

SUGGESTED SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES ACT PROPOSALS FROM THE LOCAL WORKS STEERING GROUP

Introduction

The Sustainable Communities Act became law in October 2007 due to a 5 year campaign by the Local Works coalition. It changes our system of governance by setting 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.

Government has a duty to 'reach agreement' regarding the proposals that communities and councils make for government action. So the Act has real teeth and it is NOT another meaningless consultation exercise. See the reverse of this guidance sheet for detail on how the Act's process works.

Suggested Proposals

The Local Works Steering Group has put together the following proposals across of wide range of areas that would make a real difference to promoting the sustainability of your community. These suggested proposals below are worded so that you can put them directly to your council. (See the section at the end of this document for more information on how the Act's process works):-

Protecting local services

Wording for your proposal:

"That government give Local Authorities the power to require planning permission to be sought for the change of use or demolition of any or all premises that are classified as a local service under the Sustainable Communities Act. An exception to be made where the person or persons residing at the service in question retires, e.g. a Sub-Postmaster.

How this proposal would help: This will make it more difficult for local services to be demolished or converted and replaced with things like flats and or other unwanted developments.

Protecting local pubs and smaller breweries

Wording for your proposals:

"That government take the necessary steps to pass a new law to enable community pubs to trade on a level playing field by prohibiting irresponsible promotion of alcohol as a 'loss-leader'."

"That government take the necessary steps to pass a new law to prohibit restrictive covenants that prevent any future use of a property as a 'local service' as defined by Sustainable Communities Act."

How these proposals would help: The above will allow community pubs to compete on a level playing-field with large retailers such as supermarkets. Also they will stop the owner of a pub placing a restrictive covenant preventing the property being used a pub in the future. This is one of the factors leading to the losses of local pubs across the country.

Promoting pubs/reducing transport pollution/preventing climate change

Wording for your proposal:

"That government take the necessary steps to allow all pubs to purchase at least one beer direct from local brewers."

How this proposal would help: This will help smaller breweries and create local jobs as well as reduce traffic and pollution.

Promoting local energy, preventing climate change and promoting local jobs

Wording for your proposal:

“That government take the necessary steps to

- (i) remove the barriers to local energy generation so as to create cheaper cleaner energy and local jobs and surpluses to re-invest locally; and
- (ii) give councils greater powers to require new developments to access local energy supplies.”

How this proposal would help: This will allow small scale renewable energy to develop more widely and will allow local energy networks to develop that all local people can connect to and benefit from.

Wording for your proposal:

“The government give Local Authorities the power to draw up local action plans to deal with energy and climate change; and a duty to do so if petitioned by their local communities.”

How this proposal would help: This will enable a more locally driven and targeted approach to tackling climate change in communities everywhere.

Wording for your proposal:

“That government change the planning rules so that before any local service is closed a requirement that a full social impact assessment and environmental impact assessment is carried out, including in particular the emissions of any extra CO₂ as a result of the closure and then, if the cost of additional subsidy to the local service in order to save the additional emissions is less than the average cost of saving CO₂, that the subsidy should be given to keep the local service open.”

How this proposal would help: This will lead to local services staying open if it can be shown that closing them will have a net increase on climate change emissions and/or a highly undesirable social cost to the surrounding community.

Supporting local post offices

Wording for your proposal:

“That government enable all local post offices to be used by Local Authorities to provide payment collection facilities for the full range of Local Authority services, to improve both access for citizens, and income and footfall for post offices. These services, if possible, to include: rent payments, council tax, payment for social services provision, meals on wheels, local travel permits and passes, blue badges and leisure centre passes.

How this proposal would help: This will increase the use of post offices making them more financially viable and therefore more likely to stay open.

Wording for your proposal:

“That government empower and encourage Local Authorities to remunerate all local post offices in order that they host increased provision of Local Authority information. These should include public consultations; electoral register; tourist information; and planning applications.”

How this proposal would help: This will increase local post offices' viability and improve both residents' and visitors' access to and understanding of local initiatives and services.

Saving public services (including central and local government services and local police stations)

Wording for your proposals:

“That government ensures that local communities have access to adequately resourced and publicly run local public service offices offering face-to-face service delivery.”

“That government ensures that decisions on the future of local public service offices should be made in negotiations, in which stakeholders have the opportunity to make alternative proposals, involving all local stakeholders. Also that these stakeholders represent the diversity of the area and all sections of the community served by the service in question.”

How these proposals would help: This will increase and protect local public service provision and will also give local people more influence over the decision to close a local service.

Promoting local food, local jobs and other local products

Wording for your proposal:

“That government promote local food and other products by

- (i) taking the necessary steps to require supermarkets to pay non-domestic business rates to Local Authorities on their car parking; and
- (ii) drawing up a local products strategy as to how it can help increase production of and markets for locally produced products, this strategy to contain proposals to offer up to 100% discount to supermarkets that source specified %ages of products locally.”

How this proposal would help: This will allow local shops to compete on a more level playing field with supermarkets, who currently are at an advantage to local shops in not having to pay local business rates for parking at their stores. It will also mean more food being sold locally rather than transported across the country.

Promoting local and affordable housing

Wording for your proposal:

“That government

- (i) give Local Authorities powers to designate land for self build or community land trusts,
- (ii) take action to assist with the above,
- (iii) give Local Authorities greater powers to bring empty property into use for local people; and
- (iv) empower Local Authorities to be able to use the planning system to prevent second homes.”

How this proposal would help: This will allow local authorities to use land more effectively for the community and ensure their areas do not become “ghost towns” of empty properties.

Promoting democracy and involvement in democratic decision making

Wording for your proposal:

“That if communities or Councils take the view that a change in the electoral system for their own local government elections (i.e. not MP elections) would increase public involvement as per the definition in the Act, then government shall change the law to allow them to choose their own local electoral system; and citizens to be able to petition for this if, say 5%, call for a local vote on this.”

How this proposal would help: This will increase people’s involvement in politics if they feel their vote is more likely to matter rather than being wasted, as is the case in many areas at the moment.

Promoting social justice and helping older people

Wording for your proposal:

“That Government enact measures to enable people (especially older people) greater ability to go out and enjoy social freedom, such as community policing of public parks; toilet facilities; bench facilities; requirements for local retail and transport strategies to enable greater access.”

How this proposal would help: Providing facilities to encourage older people to spend more time outside will have a positive impact on their health and enhance community involvement.

Promoting local democratic influence on national decisions

Wording for your proposal:

“Accepting that there *are* some issues that are genuinely national, and indeed that the government’s new Planning Act has decreed this as regards infrastructure of ‘national importance’, that government give local councils and communities the right to challenge the use of a particular site for a particular proposed infrastructure if they can show

- (i) that the benefits of the proposed site use can be achieved in another way that is no more expensive but is more beneficial to the local community
- (ii) that in taking the national decision, the local ‘harm’ that will ensue has not been properly considered and weighed up.”

How this proposal would help: People are increasingly frustrated with their inability to influence local planning decisions, particularly those that will have an adverse effect on their community. Giving councils and people the right to challenge a planning proposal will ensure that local considerations are given due weight in planning decisions and give local people a meaningful role in the process.

Promoting small businesses through rate relief

Wording for your proposal:

“That government establish a mandatory 50% rate relief for businesses which are a centre of ‘community life’. ‘Community life’ to be defined as that in the Institute for Public Policy Research’s (IPPR) recent research work for the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) that provides the following criteria as a means to judge whether a business is a centre of community life:

- be a place in which local social networks are significantly strengthened and extended
- be a place in which people from different backgrounds mix and socialise to a significant extent
- provide important local public services, such as a post office, general store, internet access, a pharmacy collection point or free use of its toilet facilities
- have regular charitable fundraising taking place on its premises
- be used for meetings of local groups (for example, sports, cultural, political, business and voluntary groups)
- not cause significant problems of noise nuisance or crime, as certified by the Environmental Health department and the local police.”

How this proposal would help: Many local businesses are the centre of community life and provide a place for people to socialise and for community groups to meet. When they close down, the community suffers, crime often increases and people lose access to vital services. Providing rate relief of 50% recognises their importance to local communities and will sustain local jobs and the local economy.

Background: How the Act works and how you can use it

1. Central government must invite Local Authorities (including county councils) to submit proposals for new government action. This happened on 14th October 2008 and the deadline for proposals in the Act's first round is 31st July 2009. So first you need to insist that your council resolves to respond to this invite and submit proposals to central government as invited. It is not compulsory for councils to do this and so it is vital that local people lobby their councillors to do so.
2. When your council has decided to use the Act they must set up (or recognise if they already exist) a panel or panels of local representatives (often called citizens' panels). The purpose of these panels is to take ideas from residents and put them to the council. Find out from your council exactly how their process for using the Act works and how you can put a proposal forward. You could even put yourself forward to be on the representative panels if you wish.
3. Build your case for your proposal for the help (i.e. action) that the council should seek from the government. Seek support from other local organisations, groups and individuals.
4. Present your proposal to the panel of representatives and seek its formal support.
5. Remind the council that there is a duty on it to 'reach agreement' with the panel, not just consult it.
6. Insist that the panel 'push' your idea strongly so that it becomes a proposal that the council will then make to government as regards the action government should take.
7. Liaise with other groups around the country, if you can, in order to ensure that many councils are making the same proposals for government action. If many councils make the same suggestion, then there will be enormous pressure for them to be shortlisted for action by the government.
8. If you fail to get the required action first time round, you can still try to get it included in the next round.

Note: please contact Local Works if you would like more information or detailed guides on how the Act works.

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