, despite the fact that they represent around seven per cent of the total voluntary sector. The research recommended that LSPs should ensure the full involvement of women's organisations in LSPs at all levels.

In both pilot projects it was acknowledged that the majority of women were attending meetings as representatives of their organisations as opposed to representing women, and therefore did not see their role as being responsible for raising women's issues. It was usually only the women's organisations that specifically raised the impact of issues under discussion on women. However, there was often little indication that raising issues of concern to women led to further discussion or influenced decisions. Some representatives from women's organisations felt that when they raised issues that affect women, their concerns were not perceived to be relevant to the LSP's agenda.

However, there were some examples where women's organisations have led change on LSPs. In Sunderland, discussion across statutory and voluntary sector boundaries in thematic LSP groups led to joint working on domestic violence by a women's sector organisation, the police authority, and a locally based housing association. This outcome was perceived to have occurred by accident, however; different partners had identified common issues and were able to work more productively because they knew each other through the LSP. More could be done to generate networking opportunities to develop good practice to address women's issues.

Conclusion

The pilot projects show there is lots of work to do if LSPs and LAAs are to be effective mechanisms for public service delivery that meets the needs of both women and men in local areas. Both Oxfam's 2007 national survey on women and LSPs, and the more recent local pilots, have shown that the failure to mainstream gender in LSPs has led to poorer services that do not challenge social exclusion and poverty.

There are currently many levers to change this, including the legal obligations of public authorities under the Gender Equality Duty and the Duty to Involve, and better assessment of the equality impacts of public delivery through the Comprehensive Area Assessment process. The challenge is for the Local Government Association, Improvement and Development Agency, Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships together with local authorities and other LSP partners to ensure that there is adequate resources and expertise within LSP teams to respond to the challenges outlined.

Finally, these findings could be extended to explore and challenge inequality across the board - in terms of race, disability, faith, age and sexual orientation. However, in such a process the focus on women's discrimination and gender equality must not be lost, whilst at the same time, the diversity of women is appreciated.

Recommendations

Based on the learning from the pilot projects, Oxfam would make the following recommendations:

LSPs should:

- Collect, analyse, and use gender-disaggregated data as part of their routine performance management,
- make it available at Board and Executive Group level within quarterly performance reporting to inform strategic decision-making,
- routinely use gender-disaggregated data to understand the needs of the local population and the impact of service delivery on men and women,
- use it to inform target setting and gear interventions differently for men and women.
- Develop systems and ways of working that remove cultural and structural barriers to women's participation in decision making,
- encourage diverse voices of the community, including women, to be heard in their structures; and ensure that women's issues and perspectives are addressed.
- Ensure a shared understanding of the concept of gender in terms of power, inequality, and the societal expectations of women in relation to issues considered by the LSP.
- Ensure that training and awareness-raising around the new Duty to Involve includes gender awareness training.
- Monitor its compliance with equality legislation, which outlaws discrimination in provision of services, focusing on gender discrimination.
- Set up a gender advisory group to interpret and analyse gender-disaggregated data, support women's participation, and gather expertise on women's issues to inform target setting, interventions and strategic decision-making.
- Agree a protocol or way of working to be adopted by all partners in order to raise and address women's issues and monitoring of the participation of women more effectively.
- Examine representation by gender and set targets for improvement.
- Proactively support women's organisations in raising women's issues, supporting women to have a voice and influence decision-making
- Support women's sector organisations in raising women's issues and challenging discrimination against women in LSPs at all levels

The Equality and Human Rights Commission should:

- Produce guidance to all local partners subject to the requirements of the Gender Equality Duty to ensure that they provide gender disaggregated data against all Local Area Agreement Indicators and carry out gender equality impact assessments against the LAA indicators, which they as a public body are responsible for delivering.

A part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment process, the Audit Commission should:

- Ensure that LSPs have a good knowledge of the gender profile of their area.
- Assess how effectively women are being informed, consulted with, and involved in LSP decisions within the terms of the Duty to Involve.
- Monitor the level of involvement of women's sector organisations and their impact.

Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships should:

- Support LSPs in gaining basic awareness of gender inequality and conducting gender analysis, through:
 - Holding regional training events for LSPs to share best practice in embedding gender equality;
 - Assisting LSPs to improve awareness of gender difference and tackle gender blindness;
 - Helping LSPs increase their capacity to assess the differing impact of policies on men and women, to better reflect and act on different gendered needs and provide better services targeted specifically to men and women

What does good practice look like?

- A comprehensive understanding of how to use a **gendered lens** across different issues, to uncover and challenge discrimination against women.
- Transparent systems and methods for raising and addressing women's issues on LSP agendas.
- Effective monitoring of the **representation and participation of women** (e.g. levels of representation of women at all levels of LSPs, level of representation of women's organisations, tracking the extent to which identified barriers to women's participation are breaking down, assessing the impact of women/ women's organisations on decisions).
- LSP Chairs have the skills to be **inclusive in meetings**, and manage dominant perspectives to allow diverse voices and perspectives to be heard.
- Innovative processes are legitimised that allow women to express themselves and open up spaces to explore women's issues and other social issues (e.g. Gender Independent Advisory Groups and all women's focus groups on LSP issues).

Appendix

Local Area Agreements (LAAs)

Local Strategic Partnerships must produce a Local Area Agreement, setting out priorities and targets for public services, which ensure that the needs of local people are met. But not enough LSP stakeholders realise that LAA targets (based on National Indicators) will impact differently on men and women (and on people of different ages, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities). Below we outline some of the ways in which women and men will be affected differently by the targets and look at how gender awareness can lead to the design of better targets and interventions.

NI 117: 16 to 18 year olds who are not in education, employment or training.

Ensuring that young people are in work or education is a top priority, especially during the economic recession. But young men and women maybe not in education, employment or training for very different reasons, and thus may require different interventions to support them. Young women are more likely to be needed at home to look after siblings, or to be mothers themselves. Young men may have left school with fewer qualifications than young women. Training and employment schemes may also be differently available to young men and women, even if they are intended for all: apprenticeship schemes for example tend to favour jobs largely occupied by young men. And careers advisers often unwittingly advise young women into traditionally 'female' areas of work, which are often poorly paid and have poor career progression.

Good practice: South Lanarkshire Council facilitated an Oxfam project officer to accompany and support careers advisers in their work. Through the project the careers advisers realised that they were reinforcing girls' tendency to opt for low-paid caring jobs which are more likely to be badly paid with poor career progression. As a result of the project, many of the advisers changed their practice and encouraged young women to be more ambitious and consider a wider range of careers with better prospects.

NI 112 Under-18 conception rate:

NI 112 is primarily perceived as a target affecting young women, with few measures commonly in place to ensure the involvement of fathers in ante- and post-natal care and support systems. Young women's needs are not always looked at in the round because it is not seen as OK to be a teenage mother. Little affordable childcare is available to ensure that mothers choices are as wide as possible, and not enough attention is paid to the needs of both parents.

Good practice: York One Parent Families, who support both men and women single parents, realised that fathers were not accessing their drop-in centre, because they felt out of place and outnumbered by

women. The organisation did outreach to encourage fathers to access counselling support, and created a new computer information centre to make sure they felt less isolated and got the advice they needed.

NI 154 number of affordable homes delivered

Many more women than men live in social housing and women are on average 20% less well off than men, so it is clear that affordability of housing is a gender issue, particularly for, for example, lone parents, and elderly women. Women are more likely to move to be near family or have to rely on family networks for support to get and keep paid work, and may be more reliant on public transport – so the location of affordable housing may also be much more critical for them than for men.

Housing providers are more likely to respond to the needs of elderly and disabled people, but are less likely to consider how men and women's needs are different. An awareness of the gendered demographics of residents, and who is head of a household, must underpin decisions about affordable housing.

Maisonettes without lift access will not meet women's needs, nor will housing distant from bus routes, or from their family connections. Gender disaggregated data on housing need, and more information about women's particular experience, will ensure the provision of social housing which better meets women's needs.

NI123 stopping smoking

NI56 obesity among primary school children in Year 6

Gender disaggregated data, and understanding the different motivations and influences on young men and women, are both crucial in designing interventions to prevent smoking and obesity.

For girls, starting to smoke is closely connected to wanting to stay slim, and to their body image. For boys, it is often about keeping up with their mates and appearing cool. Whether both girls and boys take action to tackle the problems of obesity and smoking is also related to their involvement in sport or exercise. Boys are more likely to see this as part of their world than girls, and more likely to get involved. Girls and women are also more likely to be responsible both for providing food for others, and targeted by government and other agencies as responsible for health eating.

Good practice: The Scottish Executive supported pilot projects investigating how and when young women and men started to smoke, and what would help them to stop. The research showed that young women's body image was crucial in them starting to smoke, and a broader awareness of health and beauty helped them to stop. For young men, the driver for stopping smoking was the desire to excel at sport.

NI 152 Working age people on out of work benefits

Women are less likely than men to sign on to employment benefits, as being a worker is less central to their identity and lives than it may be for men, and they are more likely to be un-available for work because of caring responsibilities rather than being formally unemployed. This means that statistics on unemployment or benefits are already inaccurate as they do not reflect the real nature of women's lives. Men and women also need different sorts of help to get into work, and women especially with caring responsibilities and less work experience as a result, are further from the labour market so need more support over a longer time. These factors will also determine their ability to respond to welfare to work initiatives.

Good practice: If women are to get jobs, job centres need to know where to find them and not make assumptions they will access mainstream services. In Redcar and Cleveland, the Council, Oxfam, and South Bank Women's Centre researched who actually came through the doors of the Job Centre, by gender. We found that far more men than women – 75% of users – got advice, training and financial support and that women were much more likely to find work through word of mouth. As a result, the Council designed outreach services to provide appropriate job support, which went to women where the women were – outside supermarkets, in mother and toddler groups, etc – rather than waiting for the women to come to them.

Notes

- 1 *Where are the Women in LSPs?*, Urban Forum, Oxfam, and the Women's Resource Centre in 2007.
- 2 *Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities* statutory guidance, HM Government, July 2008
- 3 *The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007*
- 4 *CAA Framework Document*, part 2, paragraph 56, Audit Commission (April 2009)
- 5 *Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities Statutory Guidance*, HM Government, July 2008
- 6 *Where are the Women in LSPs?: Women's participation and representation in Local Strategic Partnerships*, Urban Forum, Women's Resource Centre and Oxfam (2007)
- 7 There are six IAGs in Sunderland each corresponding to the six equalities 'strands' recognised by the Equality & Human Rights Commission. The IAGs meet on a regular basis to discuss relevant issues. These issues are then passed onto the Sunderland Partnership via an Inclusive Communities Thematic Group. In return, reports are then fed back to the IAGs to keep them informed of developments within the partnership.

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