



Campaigning to implement the Sustainable Communities Act

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Part 5. Why should councils get involved?

ISN'T IT ALL A HASSLE?

Why should councils get involved?

As explained in earlier parts of this guide, there is no requirement on councils to 'opt in' to the processes in the Act. They simply have the power to do so.

So why should they get involved (as we strongly believe they should), when it involves setting up local panels, and then trying to reach agreement with them? Is this not just one more hassle for hard-pressed officers?

Seven reasons why councils should 'opt in':

1. Help from government: Community decline is happening everywhere.

This Act gives government a legal duty 'to assist local authorities in promoting the sustainability of local communities'. So by 'opting in' councils are signing up to receive that 'assistance'.

2. Power to determine that assistance: The Act also gives local authorities (and their representative body, the Local Government Association) power to determine the nature of the assistance that they receive from government, as explained opposite.

3. New powers for local authorities: The assistance could involve new powers being given to local authorities.

4. Strength in numbers: By opting in, local authorities can act together to put in proposals to government supported by their colleagues elsewhere, so making it harder for the government to refuse to act on them.

5. Transferring functions and money from central to local control:

The Act also enables councils to request the transfer of functions from government or government agencies to themselves. As decisions on these requests must be made by the Local Government Association

(LGA) and the SoS trying to reach agreement, this can be used to regain from government control, powers and spending that affect local areas.

6. Access to spending information: The requirement in the Act for the government to 'open the books' re money spent locally by government departments and agencies will mean that councils will know how much extra money they can get if they push for a transfer of functions.

7. Democratic involvement: Politicians talk about lack of public

involvement in democracy. The recent Power report showed that the more people think that their involvement matters, the more they are likely to get involved. The very 'hassle' required by this Act (reaching agreement with local panels) empowers citizens, and so is a way of increasing citizen involvement.

What if my council decides not to 'opt in'?

Challenge this. Ask them, for instance, is their refusal because:

There is no community decline in their area? If so – get the evidence and challenge this.

There is community decline but the council does not need help to deal with it. If so – challenge this using the evidence of decline from the past few years. Remind your council that the sustainability of local communities includes rectifying democratic dis-involvement and ask them – 'are they really happy with the amount of citizen involvement in political activities?' Because if not, the Act gives them a chance to rectify this.

It's all too much hassle? Ask them – are rectifying community decline and promoting citizen empowerment simply 'hassle?'

They don't believe the Act provides the opportunities that we claim. If so point out that for the first time central government is required by law to 'co-operate' and 'try to reach agreement' with the LGA; that councils by law have to 'try to reach agreement' with local panels. This is NOT the language of consultation – it is entirely new language in law. It gives councils a new opportunity to involve people on a very different basis.

This Act gives citizens the chance to influence government actions to help their communities. Local authorities must not get in the way of that. Point out that the 'it won't work; it's not worth the effort' approach is a 'cynics charter' – whereby nothing new is ever tried. And that by adopting that attitude your council/councillor is part of the problem, not the solution.

Tell them that they can't have it both ways: either lack of involvement is a problem – and so worth the effort to reverse it: or it is not a problem – and they are content with the current low level of public engagement in democracy (let them dare say that!).

And above all – join with other citizens to say this publicly. For whereas our campaign was sympathetic to the 'no new centrally-imposed duties' views of councils, we are NOT sympathetic to inaction re involving local people. If your Council or councillor wants to be inactive – MAKE THEM ANSWERABLE LOCALY!

other parts:

Part 1. Worried about...

Part 2. Sounds too good to be true

Part 3. So how can this Act help us?

Part 4. From Ideas to Action