

The Environment Council and the Sustainable Communities Bill

The Environment Council is a charity dedicated to bringing together a diversity of stakeholders and interests to reach the most collaborative and sustainable decisions on environmental issues.

Our work with stakeholders shows that the issues being addressed by this Bill are of very real concern environmentally, economically and socially to society. Repeatedly our projects have demonstrated that engagement is an effective, robust way to achieve jointly owned, locally appropriate and implemented solutions and is especially helpful at a local level, where community cohesion is so vital.

The Environment Council welcomes the Sustainable Communities Bill approach of seeking to assist Local Authorities to deliver local solutions to the issues facing their communities and to encourage democratic participation in planning and decision-making.

With our extensive experience The Environment Council can add value to the four main areas of the Bill:

- ▶ **Protecting or reviving local economic activity** has consequent positive social and environmental impacts for communities, by reducing food miles, reducing carbon footprint from traveling and encouraging local innovation, employment and production. However, businesses need to be engaged in order to understand and contribute to these positive outcomes. The Environment Council can not only bring together key stakeholders from a very local, to a global level, but can also add value by sharing our skills and expertise to empower communities to achieve this engagement themselves.
- ▶ **Protecting the local environment** is vital for communities to achieve a balance with economic and social considerations. It is important to ensure that people are engaged in the decisions made about their local resources in order to ensure their support. The Environment Council has a key role in identifying not only who should be engaged, but importantly, the way to achieve the most sustainable outcomes for all parties.
- ▶ **Promoting social inclusion** is aligned with our aims and experience as a charity dedicated to engagement and involving all points of view in decision-making. Addressing this issue at a local level will help to engage with those groups least consulted for their input into decisions that often have the greatest impact on them. We believe that sustainable decisions are best reached by involving all parties and work at all levels of society to do so.
- ▶ **Increasing participation in civic and political activity** can best be achieved through engagement in a holistic and balanced fashion, to avoid the risk of the 'loudest voices' gaining the greatest proportion of decision-making power. True sustainability of communities depends on the involvement of all sectors of that community and so we believe that increasing participation is a necessary and worthwhile pursuit, but must be implemented fairly

and with consideration for the diversity of views that will contribute to achieving a sustainable community.

We Advocate

- ▶ Effective stakeholder and community engagement is critical to the successful implementation of this Bill's primary aims.
- ▶ Guidance (Section 4, Subsection 7 of the Bill) issued by the Secretary of State should include;
 - appropriate support and resources for principal councils on how best to engage
 - resource for councils to conduct engagement with communities in developing plans
- ▶ A key part of this resource and support is building capacity in communities to own and drive their own engagement processes.
- ▶ A cohesive and collaborative approach to the implementation of key pieces of legislation. For instance, we would like to see a clear demonstration of how the Sustainable Communities Bill can help to achieve the targets in the upcoming Climate Change Bill.

Background to the Sustainable Communities Bill

The Sustainable Communities Bill is sponsored by Nick Hurd MP and brought as a Private Members Bill. It is nearing its third reading in the House of Commons and addresses four main areas of concern: local services and economies, environmental protection, social inclusion and democratic participation.

In 2002, a New Economics Foundation report called 'Ghost Town Britain' identified the problem of community decline in Britain, characterised by the cumulative loss of some of its most necessary local institutions: corner shops, grocers, high street banks, post offices and pubs. The closure of local branches impacts not only local economies, but also has profound social implications for communities.

In response, the Local Works campaign consolidated support for a Bill to address these issues from 74 national organisations, 300 local organisations, 1,000 parish councils, nearly 100 local authorities, the Conservative party, the Liberal Democrats and 50% of Labour Members of Parliament.

The Sustainable Communities Bill is the result.

The Bill allows provision for "sustainability of local communities" to be promoted by

- a) protecting or reviving local economic activity, including shops and other commercial concerns, services, employment and locally-based industry;
- b) protecting the local environment;
- c) decreasing the number of households affected by social exclusion and poverty; and
- d) increasing participation in civic and political activity.

It will be the duty of the Secretary of State to receive reports from principal councils, indicating the ways in which they will promote the sustainability of their communities. These reports will contain indicators and may also suggest further local powers. The Secretary of State will be obliged to publish and implement a plan that specifies what action the Secretary of State will take to promote the sustainability of local communities.

Importantly, the Secretary of State will also be responsible for publishing guidance for principal councils to assist them to carry out their functions under Section 4 of the Bill, which pertains to participation and guidance relating to reports by principal councils.

These provisions are designed to encourage greater participation and local democracy, while coming up with local solutions to local issues.

[Find out more](#)

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