

A Very Short Guide to the Sustainable Communities Act

Philosophy: the need for the Act

1. There is overwhelming evidence for community decline: the decline of local shops, Post Offices, pubs, etc and the knock-on **environmental** and **social** effects. It is a national trend affecting the whole country. No community group or council can reverse it on their own.
2. Central government can, and should, help to reverse this community decline. Note they should **HELP**, not dictate the solutions.
3. Local people are the experts on their own problems and the solutions to them. They should therefore be driving the *help* that central government gives.

If you accept these three things then you must accept that there needs to be a process where local people and their elected councils can put forward ideas to central government to help reverse community decline and create the opposite - sustainable communities. The Sustainable Communities Act sets up that process.

The Act: A 'Bottom-Up' Process that Gives People Power

The Act sets up a process where people have real power. The ideas they put forward drive the actions that government must take. People who participate can not be ignored, which too often happens in government consultations. This process is 'bottom-up' - because what people want at community level drives what government does.

Here's how the process works, step by step:

1. The Act gives communities, together with their councils, the right to come up with proposals and to then submit these to central government. These proposals can be for *any* government action or assistance that would reverse community decline and protect or promote sustainable communities. Sustainable communities is defined in the Act as incorporating 4 things:

- **local economies**, e.g. promoting local shops, Post Offices, local businesses and local jobs
- **environmental protection**, e.g. promoting local renewable energy, protecting green spaces
- **social inclusion**, e.g. protecting local public services and alleviating fuel poverty and food poverty
- **democratic involvement**, e.g. encouraging local people to participate in local decision making

So communities and councils can put forward any proposal that a) can be shown to promote sustainable communities as defined above, and b) requires *central government* action or assistance. Communities and councils can submit proposals whenever they choose to.

2. If councils choose to use the Act by submitting proposals, they must first involve communities and citizens in their area. They must not just consult them, but also **try to reach agreement** with them on what proposals the council will submit. How councils do so is up to them, though it is recommended that councils set up (or recognise, if they already exist) a panel or panels of representatives of local people. These should include people from under-represented groups: ethnic minorities, young people, older people, tenants etc.

3. Upon receiving proposals, central government must consider them and decide whether to implement them. If they decide not to implement a proposal they must give reasons why.

4. Any proposal that is not given an initial 'yes' by the government can be taken up by the Selector. The Selector is an external independent body (currently the Local Government Association) that central government must **try to reach agreement** with on whether the initially rejected proposal is implemented. This means an iterative dialogue, discussion and negotiation where **the final decision is taken together** by government and the Selector on whether and how each proposal will be implemented. So the results of this process can lead to reconsideration or compromise from the government on proposals that they initially said 'no' to.

VERY IMPORTANT: Reaching Agreement, NOT Consultation

The process the Act has set up is one where reaching agreement is paramount. It is NOT merely consultation. The Act sets up a truly 'bottom up' process where councils must **try to reach agreement** with their communities on proposals to put forward. Government must then **try to reach agreement** with the Selector who represents all the proposals that are made. This form of decision-making is new and unprecedented in law and it is why the Act has real teeth.

The Act's Story: how it happened and what has happened

2002-2007: Local Works, a coalition of over 100 national organisations, was formed and campaigned for the Act to become law. They mobilised tens of thousands of people to lobby their MPs to support the campaign and organised over one hundred public meetings across the country. The public meetings were packed, with average turnouts of 150-200 people, with some attracting up to 500 people - MPs were astonished.

23rd October 2007: The Sustainable Communities Act became law with full cross party support. Local Works resolved to continue campaigning in order to help citizens and councils use the Act and to ensure it is properly implemented by government.

October 2008 to December 2010: The first round of the Act is carried out. 100 councils submit a total of 300 proposals. After reaching agreement with the Selector, the government began to implement those that had been agreed to. Results included new powers, rights and government policy to help local shops and businesses, Post Offices, green spaces, local allotments, local renewable energy and local pubs. More details of what the Act's results are on the 'Achievements' section of our website: www.localworks.org

15th December 2010: The government announced the second invite for proposals.

June 2012: The government made new regulations improving the Act's process and re-establishing the rights of citizens and councils that use it.

Ideas for proposals: Things the Act could help communities achieve

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

- Keeping community services like Post Offices open
- Promoting small businesses by increasing the rate relief they receive
- Requiring large out of town superstores to pay a local tax 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

How You Can Get Involved

1. Sign up to Local Works on our website at www.localworks.org or by sending your contact details to steve@localworks.org, or Local Works, c/o Unlock Democracy, 37 Gray's Inn Rd, London WC1X 8PQ.

2. Lobby your council to use the Act. It is *absolutely crucial* that councils hear loud and clear from their communities that they should use the Act. So please write to your councillors and the leader and deputy leader of your council asking them to "Please resolve to use the Sustainable Communities Act's process by submitting proposals to government for action and assistance to promote sustainable communities."

3. Make this public! Write to your local paper, local newsletters, tell friends and colleagues about the Act and urge them to also write to their councillors in the same way as above.

4. Get involved in your local panel that your council should set up when it decides to use the Act.

Note: details on how to apply to be a panel representative and how to put proposals to your local panel will be available from your council once they decide to use the Act.

A Note on Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

The Act only applies to England. Unfortunately Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland currently have no bottom-up mechanism like that which the Act has set up in England. Local Works hope to campaign for similar Acts in these countries.