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Voluntary sector empowered through training in public law

Grassroots organisations nationwide are to be trained in public law principles by the Public Law Project (PLP) and National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) so that they will have a better understanding of how public bodies must lawfully act when making decisions that will affect the voluntary sector.

Through this 3-year project, around 800 representatives of local groups will be given practical training on public law principles, tactical advice and information about lobbying and the media, as well as being advised what action they can take if unfair or illegal decisions have been made against them.

A free advice line staffed by specialist lawyers from PLP will provide detailed legal advice to voluntary and community organisations on issues involving public bodies' decisions and failures, and PLP will be able to take on particular cases to resolve disputes where appropriate.

Through the training, advice line, and quarterly newsletters, the project aims to make organisations aware of their rights and funders' obligations under public law, thus empowering them to challenge unfair decisions, make funders act more lawfully and responsibly and, ultimately, to strengthen the relationship between funder and funded. It also aims to help grassroots organisations better advocate on behalf of their users where policy decisions are made which impact upon them.

"Public law provides the framework and principles of law that govern the exercise of power by public authorities. These principles can be harnessed to ensure that public bodies do not abuse their powers. It is sometimes thought that a public body can do anything unless the law expressly prohibits it or that where public bodies have been given discretion in a particular field, they can exercise it however they think best. Both propositions are false," says Conrad Haley, Director of PLP.

Kevin Curley, chief executive of NAVCA says: *"Small organisations often feel helpless when they are informed from on high that their funding is being withdrawn*

or services are being cut. This project will give them the information and support they need to challenge unjust decisions taken by public bodies. It will help them develop the confidence to engage in a robust dialogue, making litigation an option of last resort to tackle those public bodies that continue to shirk their responsibilities.”

“Successfully challenging an adverse decision can not only secure vital community services, it can be an empowering experience which helps combat the very roots of social exclusion.”

**For more information, please contact Hannah Jones at PLP
Tel: (020) 7697 2196 / Email: h.jones@publiclawproject.org.uk**

Editors’ notes

1. For further information about the training programme, including dates, venues and attendee fees, please contact Terry Perkins, PLP Training Officer on 0114 278 6636 x 163, email: terry.perkins@navca.org.uk

2. The advice line is available on 020 7697 2198 Mondays and Wednesdays 2-5pm, and Tuesdays and Thursdays 10am – 1pm. Advice is also available via email: evs@publiclawproject.org.uk

3. To receive quarterly briefing papers about the project, containing case studies & updates on training events, email h.jones@publiclawproject.org.uk

4. ‘Empowering the Voluntary Sector’ is funded by the Big Lottery Fund.

4. Further information on PLP and NAVCA:

The Public Law Project (www.publiclawproject.org.uk)

The Public Law Project (PLP) is a national legal charity, set up in 1990, which aims to improve access to public law remedies for those whose access to justice is restricted by poverty or some other form of disadvantage.

Within this broad remit PLP has adopted three main objectives:

- increasing the accountability of public decision-makers;
- enhancing the quality of public decision-making;
- improving access to justice.

Public law remedies are those mechanisms by which citizens can challenge the fairness and/or legality of the decisions of public bodies and so hold central and local government and other public authorities to account. They include non-court-based remedies such as complaints procedures and ombudsman schemes and also litigation remedies, in particular judicial review.

To fulfill its objectives PLP undertakes research, policy initiatives, casework and training across the range of public law remedies.

National Association for Voluntary and Community Action

(www.navca.org.uk)

NAVCA is the growing network of 350 CVS and other local voluntary and community infrastructure organisations throughout England. We help to promote voluntary and community action by supporting our members and by acting as a national voice for the local voluntary and community sector.

A Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) is a voluntary organisation which is set up, owned and run by local groups to support, promote and develop local voluntary and community action. CVS support their members by providing them with a range of services and by acting as a voice for the local voluntary and community sector.