

Briefing Note from Gary Alderson, Director of Sustainable Communities

### **Sustainable Communities Act 2007**

#### **Background**

The Sustainable Communities Act enables local authorities to make a case to Central Government for the acquisition of new powers or the taking on of activities previously provided by Central Government or another public body.

The Government has issued an invitation to all local authorities to put forward new ideas for policy and powers to deliver sustainable communities e.g. reduction in business rates for those businesses meeting recycling targets or provision of local public transport or broadband for training purposes to assist employers to employ local people, especially younger people who may move away from the area for work. All requests must be made by July 2009.

Any request must show that the outcome is as a result of engagement with local communities. Ideas will originate locally and must be agreed between councils and local panels. The Act leaves the exact composition of these panels open and does not specify how many there should be. Councils can use existing neighbourhood or consultative bodies, set up different panels for different issues or form a new one to deal with ideas that emerge. The hope is that such latitude will enable councils to prevent panels being captured by unrepresentative groups. Only the local authority can put ideas forward, town and parish councils can be included in the process by representation on a consultative group.

Agreed ideas will then go to the Local Government Association which will act as a 'selector' (a role defined by the Act) filtering and consolidating requests and deciding on which will go to CLG. Ministers will then accept, modify or reject bids and must explain their reasons for their decision.

There are four main limbs to the areas for consideration: -

- Business
- Environment
- Social Exclusion
- Accessible Services

Requests can come from a single authority or a region, but they must be able to show engagement with the local community, they can also be tied in to LAA's and LSP's.

#### **Making use of the provisions of the Act**

A local authority can use the Act to involve local communities in sustainability, quality of life and wellbeing.

Any request to the LGA must fall under one of the four main arms:

Local business  
Environment  
Social Inclusion  
Democratic Input.

The LGA will initially evaluate and analyse submissions, they will consider, has the idea been identified as a local requirement or is there a need for decisions to be made locally? What will the impact of the change be? Is it something idiosyncratic to a local area or can it be rolled out nationwide and still meet local needs? Can consistency of provision be achieved by different local providers of a service currently being nationally provided?

Should Central Bedfordshire wish to take advantage of the provisions of the Act, before making any proposals Regulation 4 must be complied with that is:

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- Establish or recognise a panel.
- Consult the panel about any proposal
- Try to reach agreement with the panel about proposals.
- Representation on the panel must reflect the local community

Members should consider that there will be a short period of time to make a request having complied with Regulation 4 and that if we are successful in any request, resource will be transferred from the current provider, but will that require further resource from the authority to manage and will it be sustainable.

To ensure local communities are better informed about public spending in their area **Local Spending Reports** will be published by central government.

By the 23 April 2009 expenditure by all authorities exercising public functions will have to be reported to central government.

These returns will allow public spending to be mapped locally and provide information on the public spending flowing into a local area.

The purpose of these reports will be: -

- To better inform local communities on the overall pattern of public spending in their area, and
- To allow agencies and communities to take local decisions to promote sustainable communities

The area covered will broadly be a local authority area or a part thereof. The breakdown of expenditure will provide information to local communities about who is spending it; this will include defence, NHS, spending by a local authority on services outside their areas etc. So the breakdown may show

35% by local authorities  
35% by Dept. Work & Pensions (20% benefits, 15% pensions)  
20% Health expenditure  
Grant expenditure (area based in a ring fence)  
Dedicated schools grants

All government departments are required provide data. The requirement to provide information will be countrywide and not just subject to those authorities which choose to opt into the provisions of the Act.

This information will tie in with the information being collected by the audit Commission for CAA. It is unlikely that the information for 2009 will be complete and may initially be for pilot areas and this will then be expanded to all local areas.

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