5 Local Interest Group Politics

This chapter deals with the relationship between local authorities and local interest groups. It opens with a categorisation of local groups by their producer, cause community or voluntary sector focus. There follows an examination of a debate between pluralist and elitist positions which has dominated much analysis in this field. There are valuable lessons to be learnt from this debate but it is argued that it fails to capture the complexity of current patterns of local authority – interest group relations. The next two sections of the chapter examine how many local authorities have ‘opened out’, creating new, if limited, opportunities for participation from a wider range of groups. Attention is also focussed on an increased assertiveness, a spread of resources and a greater willingness by a number of groups to become involved in service provision. The implications of these developments for the diverse patterns of interest group politics in a range of localities are examined in the final main section of the chapter.

The world of local groups

According to Hampton (1987, pp. 129–30); ‘the view is often expressed that if two Britons were marooned on a desert island the first thing they would do would be to form a club; and the second thing would be to elect a committee!’ Evidence clearly suggests that a substantial active base of local groups exists in many areas. In his study of Birmingham, Newton (1976, p. 38, Table 3.2) identified some 4264 local organisations. There were over 2000 sports organisations, almost 700 social welfare groups and 388 cultural clubs. The remaining organisations included trade associations, professional groups, social clubs, churches, youth clubs,
trade unions and groups concerned with educational, health or technical and scientific issues. As Newton (1976, p. 36) notes this list was collected by a postal survey and as a consequence it included ‘most of the best-organised, most visible, and permanent organisations, while probably under-representing the more unstable, less organised, and more ephemeral groups’. A more recent study reveals a similar staggering range and complexity of clubs and associations even within small district councils (Bishop and Hoggett, 1986). In Kingswood, a local authority with a population of 78,000 in Avon County, the authors found that over a thousand individuals were actively engaged on local committees of one form or another. This level of activity challenges the presumption that only local government officers or politicians have experience of administration and organisation. Most local authorities operate in the context of a world of active local groups.

Many such groups will be concerned primarily with providing services, opportunities and contacts for their members or clients, or with simply pursuing their own activities. Our concern is not with this side of their operations but with their role in making demands on local authority policy and resources. The relationship between local authorities and local groups is our focus of attention.

To facilitate a discussion of this relationship we propose to draw a distinction between four types of interest group. The first category is producer or economic groups. It includes businesses, trade unions and professional associations. Organisations representing business interests range from individual firms or companies through to umbrella organisations, such as those relating to particular trades or articulating business concerns in a more general way. The most prominent of the general umbrella organisations are Chambers of Trade, Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Employers Federations, Country Landowner Associations, the National Farmers Union and local branches of the Confederation of British Industry. Producer groups also include the trade unions and the umbrella organisation provided by local trades councils. Professional associations such as local branches of the National Societies of Architects, Chartered Accountants, Surveyors, Secretaries and Administrators also fall into this category.

The second category is community groups which draw on a