

THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES BILL

According to the New Economics Foundation's recent study 'Ghost Town Britain', the closure of shops and services in small towns and villages could destroy community life in Britain within 10 years. The report states that in order to avoid this happening, local authorities should be given greater powers to veto large-scale out of town developments and to impose conditions such as local procurement in their areas.

The campaign is all about enabling 'ghost towns' to revert back into vital, inclusive and sustainable communities. The new Act will give legal support to local sustainability and help shift the balance of power away from central government back into the community. The objective of the Bill is to ensure that central authorities use their powers and resources to help implement strategies for the empowerment and development of local communities and the promotion of local sustainability in a manner that will include the active involvement of local authorities and their communities.

The duties in the Bill are on central government not on local authorities. The Bill is an enabling and empowering one for councils and will allow the role and influence of local authorities to be increased by:

- Feeding into and influencing government strategy and by empowering the local authority to add new indicators. In this way the authority can impact on the way in which the government spends its money and uses its influence within the local authority's area.
- Securing more support for the community and local initiatives through the enablement of the local authority to influence the strategy.
- Using the Bill to highlight new powers that councils need in order to deliver local sustainability.
- Using the clause which specifically states that government must provide local authorities with 'a reasonable allowance for any expenditure to be incurred by a principal council in consequence of this Act'.

The Bill is divided into two parts; one dealing with local sustainability indicators and the other with mechanisms for achieving policies which work towards the long-term well-being of our community. This involves promoting local economic needs whilst at the same time ensuring that the environmental impact of any planning or economic objectives is central to the decision making process and that the political and social participation of every member of the community is promoted.

The Local Communities Sustainability Bill, if implemented, will require the Government to use its influences and resources to draw up and implement strategies (in conjunction with local authorities and local communities) which will increase:

- The provision of local services e.g., retail outlets, public houses, banks, health facilities, social housing, post offices, schools, catering establishments, leisure facilities, open spaces, etc.
- Local procurement and sourcing of goods which are either produced or grown within 30 miles of their place of sale.
- The growth and marketing of organic forms of food production and the local food economy.
- The number of local jobs.
- The quantity of sustainable energy supplies produced within a 50 mile radius of the region in

which they are consumed.

- Measures to reduce the level of road traffic and promotion of public local transport as well as measures to decrease the amount of product miles.
- Social inclusion, including an increase in the involvement in local democracy.

The Bill will fit in with our Community Plan because the duties contained within it are on central authorities to use their influence, powers and resources to help local communities and local sustainability in ways decided with the participation of local authorities. In this way Penwith District Council can feed into the process of the Bill by ensuring the Government's targets and indicators in the Local Communities Sustainability Strategy are similar to, or along lines that would help support, our Community Plan. As a result the government will be bound to use their influence, powers and resources in a manner that will complement the Penwith Community Plan

The new Bill, should it become law, will work as follows|:

1. The Secretary of State, after consultation with communities and statutory bodies (including parish, town and community councils) will draw up a draft strategy for promoting local sustainability and this will be debated in Parliament.
2. The issues raised in such debates, and any other comments on the draft strategy raised by consultees will then be considered. The final published strategy will outline the measures government proposes to take to protect local communities and increasing local sustainability according to the indicators and setting of targets it sees fit. Targets and indicators may differ from area to area.
3. All principal councils (district, borough, county and unitary) will be asked to feed into the process either individually or in partnership. Such local authority reports may include suggested targets as well as completely new area specific matters as indicators.
4. Any reports by principal councils must be made public. This means that councils are given enabling powers but are answerable to their local electors and not to central government.
5. The government body must include points made by councils in the final strategy 'unless it considers it impracticable or undesirable to do so'.
6. The government body has a duty to implement the final strategy and achieve the targets set as far as it is able to do so.
7. There are challenge and 'over-ride' powers for councils and electors.
8. Councils are then given the power to take reasonable steps in their areas to implement the strategy.