

The Sustainable Communities Act – a 2 page guide

Introduction

On 23rd October 2007 the Sustainable Communities Act became law with full cross party support. Local Works, a coalition of over 90 national organisations, had campaigned for 5 years to see this happen. This was a great victory and provides significant new opportunities for communities and their councils.

The Act sets up a new process where local communities and their local authorities (including county councils) can drive central government policy and action on reversing community decline and promoting local sustainability. So it is NOT another meaningless consultation exercise.

The Act also requires central government to publish local spending reports which will be a breakdown of *all* public money spent (local and national) by local area. Local authorities (including county councils) then have the power to argue for a transfer of specific monies and function from central to local control.

How the Act Works

The Act impacts on central government. The aim of the process is to make government do more to help promote sustainable communities. Sustainable communities are defined in that Act as having 4 categories:

1. **local economies**, e.g. promoting local shops, local businesses, local public services and local jobs
2. **environment**, e.g. promoting local renewable energy, protecting green spaces
3. **social inclusion**, e.g. protecting local public services and alleviating fuel poverty and food poverty
4. **democratic involvement**, e.g. promoting local people participating in local decision making

So, relevant proposals made by a community or a local authority are ones that a) fall under one of the above 4 categories, and b) are areas in which *central government* can help.

Note: in the Act 'local authorities' includes county councils

Double Devolution

The Act sets up what is called a 'double devolution' process so that local people can drive central government action to promote sustainable communities. This means that:

1. The Act gives the government a legal duty to 'assist local authorities in promoting the sustainability of local communities'. Councils will be invited to make proposals to central government as to how it can help them promote the sustainability of local communities. So it is local authorities, **not the government**, that are in the driving seat as to what the government must do.

2. The Act specifies that local authorities cannot make suggestions to central government without involving 'local people'. Councils must set up (or recognise if they already exist) 'panels of representatives of local people' – which **must** include people from usually under-represented groups: ethnic minorities, young people, older people, tenants etc.

Why this is NOT consultation

The new process in the Act is NOT just another meaningless consultation exercise. The Act sets up a double devolution process where local authorities must 'reach agreement' with proposals made by their communities via the citizens' panels. Government must 'co-operate' and 'reach agreement' with the Local Government Association who will represent all the proposals that are made by local authorities. This form of decision-making is new and unprecedented in law and is why the Act has real teeth. So please get involved, see how below.

Local Spending Reports

Government *must* publish local spending reports that will provide a breakdown by local area of *all* public spending (i.e. central and local). This 'opening of the books' has never been done before and is likely to generate much debate as central agencies and quangos have to show how their money is spent locally.

Local authorities can use these spending reports to then argue for the transfer of specific monies and their related functions from central to local control. Once under local control these new resources and powers could be used to promote local shops, local jobs, local services like Post Offices, local food etc.

Timescale

October 2008: Central government invites local authorities (district, borough, city, unitary and county) to 'opt in' to make proposals on how central government can help promote local sustainability.

Councils that do opt in must then set up citizens' panels and must 'reach agreement' (again, this is NOT just another consultation exercise) with local people, regarding the proposals on promoting local sustainability that local authorities will ultimately submit to central government. This is the point where proposals on e.g. defending Post Offices and other local services, promoting local jobs and businesses can be made by communities.

April 2009: Central government must publish the local spending reports containing detailed accounts of all public money spent (by local *and* central government), broken down by local area.

October 2009: The whole process is expected to re-occur on an annual basis. Councils that did not opt in to the first round will now have a chance to do so.

Things the Act could help communities achieve

Here are some examples of what the Act could be used to help communities achieve:

- Keeping essential community services like Post Offices open.
- Promoting small businesses by increasing the rate relief they receive.
- Forcing large out of town superstores to pay local domestic rates on their huge car parks.
- Promoting local renewable energy, e.g. by removing the restrictive barriers relating to the local grid.
- Promoting local food and other products, e.g. by giving rate relief to businesses that earn 50% of their turnover from selling local food and goods.

Action! – please get involved

1. Lobby your council to opt in. It is *absolutely crucial* that councils hear loud and clear from their communities that they should choose to opt in to this new process. So please write to your councillors asking them to "please opt in to the new Sustainable Communities Act process when invited by Government to do so in October", so that they and your community can make the most of the opportunities created by this Act. If you can write to the leader and deputy leader of your council asking them the same thing that would be great.

(Note: you can find out who your council leaders and councillors are by calling your council or checking on your local authority website.)

2. Make this public! – write to your local paper, local newsletters, tell friends and colleagues about this new Act and urge them to also write to their councillors in the same way as above asking them to choose to opt in.

3. Help spread the word - Please contact Local Works if you can help distribute leaflets on the Act or help organise a promotional meeting in your area.

4. Get involved in your citizens' panel that your council must set up when it decides to opt in (October 2008). You can:

- a) Be a representative on the citizens' panel (you will have a better chance if you get other people and organisations to nominate you), or
- b) Put forward proposals to the citizens' panel on what central government can do to promote local sustainability (as defined in the Act).

Note: details on how to apply to be a panel representative and how to put proposals to your citizens' panel will be available from your council once they choose to 'opt in'.