THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES ACT

PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST ROUND
The Sustainable Communities Act: Perspectives on the first round

About Local Works

Local Works, a project of Unlock Democracy, is a coalition of over 130 national organisations that successfully campaigned for the passing of the Sustainable Communities Act in 2007. Since that time Local Works has promoted the Act and campaigned for its proper implementation.

Find out more at: www.localworks.org

About Unlock Democracy

Unlock Democracy (incorporating Charter 88) is the UK’s leading campaign for democracy, rights and freedoms. It is a grassroots movement that is owned and run by its members.

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Executive Summary

Local Works carried out a research project in 2011 which involved interviewing 50 people who participated in the first round of the Sustainable Communities Act which ran from 2008 to 2010. This is an executive summary of the findings of this research:

People had a positive experience

People responded positively to the experience and very much valued the chance to put forward their own ideas that could promote the sustainability of their community. The councils that participated in this study generally seemed to do a good job of setting up open discussion forums, where participants were given the chance to set the agenda, discuss ideas and agree proposals to put forward under the Act. The facilitator and/or chair of the meeting seemed particularly important in this context, with a number of respondents pointing to them as being the reason for the success of the citizens’ panel. People viewed the process as different to council consultations and engagement exercises. This was one of the principal aims of the legislation – that it would be much more than consultation – so it was good to see this being reflected on the ground.

People would participate again

Perhaps most encouragingly of all, respondents expressed an overwhelming desire to participate in the Act again, with 21 out of 22 members of the public saying they would take part in the Act again, with one person non-committal and none saying they would not. Amongst councils this trend was also strong, with 12 council personnel saying they would participate again as against only 3 who would not and 4 being non-committal. There appeared to be a general recognition amongst participants that being involved in the Act was a worthwhile experience in itself, allowing people to put forward their own ideas to help the local area and to debate these ideas in an open manner. Councils themselves also seemed to appreciate the opportunity to engage with the public in a different way and found that members of the public responded well to this.

More work is needed on “reaching agreement”

A worrying revelation of the research was how few people were aware of their rights under the Act, with a majority of members of the public not aware that the council had to not just consult them, but “try to reach agreement” with them. It was also the case that some council personnel were not aware of this either. The majority of respondents felt that their council did reach agreement with them, although there were still a reasonable number who considered this did not happen. Further work will be needed in future to ensure councils do not just consult local people, but try to reach agreement with them, as is required by the Act. Efforts will also need to be made to ensure that participants are aware of their rights and that examples of best practice are shared so that councils can follow practical steps of “reaching agreement” undertaken by other councils.

People were disappointed with the results and time taken

Where the process fell down however, which was reflected in answers to a number of different questions, was in what happened after proposals had been submitted to the Selector. There was widespread criticism from participants, both members of the public and council personnel, of a lack of clear direction in receiving a response to their ideas. In the first instance, it seemed that there could have been better feedback from some councils to participants. Moreover participants expressed dismay at the lack of a timetable for dealing with proposals after submission to the Selector and the time it took to receive a response. Many people did not even know what had happened to their ideas, with nearly twice as many people unaware of the outcome than those that were aware.

Others had grown despondent over the time it took to receive a response. Some had received a response, but felt disappointed with the outcome given the time and effort they had put in to the process. It is disappointing and worrying that of 50 people interviewed, only 4 expressed a positive view of the outcome of proposals in the first round. This is an alarmingly low number and should raise concerns for all those involved in the Act.

Improvements are needed, particularly in terms of the outcome of proposals

There are clearly areas of the Act that will require considerable attention and improvement in future. All parties concerned will have to make much greater efforts to ensure there is a clear timetable for dealing with proposals and that participants are kept well informed at all stages as to the progress of their proposal. It is crucial that agreement is reached on proposals between both councils and residents and government and the Selector. This is what makes the Act unique and inspires people to become involved.

It is also vital there are more positive policy outcomes at the end of the process. This last part is perhaps the one that will require the most effort from all parties concerned. There will need to be concerted efforts to negotiate, make compromises, think creatively and at the end of the process come out with more concrete results for participants.

“Actually, process is not the measure of success, the real measure is what comes out at the end.” Cllr Ian Eiloart, Lewes

For whilst participants seemed to respond positively to the engagement processes of the Act, this is unlikely to last if ultimately the outcomes are disappointing. As one participant put it...
Recommendations

Based on the results of this research, the following recommendations are made for the various bodies responsible for the administration of the Act:

Recommendations for Councils

We recommend that councils using the Act should:

- Continue to use citizens’ panels to engage with local people under the Act;
- Publicise the Act and the opportunity for members of the public to participate, as widely as possible, focusing attention on under-represented groups and encouraging those who do not normally participate in political activity;
- Ensure that participants in the Act are aware of their rights and how the Act works before participating; i.e. that the council must not just consult local people, but “try to reach agreement” with them;
- Not just consult local people, but try to “reach agreement” with them on the proposals that will be put forward under the Act;
- Use a skilled facilitator, which will greatly aid the process of engaging residents in a citizens’ panel or similar body;
- Ensure that participants are given feedback throughout the process, particularly as to the final outcome of their proposals once a decision has been reached.

Recommendations for the Selector

We recommend that the Selector should:

- Ensure that outcomes for participants are positive, through robust negotiations with government;
- Ensure that government adheres to the six-month time limit for responding to proposals;
- Provide support to councils using the Act, explaining time-frames and processes for considering proposals and reasons for rejecting/appealing proposals;
- Provide feedback to participants using the Act on the progress of their proposals.

Recommendations for Government

We recommend that government should:

- Not merely consult the Selector on proposals that the Selector resubmits, but “try to reach agreement” with it, so that the final decision is “taken together.”
- Ensure that the time limit for responding to proposals is adhered to;
- Publicise the Act as widely as possible and encourage active take-up;
- Provide a tracking mechanism for proposals so that proposers know what the position is regarding their proposal.
Introduction

The campaign for the Sustainable Communities Act grew out of widespread public concern over the national decline in things like small shops, Post Offices, independent grocery stores, bank branches, sports facilities, bus services, doctors surgeries, dentists surgeries, community halls, police stations, fire stations, green spaces, sports facilities and recreational facilities and the impact that this decline has on people’s quality of life. The evidence of this decline and its effects was detailed in the new economics foundation’s ‘Ghost Town Britain’ reports.  

The campaign for the Act began in 2002 and grew into a mass coalition movement of over 100 national organisations, thousands of local organisations and tens of thousands of individuals. Over 100 public meetings were held up and down the country as part of the campaign. Average turnouts were 150 people, with some meetings attracting 500 people. MPs were astonished at these turnouts and the level of feeling people expressed about the decline of their local communities.

This grassroots campaign and the organisations that supported it were co-ordinated by Local Works, which started out under the new economics foundation but then became an organisation in itself and is now part of Unlock Democracy. As the campaign developed, it became clear that in order to address the worrying and widespread issue of community decline, action needed to happen from the bottom up: “people are the experts on their own problems and the solutions to them” was the philosophy behind the campaign. However, it also became clear that to really make the scale of changes needed to address the decline, people needed government assistance.

So a Bill was drawn up - called the Sustainable Communities Bill - which would establish a process whereby people could put their proposals to government for changes that would help their community and government would be obliged to take action on those requests.

The Bill was taken up as a Private Members’ Bill by Nick Hurd MP and was passed with full cross-party support in 2007. The passing of the Act marked an historic achievement - it was the first genuinely “bottom-up” piece of legislation this country has had.

A key part of the bottom-up processes the Act set up required councils using the Act to set up “panels of representatives of local persons,” and these panels would have to include “representatives of under-represented groups,” so that panels did not just become another forum for the “usual suspects.”

However, it was also crucial that panels set up under the Act would not become just another “talking shop,” this process was not about mere consultation. As former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Hazel Blears said “There’s nothing more demoralising than asking for people’s views and consulting and then doing what you would have done in the first place.”

The Act, therefore, required councils to “try to reach agreement” with their panels about proposals that would be put forward to government, something that Ms Blears described as “a dialogue where you say “I can do this and I can’t do that” and then have a dialogue about the final decision to be taken together.”

In October 2008, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, launched the first round of the Act by inviting all principal councils (i.e. city, borough, district, county and unitary councils) in England to submit proposals to government for changes that would make their communities more sustainable.

There was a very good take-up of the Act in the first round, with one hundred Local Authorities putting forward a total of 300 proposals, many of which originated amongst residents and community groups. These proposals were submitted to the Selector – which in the first round was the Local Government Association – in July 2009, who filtered them down into a list of 200 proposals.

Just as councils are required under the Act to “consult and try to reach agreement” with local people on the proposals they will put forward, so government was also required to “consult and try to reach agreement” with the Selector on which of the 200 shortlisted proposals would be implemented. This negotiation process happened late in 2010 and government announced the results in December 2010, stating that approximately one third of the 200 shortlisted proposals were to be implemented.

This report is an attempt to draw together the experience of those who participated in the first round of the Act, to ascertain how well the aims of the legislation were achieved “on the ground.” We wanted to understand how people found the experience of being involved: was it a positive experience, did they feel it was worthwhile, empowering, rewarding? Or did people come away from the experience feeling disappointed, frustrated, that this was just another “talking shop,” another meaningless consultation where those consulting had made up their minds before asking people for their views?

We also wanted to understand which particular aspects of the Act had worked well and which had not worked well, so that improvements could be made in future, to both the formal processes of the Act and the informal processes: all that goes into making something like this a success. The ultimate aim of this report is to make recommendations to those involved in the Act – councils, the Local Government Association and government – so that the experience of participating in the Act is as rewarding for possible for those who choose to take part in future.
The New Regulations

Following the passing of the Sustainable Communities Act Amendment Act in 2010, government was required to publish new regulations governing how the Act would work in future. The idea was that these regulations would be used as an opportunity to make the Act work more effectively. The regulations were published by government on 13th June 2012 and will come into force on 26th July 2012. The Act will now work as follows:

The requirement for councils using the Act to "try to reach agreement" with representatives of local persons on the proposals they will put forward remains, but the Act no longer prescribes how this should be done:

- The process is now ongoing, rather than occurring in rounds
- Councils will submit their proposals directly to government and there will be no short-listing of proposals
- The Selector will be able resubmit any proposals government initially rejects. Government will then be required to "try to reach agreement" with the Selector on those proposals
- Government are required to provide updates on the implementation of proposals, if implementation has not been completed within one year.

When announcing that government had made the regulations, Communities Minister Greg Clark stated that: "There will be a memorandum of understanding between the Secretary of State and the selector to include a time limit during which proposals that have been submitted for consideration will be considered—that is likely to be a maximum of six months" and that "There will be a requirement to be transparent about the processes that are gone through."

It is very good news that the regulations retain the requirement for councils to try to reach agreement with their communities and for government to try to reach agreement with the Selector. It is clear from our research that people valued this and in many cases it inspired them to get involved. We pushed strongly for the regulations to contain these requirements.

Councils will no longer be required to set up panels of local persons (citizens’ panels) however and will have more freedom on how they consult and try to reach agreement with their communities. One of the questions we considered in our research was how well the previous requirements worked and whether councils should continue to set up citizens’ panels, despite it no longer being a requirement.

We also welcome Greg Clark’s announcement that there will be a time-limit for government to respond to proposals, likely to be six months. The lack of having a clearly-defined timescale for proposals was a major drawback of the first round of the Act.

Overall the new arrangements should serve to strengthen the Act and help to make the process more streamlined and effective. It is now a question of making the process work and ensuring people have as positive an experience as possible. We hope that this research will help to make this happen.

Methodology of this report

Invitations to participate in the research were sent out across the country to relevant councils, community organisations, Local Works coalition organisations and supporters and advertisements were put up on the Local Works website.

Following the receipt of responses, Local Works staff members Steve Shaw and Daniel Flanagan travelled all over the country to carry out in-depth interviews with people who participated in the first round of the Act. We interviewed people from the following areas: York, Sheffield, several London boroughs, Oxford, Wycombe, Bath, Bristol, Cambridge, West Lancashire, Devon, Exeter, Dorset, Purbeck, Lewes and Brighton.

A total of 46 interviews were carried out for the purposes of the research, with 50 people being interviewed (some interviews being with multiple participants at the same time). We aimed to include a balanced selection of members of the public, councillors and council officers in our research, so that a variety of perspectives would be presented and a fuller picture of the experience could be gathered.

A standard set of questions were put to all participants, although a degree of freedom was allowed for participants to expand on answers and focus on aspects that they felt warranted attention. The interviews were recorded with the full permission of all participants and then fully transcribed. Data was then formulated into categories for each question to provide a broad picture of the responses received. The data is presented below, along with charts to assist with understanding the themes of responses and some quotes illustrating people’s opinions. Please note the total number of responses for each question varies; this is due to the fact that some questions were not relevant to all participants, some participants chose not to answer some questions or could not remember and in interviews with more than one person, on some occasions only one person answered, as appropriate to the question asked.

This was a piece of primarily quantitative research consisting of in-depth interviews. We wanted to go into detail with people about their experiences, so that we could draw as full a picture as possible. Our research covered the experiences of 18 local authority areas right across the country, urban and rural, district, city, borough and county and would seem to provide a valuable insight into the experiences of people in these varied settings. At the same time, the results of our research revealed some strongly recurring themes, regardless of setting, which would certainly suggest that there were some general experiences of the first round that seemed to be felt across the country.
Section 1
Becoming Involved
1.1 Background of participants

Below are details of the backgrounds of participants in our research, as to whether they were members of the public, councillors, council officers or involved with the parish and town council.

We interviewed a good mixture of members of the public, councillors and council officers, ensuring that there were a variety of perspectives on the first round of the Act. There was a good balance of councillor and council officer representation, with eleven of the former and ten of the latter. We also interviewed two representatives from parish and town councils.

In terms of the twenty-nine members of the public we interviewed, nineteen were members of a community or voluntary sector organisation, which indicates that most participants were active in the community already. Although this may not necessarily represent the overall situation across the country, it suggests that greater efforts may be required in future years to involve people from all sectors of society, including under-represented groups and those who are not already active in the community or who normally participate in political activity.

As the results to the previous question would suggest, most people had been involved in council activity before, with only three people not having done so. This confirms the findings from the previous section which suggested that greater efforts will need to be made in future to involve those who do not normally participate in political activity. We therefore recommend that councils should make special efforts to involve under-represented groups when using the Act.

1.2 Had participants been involved in council business before?

We were interested to know whether participants – members of the public – had been involved in council business before, to see whether councils had managed to go beyond the “usual suspects” and involve hard-to-reach groups and those that do not normally participate in political activity.

The results reflect the wide range of ways people became involved, from seeing adverts, to word of mouth, to being approached directly by the council, to public meetings and e-mails received.

A large number of people were involved via their voluntary sector links, which probably explains the high numbers in the previous section who had been involved in council business before. Ideally it would be good to see a higher number of people involved via advertising and open publicity, rather than through groups that already had contact with the council. We would therefore recommend that councils using the Act publicise the opportunity to participate as widely as possible, using a variety of channels to do so.

1.3 How did people become involved?

We wanted to get a sense of how people came to be involved in the Act, so that we could understand which channels councils had used to successfully engage people.
1.4 Nature of Involvement

We wanted to find out exactly how people had been involved: did they sit on the citizens’ panel, put forward a proposal, or were they involved in some other way?

Public

Amongst the members of the public we interviewed, there were a good number of people who sat on the citizens’ panel, with 14 doing so and 11 submitting proposals, with 3 people doing both. Two people did neither, but promoted the Act instead.

Council

Similarly, with councillors we interviewed, a good portion (6) sat on their council’s citizens’ panel, 3 submitted proposals and 1 promoted the Act. This meant we had a good spread of experiences overall, which would help to provide a variety of perspectives on the way they Act worked during the first round.

Recommendation 2

Councils should publicise the Act as widely as possible in their areas, using a wide variety of methods.
Section 2
The Experience
2.1 How much of a chance did the council give you to put your views across?

The idea of the Act is that it offers a people a chance to drive the agenda and to devise their own ideas for changes that will help the community. So it is important that councils using the Act give people a chance to put their views across in an open way.

It should be noted here that the approaches councils took to running their citizens’ panels varied widely and it is therefore likely that the opportunities participants were given to voice their opinions also varied. However, the participants we interviewed felt overwhelmingly that they were given a chance to put their views across, with 27 positive responses to this question, as opposed to only 6 negative responses.

Positive, 27
Mixed, 11
Negative, 6
N/A, 1

![Figure 2.1a](image_url)

When confined to the opinions of just members of the public, the findings were equally positive:

Positive, 19
Negative, 4
Mixed, 6

![Figure 2.1b](image_url)

This indicates that in general councils followed the spirit of the Act – the idea that the process should be “bottom up” and allowed people to express their opinions openly and without constraint. The most common theme of those responding positively to this question was that there were good open discussions, with citizens taking the lead, with 19 out of the 27 positive responses expressing this view. This view was held just as strongly, if not more strongly, by members of the public than by councils, which is encouraging.

One of the major factors determining whether people had a positive experience seemed to be the time, effort and skills of the officer running the process. There were many positive comments which cited the abilities and conduct of the officer involved as the reason for a successful process.

“I think we had a lot of opportunities to do that [contribute]. And it was made very clear that the important people in this process were not the council officers, they were the members of the panel. And it was very well chaired, and he made it very clear that he wanted to hear our views, and for us to decide the priorities and contribute our own ideas.” Paul Carnell, Sheffield

“The ideas, the meetings about it, the going to the civic centre and all of that [was] quite exciting and it was fun to be involved”... “And there were at times a couple of councillors who were very approachable and interested in it, and I think that made it, I think Dawn was a key figure in making it a positive experience.” Mary Evans, Exeter

“It was only the leader of the group who worked with the council. I mean he did it well. And he organized the meetings well, he made sure that nobody dominated too much.” Shirley Brown, Cambridge

“Oh there was a good deal of discussions, and I think generally, we came to a consensus.” David Webb, West Dorset

“... It was really open. At no point was I made to feel like I couldn’t say anything... there were two ladies who were running the whole thing... making sure everyone had a chance to speak.”

Natasha Duckett, Redbridge

Negative responses:

Of the negative responses to this question, the most common complaint was that discussions were council dominated and too tightly controlled both before the panel actually met and during meetings, with 5 respondents expressing this view:

“The council were extremely dismissive of some of the proposals – they never got anywhere near the panel and those people weren’t offered to be on the panel - only people whose ideas the council liked were given a chance to put views across.”

Tom Chance, Southwark
Three respondents also found that discussions were restricted because there was limited time in which to run the panel and submit ideas.

Figure 2.1c – Negative responses regarding putting views across

Summary:

It was clear from participants’ responses to this question that a skilled and experienced facilitator made a significant difference to the quality of people’s experience. We therefore recommend that councils utilise such a person for their engagement of residents under the Act.

Recommendation 3

Councils should utilise skilled and experienced facilitators in running their engagement process under the Act.
**2.2 How would you describe your experience?**

We felt it was important to gather an overall impression of people’s experience before gathering more detailed information about particular aspects of it. We wanted to know whether people found being involved in the Act a positive, worthwhile experience overall or whether they came away disappointed. Was it interesting? Productive? Empowering? Or was it frustrating? Limited?

The overwhelming response of participants was that they had a positive experience, with 25 positive responses as against 8 negative ones, with 11 people expressing mixed views.

![Figure 2.2a – How would you describe your experience?](image)

The trend was very similar both for members of the public:

![Figure 2.2b – How would you describe your experience (members of the public)?](image)

And for council personnel:

![Figure 2.2b – How would you describe your experience (members of the public)?](image)

**Positive themes**

Members of the public gave a variety of responses as to why they found the experience positive, but the most common was a sense of being listened to and feeling like their voices mattered. Other positive responses from members of the public praised the SCA process as a whole, their particular council’s approach and the nature of discussions being open and fair.

“I thought it was good, you know, I just found it really interesting and positive actually. I don’t know whether the Council thought it was so great - it was probably more positive than for the council because we actually got a channel to them” *Anonymous, Oxford*

“It was really good – a really unusual opportunity for people to come out and discuss and develop those proposals. The people in the group whose proposals went through came from people in the community and we were able to help and support each other in developing them.” *Tom Chance, Southwark*

“I felt that my vote was important. Especially if you think that there weren’t that many people in the panel, so you got a feeling that like it was important.” *Maciej Welzman, West Lancashire*

“*The attendance was amazing, relatively high. And the quality of discussion was good.*”

*Paul Carnell, Sheffield*

“It was interesting, I mean I’ve never been involved in anything to do with local government or similar work before. Yeah I found it very interesting, I was impressed very much by the way the council let us join the meeting. We were allowed to, everybody was allowed to have their say, but nevertheless it felt that we were doing things correctly and carefully.” *Anonymous, Exeter*

“I felt very honoured to be asked to be honest. I thought it was a very useful way of looking at issues that I wouldn’t have been involved in.” *Ian Chisnall, Brighton & Hove*

“I did get my chance to put my input into it… I’ve been surprised by how responsive and supportive and committed the local government has been to us.” *Ken Edwards, Wycombe*

“The process was quite interesting; we got quite [an] interesting original selection of different ideas. It wasn’t just one interest group lobbying for ideas.” *John Le Corney, Sheffield*

From council’s point of view, they tended to see the process as a useful and innovative way of bringing people together in one place and a useful channel to make requests to central government.
“I enjoyed it. It was good talking to people. It allowed us to talk about some of the difficult issues which otherwise didn’t fit in [with our strategy]... I like talking about what the problem is and getting people to suggest the solution... [it] allowed us to frame problems we were facing in a way that could be solved potentially by the government.” Cllr John Rogers, Bristol

“I think the group engaged well, there were ideas there that came up from councils and citizens. I think the fact that we gave time to discuss ideas, whether we keep them or throw them out, ask questions [was good]. The thought-gathering process was initially seen as slow, but then the panels were actually able to go and attend meetings [which was] really important.” Cllr Paul Scriven, Sheffield

“[It] felt very long winded. It felt quite reasonable in that you submitted ideas, then a few weeks later we met and talked about it and then they were submitted. But it then kind of fell a bit cold. So the LGA wasn’t set up to tell you directly how your ideas were getting on, so that had to come through word of mouth, and from the council officials had to keep an eye on the LGA; the number of ideas that came out of the other end and real changes were minuscule, it felt. In Southwark – [the Council kept] me and other residents updated...but had to make quite an effort to find out what’s going on” Cllr James Barber, Southwark

Summary:
Under the 2012 regulations on the Act, whilst councils will still be required to “consult and reach agreement” with local people, they will no longer be required to set up “panels of representatives of local persons” (citizens’ panels).

“Since we made the submission, I think it’s fair to say it’s been quite a frustrating experience for us. We feel that we’ve had to take the initiative every step of the way.” Deborah Kinghorn, Bristol

However, it is clear from people’s responses that they found the panels to be a very useful and effective way of discussing proposals to put forward under the Act. We would therefore strongly recommend that councils continue to use citizens’ panels when using the Act, as the body they “consult and try to reach agreement” with. It is also clear that some people were disappointed with the final results of the Act.

Recommendation 4
Councils should continue to use citizens’ panels to engage with people under the Act.
2.3 Was this different to standard council consultations?

The Sustainable Communities Act stands apart from all consultation and engagement exercises carried out by councils. It is the only piece of legislation that requires councils to not just consult local people, but “try to reach agreement” with them. It is also the first time that people have had the chance to propose ideas to help the local area themselves, rather than just being consulted on a policy or idea the council has drawn up itself.

These were the requirements of the Act during its first round, however sometimes the reality “on the ground” can be quite different to that set out in legislation. We wanted to ascertain whether councils really did approach this in a different way to engagement exercises they would normally carry out with local people – i.e. was it different to consultation. At the same time, we wanted to find out whether participants felt this was different too, if they had participated in other engagement/consultation exercises before.

A large majority of respondents felt the Act was different to consultation and engagement exercises normally carried out by councils.

The notion of setting up a panel and giving them complete autonomy, I don’t think we’ve done that with anything else. We have focus groups, but this wasn’t a focus group. This panel was in charge of filtering down ideas.

Cllr Ian Eilloart, Lewes

“...I think it was done differently as much as having a panel of people that normally wouldn’t sit at a table making decisions on something which was going to the government. I think it’s the start probably, start of a really open consultation.” Cllr Dee Simson, Brighton & Hove

In some ways, 4

No, 6

N/A, 3

Yes, 15

In some ways, 6

No, 9

N/A, 6

Yes, 24

Figure 2.3a – Was this different to standard council consultations?

This was the case for both councils and members of the public, with roughly equal proportions expressing these views in each group.

In some ways, 2

No, 3

N/A, 3

Yes, 9

Figure 2.3c – Was this different to standard council consultations (council personnel)?

Figure 2.3b – Was this different to standard council consultations (members of public)?

The main aspects which people felt separated the Act from other initiatives were the fact that citizens came up with ideas themselves rather than the council and that people were involved in the selection process rather than just the council deciding, reflecting two of the major aspects of the legislation.

“Yes, it was different in a way that it was a government consultation and the council was facilitating it... I did feel it was a more of open forum.” Helen Pillinger, Bristol

“Yes, because basically we were there to give our opinions, whereas most council [consultations] on things we are looking at their opinion.” Shirley Brown, Cambridge

“Yes. There was a lot of energy created in debates as a result of it.” David Webb, Dorset

This was also very much the case for councils as well:

“I think it was done differently as much as having a panel of people that normally wouldn’t sit at a table making decisions on something which was going to the government. I think it’s the start probably, start of a really open consultation.” Cllr Dee Simson, Brighton & Hove
Of those who expressed the view that the SCA was not much different from council consultations, it was generally the case that this was down to the council not following the requirements of the legislation in properly engaging and reaching agreement with local people:

“It felt like it was top down, push it back up … it wasn’t at the end where we agree jointly.” Ann Faulkner, Kim Gallager, Purbeck

Or it was that the council was generally very thorough in their engagement mechanisms normally anyway:

“I would say, the standard consultation if they are doing, you know, a big development, for example was much more outreached than this.” Kate Calvert, Islington

“I am tempted to say no, because Bath & NES Council are remarkably good at consulting. It’s not absolutely clear whether their consultations are actually informing or consulting or even involving… I’m thinking of the system of engagement; inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower.”
Peter Duppa-Miller, Bath & North-East Somerset

“What we tried to do was to use existing community mechanisms; we didn’t create a new structure - we wanted to latch onto what community issues we were already aware of - didn’t feel the need to do something additional.”
Charles Meakins, Officer, Wycombe Council
2.4 Were you aware that you had any special rights under the Act?

We were interested to know whether participants were aware of their rights under the Act – i.e. that their council had to “try to reach agreement” with them and not just consult them. This, as mentioned above, is one of the cornerstones of the Act and we believed it was important to ascertain again whether the aims of the legislation were being translated into reality on the ground.

Perhaps surprisingly, most members of the public were not aware of their rights under the Act and some seemed surprised when we explained this to them.

Of those who were aware of their rights, it was generally the case that their council or Local Works had told them, or that they had researched the Act themselves:

“So when PDC told us about it, we did some research about the Act and we found out that there’s actually two streams we could follow.” Anonymous, Purbeck

“Yes I think so. I mean as I say, if you like, it was a pretty distinct part of the process that I was aware of before it got to the central government.” Ian Chisnell, Brighton & Hove

Councils tended to be better informed about the specific requirements of the Act, with 7 respondents being aware of people’s rights under the Act and only 2 unaware:

“Yes I do. I’m certain that happened. We did discuss that fairly early on. I think the positive was that the process, what was expected, and what the Act was trying to cover was, we did go through in the meeting.” Matthew Bird, Officer, Lewes Council

Summary:

It was clear from responses to this section that many participants were not aware of their rights under the Act. We therefore recommend that councils make sure that all participants are aware of their rights under the Act at the start of the process.

Well yes, because you told us. You told us about their duty to consult and agree. So yes, that was very important to know that. I wouldn’t have bothered otherwise.”

Anonymous, Oxford

Recommendation 5

Councils should ensure that all participants are aware of their rights under the Act, i.e. that the council must not just consult them, but “try to reach agreement”.

“"
Did the Council try to reach agreement with you?

One of the fundamental aims of the Act was to ensure that it did not become just another “talking shop.” As the former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, said when launching the first round of the Act in 2008, “There’s nothing more demoralising than asking for people’s views and consulting and then doing what you would have done in the first place.”

If the philosophy behind the Act – that “people are the experts on their own problems and the solutions to them” – was to work, then people had to be given a genuine say in the decision-making process. This meant putting in place requirements for councils using the Act to involve people in a more thorough way than happens normally under consultations. The idea was to set up a genuinely iterative process, where councils negotiated with local people on the proposals that would be put forward.

The Act, therefore, required councils to “try to reach agreement” with their panels about proposals that would be put forward to government, something that Hazel Blears described as “a dialogue where you say ‘I can do this and I can’t do that’ and then have a dialogue about the final decision to be taken together.”

During the progression of the Sustainable Communities Act through Parliament, it was also explained that councils must “ensure that there are genuine attempts to reach agreement. That goes much further than consultation often does when the consulter has to show only that suggestions were considered.”

Again however, we felt it was important to establish whether the requirements of the Act were followed in practice.

Overall results showed that slightly more members of the public believed the council did reach agreement with them – eleven – as opposed to eight that did not.

“That was my impression. What we said we wanted was also taken forward.” Andrew Manasse, Sheffield

“We whittled it down, we had to do it somehow so it may just have been a show of hands, I’m not sure. I feel that they did do that.” Mike Brown, West Lancashire

“Yes I think we selected three and the city [council] sent two up to London.” Mary Evans, Exeter

Of those members of the public who felt the council did not reach agreement with them, people felt that the lack of reaching agreement occurred at different stages – sometimes with the council filtering out valid proposals before they reached the panel stage, sometimes failing to reach agreement with the panel and in certain cases the council made the final decision without recourse to the panel. In each instance this led to people feeling that the council had not tried to reach agreement with them.

“No. I think they took the opinions of the community panel, and made their own decisions based on the result. They then considered it, and said yes no, we are going to get business rates in there, even if that means displacing whatever was sixth on that list. So in that sense, yes, it was run like a consultation and the council had the final decision.” Bryony Wilford, York

“No. Put your ideas forward and we’ll sort it out basically.” Helen Pillinger, Bristol

“I think actually the reaching agreement was a point of tension before they reached the panel because a lot of people felt the council officers were saying no, we can’t do that and we can’t do this, not because of the legal implications, but because it’s not what the council wanted to do.” Tom Chance, Southwark

“I recognised it in the first stage of the process but then the council set their own priorities from our…what we wanted…well they definitely took control; they didn’t see it as a joint thing because they didn’t invite us to argue it out with them; we definitely weren’t part of the decision making, the final decision making process.” Ceri Galloway, Cambridge

In contrast, most councils considered that they had tried to reach agreement with their citizens’ panel, with 10 believing so as against only 2 that did not.

That absolutely did not happen; no. I think they tried to listen, but that’s a different thing...they said ‘this is not something that we can tackle by this Bill.’

Kate Calvert, Islington
“This was about the people of Sheffield having their say. And I would have resigned, my cabinet would have resigned if it would have come to stalemate and we couldn’t have gone with what the panel had said. The panel, was the voice of the people of Sheffield.”
Cllr Paul Scriven, Sheffield

“We got ideas, we selected ideas, and we had a group of people who were looking at those ideas… could almost call it a Citizens’ Panel… There was also, feedback and correspondence with officers within individual member of the public and individual organizations to clarify what people meant by their suggestions.”
Cllr John Rogers, Bristol

“It wasn’t one political party or another. It was about keeping politics out of it. It was about what the community wanted.”
Cllr Dee Simson, Brighton & Hove

However, not all councils were so ready to praise themselves:

“Well, if one wanted to define ‘try to reach agreement’ as consulting people in one evening, then yes. If that’s not our understanding of how it should have been done, then no, I think there wasn’t.”
Uta Mitchell, former Councillor, Lewisham

Summary:

Overall the results suggest that whilst some councils did make a genuine effort to reach agreement with their local panel, a number did not adhere to the requirements of the legislation and followed the more established pattern of merely consulting and then taking the final decision themselves, in the manner which Hazel Blears identified as being so “demoralising.”

In these instances, greater efforts need to be made in future, both by councils themselves and by those promoting the Act (government, the LGA, Local Works) in making councils aware of their duties and providing examples of best practice for other councils to follow.

In this regard, our own Best Practice Guide – available at http://www.localworks.org/pages/publications - provides good examples and model processes which councils could follow.

We are also available for advice for councils on this and indeed all aspects of the Act.

Recommendation 6
Councillors must ensure that they do not just consult local people on ideas to put forward under the Act, but “try to reach agreement” with them.
2.6 Would you participate again?

We considered a good barometer of the success of the Act would be whether people wanted to participate again. If the experience had been worthwhile and people could see a benefit from doing so, it is likely they would want to participate again. If people felt that the time taken to become involved, which in many cases was a considerable commitment, was not worth their while, then they would be unlikely to participate again.

We were very pleased with the results, with 33 respondents saying they would participate gain and only 3 saying they would not.

“I think I would participate again because now I actually know what it’s about and I think I actually could make a positive contribution, instead of just sitting there and ticking off what I can understand.”
Natasha Duckett, Redbridge

“Yes I would...because of the ideas brought forward. I’d like to think that there is at least one positive outcome.”
David Webb, West Dorset

“Yeah, definitely. Because I propelled myself into a position to be able to represent my corner.”
Helen Russell, Brighton & Hove

“Because it’s an opportunity to sort of flag up ideas. I mean normal consultations, ‘we have a pot of money how would you like to spend [it]’, ‘we have a building what use would you like for that building.’”
John Le Corney, Sheffield

“Yeah, definitely. I think it’s a good way of identifying major issues and allowing those issues to be weighed in a situation with no expectation that they will be solved... I think people still thought it was worthwhile taking part even though they knew that it was a bit of lottery.”
Cllr John Rogers, Bristol

“I think the idea of it is wonderful because it gives ordinary people a chance to have a say in what happens.”
Cllr Janet Page, West Dorset

“The fact that we can place power with ordinary citizens sat in their house, sat in their community to actually get through the frustration of improving their lives and improving their communities from ideas they may have, and things they see are right, and influencing not only at city level but at national level is absolutely fundamental in empowering people and giving them opportunities to be able to change a city, a community and improve their life.”
Cllr Paul Scriven, Sheffield

“If somebody asked me to sit on a panel to look at something I wouldn’t think twice about it. Absolutely.”
Cllr Dee Simson, Brighton & Hove

Figure 2.6a – Would you participate again?

Figure 2.6b – Would you participate again (public)?

Members of the public gave different reasons for why they would like to participate again, but most saw the Act as a useful tool and felt valued as part of the process.

“Non-committal, 5
No, 3
Yes, 33”

“Non-committal, 1
Yes, 21”

“Yeah, definitely. Because I propelled myself into a position to be able to represent my corner.”
Helen Russell, Brighton & Hove

“Because it’s an opportunity to sort of flag up ideas. I mean normal consultations, ‘we have a pot of money how would you like to spend [it]’, ‘we have a building what use would you like for that building.’”
John Le Corney, Sheffield

“Non-committal, 1
No, 3
Yes, 33”

“Non-committal, 1
Yes, 21”

Councillors expressed similar sentiments in terms of wanting to be involved again:

“Yes, definitely. I think it’s a good way of identifying major issues and allowing those issues to be weighed in a situation with no expectation that they will be solved... I think people still thought it was worthwhile taking part even though they knew that it was a bit of lottery.”
Cllr John Rogers, Bristol

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“Yeah, definitely. Because I propelled myself into a position to be able to represent my corner.”
Helen Russell, Brighton & Hove

“Because it’s an opportunity to sort of flag up ideas. I mean normal consultations, ‘we have a pot of money how would you like to spend [it]’, ‘we have a building what use would you like for that building.’”
John Le Corney, Sheffield
“Of course I will. I’ve been frustrated there hasn’t been more rounds.”
Cllr James Barber, Southwark

However, some council personnel, particularly council officers, expressed a frustration with the time it took to get a response and the lack of eventual government action, in relation to the time and effort they put in to the process:

“No... Because it was unfortunate that there was an election and it would have been very different I think if there hadn’t been a change of parliament but there was and it took a very long time to get anything out.” Laura Payne, Officer, South Hams Council

“No...Well, the amount of research I have to do as one of the city councillors, and I got no help whatsoever.” Anne Ward, South Hams

Some respondents were non-committal and said it depended on circumstances:

“Yes. Actually I tell you what. I’m not sure. I think it depends on whether we actually get anything as a result. And I don’t know enough about whether stuff has or hasn’t.” Cllr Ian Eiloart, Lewes

“I wouldn’t rule it out. I’d need indication that it was far, far more robust, probably much, much more selective – well, over 300 submissions the first time – and that it took on championship of the issues they decided to endorse.” Ken Edwards, Wycombe

“Yes and No. Yes. Why, because, obviously for me it’s really fundamental. But no if it was exactly as it was before. There were few errors that really needed to change.”
Matthew Bird, Lewes

Summary:

It is very encouraging to see that so many people would participate in the process again. People saw the process as something different and appreciated the chance to put their views across. However, there are warnings within people’s responses that if the outcomes did not improve in future, they may not be so keen to participate again.
2.7 Did you feel empowered?

A key aim of the Act is to empower people in decision-making processes in determining what action government can take to help their own community. We wanted to ascertain whether this was the case in practice or whether the Act fell short in this respect.

Respondents felt empowered in different ways, but common themes were having their views listened to in a different way to anything else they had been involved in. Others were pleased that their proposal had progressed through different stages of the Act.

“Yes, I think so, yes. We’ve got that, I know that I think the proposal on energy that went through, and I thought well actually, I sat there and something came out of it. So yes.” Chris Rowland, Lewes

“Yes, I think I did.” Ian Chisnall, Brighton & Hove

“Oh yes...very...it was a really, really good use of the LSP [Local Strategic Partnership].”
Peter Duppa-Miller, Bath & North-East Somerset

“Certainly. I was absolutely gob smacked. Yes. It was amazing, couldn’t believe it. But I should have believed it, shouldn’t I?”
Helen Russell, Brighton & Hove

“Yes, because before it’s always just been like your ideas are put forward to a group of people to possibly get put forward to the council, whereas this, you’re sat in a room with adults and you get taken seriously, they actually want to listen to what I’m saying.”
Natasha Duckett, Redbridge

“Yes, because before it’s always just been like your ideas are put forward to a group of people to possibly get put forward to the council, whereas this, you’re sat in a room with adults and you get taken seriously, they actually want to listen to what I’m saying.”
Natasha Duckett, Redbridge

“Yes, because before it’s always just been like your ideas are put forward to a group of people to possibly get put forward to the council, whereas this, you’re sat in a room with adults and you get taken seriously, they actually want to listen to what I’m saying.”
Natasha Duckett, Redbridge

“Obviously, I’ve only been here for 7 to 8 years now, and that’s the first time I’ve ever felt truly engaged. There’s always a panel set up, ---to [do] this, --- to [do] that. But the initial meeting for the actual Act which I went to, you could tell it’s something happening there, people’s actual lives, rather than just something that was “oh yeah we’ll listen but we’re not really going to anything about that”
David Williams, Sheffield

“Yes, I felt that my vote was important. Especially if you think that it wasn’t that many people in the panel, so you got a feeling that like it was important.”
Maciej Welzman, West Lancashire

“Yes, it was good to be involved with the process. I feel we had that ability to put these ideas forward to a different group than we would otherwise be able to use.”
Susan Kay, Exeter

Many council personnel expressed similarly positive views:

“I felt really chuffed, because they kept on saying ‘yes you got through round one’, ‘yes you got through round two’, and I started to kind of think ‘maybe this really has got legs’, ‘maybe something can come out of it’.”
Anne James, Officer, Bristol Council

A good majority of respondents did feel empowered, which was encouraging, although the trend was slightly stronger for council personnel than for members of the public:

Figure 2.7a – Did you feel empowered?

A good majority of respondents did feel empowered, which was encouraging, although the trend was slightly stronger for council personnel than for members of the public:

Figure 2.7b – Did you feel empowered (public)?

Figure 2.7c – Did you feel empowered (council)?
“Yes, I think I did - personal, council and city-wide basis - government saying we are interested in what Bristol would like, don’t often get that.”

Cllr John Rogers, Bristol

“Yes, I think an example of that, you know, I can picture the event that day in my head and remember, yes there were people that were very vocal and what have you, but there were others who really got into the process and felt that they were contributing to something that was happening. It wasn’t a talking shop. Particularly with the panel.” Mora Scalfe, Officer, York Council

A number of respondents, however, expressed the view that they felt empowered initially in the process, but less so as time went on and their proposal was either rejected or they did not hear anything about what had happened to it. This was a recurring theme in interviews, not just in responding to this question but in general when participants talked about their experience:

“Not really, no. Because nothing came through.”

Cllr James Barber, Southwark

“Yes. Having said that of course, what has happened to the proposals?” Paul Carnell, Sheffield

“At the outset, yes, we were hopeful. And we had a lot of fun putting the suggestion together. At some point I felt a little bit cheated.” Helen Pilinger, Bristol

“Yes. Although you know, progressively not as much. Once at the LGA and the government it was out of our hands and it was a black hole really in a way. Well the LGA, they did feedback, but no criteria. Or maybe there were, I just wasn’t aware.” Anonymous, Oxford

“I did, up to the stage where it went to government.”

Uta Mitchell, Lewisham

Similarly, a number of respondents expressed the view that they were disappointed by the results or the time it took to receive a response to proposals, but did not feel the initial empowerment of those above:

“No I don’t think you would feel empowered until something happened.” David Webb, West Dorset

And some participants expressed the view that they did not feel particularly empowered by the process:

“It comes out, you’re asked a set of questions you answer the questions you send it in and no one tells you what they’re going to do with it.” Gill Claydon, South Hams

“We were told that we were empowered, but not particularly [felt]... I don’t really know if I want to feel empowered... I like to see things happen, and I like to have my opinion.” Shirley Brown, Cambridge

“No. No more than I have ever been.” Mike Brown, West Lancashire

“Not necessarily so much empowered, but certainly having been able to develop a bit as a person.” Michael Creedy, Brighton & Hove

Other respondents expressed mixed views:

“It was empowering for the community to make things happen, but within the council’s process it didn’t happen.” Tom Chance, Southwark

“Yes, I felt empowered as a part of the group that actually had a say, but not personally empowered.” Andrew Manasse, Sheffield

Summary:

It is encouraging to see that most people felt empowered by the process, but in many cases an initial sense of empowerment faded after the proposals were submitted to the Selector.
2.8 Did you know what had happened to your ideas?

We were interested to find out, given the time it took to deal with proposals (i.e. nearly 18 months) and the different stages there were to the process (i.e. proposals submitted to the Selector, proposals shortlisted, Selector and government negotiation, final decisions taken) how aware people were of what happened to their proposals. Did people manage to follow their proposals right through to the end, or were they still unsure what had happened?

There were quite a high number of people who did not know what had happened to their proposals. In fact, overall just as many people did not know what had happened compared to those that had.

However, some of those that did not know the final outcome of their proposal(s) were still aware if they had progressed through one or more stages, with 10 of the 21 knowing something about what had happened to their proposal(s).

Councils generally had a better understanding of what had happened to proposals than members of the public, although even some councillors were not aware of the outcome.

Public

A number of respondents had only a limited sense of what had happened to their proposals:

“We did get the 18-month-later feedback... So we did get all the feedback from the council, what they finally put forward and everything, that was all e-mailed to us... it would have been better to have been spoken to face to face.”  Ceri Galloway, Cambridge

“Yeah the overall outcome was good, yes. The project which I was probably the most hoping that it would go through had gone through.”  Maciej Welzman, West Lancashire

“I do recall hearing that a few, maybe four got through to the next stage of the process. And I was pleased with that. Because I’m not sure if any other authorities did get most of them through. And so all of that was quite encouraging, and actually the real test is whether anything has got enacted.”  Cllr Ian Eiloart, Lewes

“I was pleased that it was selected, but as I said, there was absolutely no indication that the selection process actually weighed the evidence in any way.”  Ken Edwards, Wycombe

“Disappointingly not much. We heard by November that it had gone to the LGA, I forget what that stands for.”  Anonymous, Exeter

“They were sent to London - Whitehall.”  Mary Evans, Exeter

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“I was pleased that it was selected, but as I said, there was absolutely no indication that the selection process actually weighed the evidence in any way.”  Ken Edwards, Wycombe

A number of respondents had only a limited sense of what had happened to their proposals:

“My ideas didn’t come to fruition. I know to that extent of the outcome. I don’t know how the other ideas did... I looked on the LGA website. So I had to do a bit of looking rather than being told.”  Cllr James Barber, Southwark

“Deborah Kinghorn [Bristol council officer] basically said which ideas were going up, I think there were two. As far as the other suggestion, I don’t recall getting any detail explaining why the council decided not to take them up. This is where I think the process perhaps could have been improved.”  Helen Pillinger, Bristol

“Disappointingly not much. We heard by November that it had gone to the LGA, I forget what that stands for.”  Anonymous, Exeter

“They were sent to London - Whitehall.”  Mary Evans, Exeter
“I think to be fair when there was some news Dawn Rivers did get in touch, a couple of times I did email her and say has anything happened. But again, it seemed unclear what the time-scale was and when we could expect any sort of answers.” Susan Kay, Exeter

“There was stuff on websites...government I think did a lot on it, then ‘Hey! We’re in the Guardian.’ But what’s next? It does kinda make you wanna give up.” Cllr Anne Ward, South Hams

“Not much. There was some initial kind of tracking I supposed, and a couple I know got through to the later stage.” Matthew Bird, Officer, Lewes Council

However, others had very little or no idea of what happened to their proposals:

“No. Much less the outcome, you know the eventual outcome, don’t even know whether the process is still continuing or whether it’s all finished. You know that is a frustration, ‘cause I would have liked to have known that.” Mike Brown, West Lancashire

“No, that’s why I think the follow up should have been a lot better.” Natasha Duckett, Redbridge

“They [residents] wouldn’t have known anything. As I said earlier, there was no feedback, no proactive follow up by the council.” Uta Mitchell, former councillor, Lewisham

“I don’t, if I’m honest.” Cllr Terry Snow, Mid-Devon

“I don’t know the outcome of the involvement. There’s been no feedback.” Kate Calvert, Islington

“No. I still don’t know. I mean, we’ve had a change of government since then and there’s a Localism Bill and I don’t know how that interferes or interacts or whatever... [my proposal] went to central office and I never found out what happened after that.” Ian Shacklock, Islington

It should be noted that there were also some discrepancies between what councils said they had done in terms of giving feedback and participants’ responses on this. However, this could have been people not remembering correctly, given the time that elapsed between proposals being put forward and receiving a response from government and also between receiving feedback and our interviews. Indeed, a number of respondents could not remember at all whether they had received news of the final outcome of proposals:

“I know they went to government. I don’t remember – I’m sure I read the responses.” Tom Chance, Southwark

“I have to confess...I’d be honest I can’t remember. I do know that the ideas we suggested were positively responded to by the bits of the government that listens, CLG I suppose. So I think, as I understood it, the ideas were explored in a wider context nationally.” Ian Chisnell, Brighton & Hove.

Summary:

A worryingly high number of participants were not aware of what the final outcome of their proposals was. It is very important that people are informed of the final decision on their proposal, so that they do not feel the time and effort in getting involved was wasted. We therefore recommend that both councils and the Selector ensure that participants are fully informed of the outcome of their proposals.

Recommendation 7

Councils and the Selector should ensure that participants are given feedback throughout the process, particularly as to the final outcome of their proposals once a decision has been reached.
2.9 What was your view of the outcome your involvement?

A crucial aspect of the first round was people’s impression of the outcomes. Did they feel the final outcome, in terms of the proposals that government agreed to implement, was worth the time they spent on the Act? Or were people disappointed with the final outcome to their proposal(s)?

“Yeah the overall outcome was good, yes. The project which I was probably the most hoping that it would go through had gone through.”

Maciej Welzman, West Lancashire

![Pie chart showing positive, negative, and mixed/neutral responses](chart.png)

Figure 2.9a – What was your view of the outcomes of proposals?

The first point to bear in mind – as shown in the previous section – is that only a small proportion of respondents knew the final outcome of their proposal(s), i.e. 16, with many more, i.e. 29, unaware.

Of those who did know the final outcome, it is very disappointing to see that only 4 people viewed the outcome in a positive light, with 8 expressing negative views and 4 expressing mixed or neutral views. The views were fairly similar for both councils and members of the public, with both having the same number of positive and negative views.

Those who expressed a positive view were pleased that their proposal(s) had been implemented:

“Certainly. I was absolutely gob smacked. Yes. It was amazing, couldn’t believe it.” Helen Russell, Brighton & Hove

“There were only 2 that were actually accepted, and of course one of them was introduction of Feed-in-Tariff which had produced something which is really good, whether it would have happened or not I don’t know, I think I specifically had a hand in that, and then the Business Rates, obviously is the other important one.”

Clr Dee Simson, Brighton & Hove

“Some of it has been quite useful actually, it’s challenging post offices to rethink their approach to working with councils, and a few sort of ideas.” Laurie Brennan, Officer, Sheffield Council

However, there were more respondents who were disappointed with the outcome:

“I was pleased that it was selected... [but] when you read carefully what was offered, what it actually committed to, was not to fix the problem. It was to have a meeting. That’s all it was.”

Ken Edwards, Wycombe

“I think a couple of them were selected to go further, but I don’t feel that it fulfilled the spirit of the Act, which was to represent different groups and geography within the area.”

Matthew Bird, Officer, Lewes Council

“We found, ever since we made the submission, I think it’s fair to say it’s been quite a frustrating experience for us. It has not been positive, it has been quite negative. We feel that we’ve had to take the initiative every step of the way. So although we looked to the LGA as the selector and it made the cut, went to government, our expectation at that point was that government would seriously look at those proposals and come back to us with a solution. What we found was we had to take the initiative every step of the way.”

Charles Meakins, Officer, Wycombe Council

“Oh yes we’ve finally got the response from government, okay it’s in government and they say you know ‘why have you bothered, this isn’t a matter for national legislation at all, local councils can sort it all out on the ground, legislation is fine’. You just think well, ‘I don’t agree at all’, but it’s just personally, I think they’ve completely perverted it.”

Uta Mitchell, Lewisham

“We had two communications from them. One was on the idea of reducing VAT, and one was that unfortunately unsuccessful. There was no analysis we were aware of, that we were filled in on, about why it was unsuccessful. We suspected it was purely down to the power of lobbying. It’s very interesting to see how it panned out. Nothing is going to happen.”

Helen Pillinger, Bristol

“We thought it was going to make a difference, and the trouble is, we are now in 2011, 2012, and those three proposals we put forward then, the situation hasn’t changed. Our community has not become more sustainable.”

Ann Faulkner, Kim Gallagher, Purbeck
Some respondents had mixed feelings about the outcome:

“Well, there were four proposals, and I think three of them were given, we were given reasons why the government wouldn’t take them any further, and one of them is sort of still in machinery, to do with the Post Offices.” Paul Carnell, Sheffield

Summary:

It should be a great cause for concern for those involved in the Sustainable Communities Act that only four people had a positive view of the decision taken on proposals. Clearly greater work will be required on this in future to ensure that there are more positive decisions on proposals for participants. We therefore recommend that Selector should use its powers under the Act to ensure negotiations with government are as robust as possible, and in turn government must not just consult the Selector, but “try to reach agreement” with it on resubmitted proposals.

Recommendation 8
The Selector should ensure that outcomes for participants are positive, through robust negotiations with government.

Recommendation 9
Government must not merely consult the Selector on proposals that the Selector resubmits, but “try to reach agreement” with it, so that the final decision on proposals is “taken together.”
2.10 Did the Council provide feedback?

Following on from the question of whether people knew what had happened to their area’s proposals, we were interested specifically in whether councils had provided feedback to participants. As mentioned above, this is a crucial part of the process and one which we strongly encourage councils to carry out in a thorough manner. Some very good examples of feedback being given by councils are presented in our Best Practice Guide, available at http://www.localworks.org/pages/publications

Figure 2.10a – Did the Council provide feedback?

The responses were fairly evenly split on this topic, with 21 positive and 16 negative, either that the council gave no feedback (11) or the feedback it gave was quite limited and could have been better (5). This would suggest that some councils need to focus more attention on providing thorough feedback to participants. The trend was fairly similar whether it was members of the public or council personnel responding:

Figure 2.10b – Did the Council provide feedback (public)?

Figure 2.10c – Did the Council provide feedback (council)?

It should be noted again though as in section 2.8 that there were a few discrepancies between councils’ reports of the feedback they had given and participants’ recollections of this, although as stated above this could well be due to the time that has elapsed since people took part and our interviews.

“It went to central office and I never found out what happened after that.” Ian Shacklock, Islington

“No [we] had two communications from them [the council]. There was no analysis we were aware of, that we were filled in on, about why it was unsuccessful. We suspected it was purely down to the power of lobbying.” Helen Pillinger, Bristol

“Ah, I think so, but I’m not certain. And in fact given that I don’t know how far the proposals got, the answer is probably no actually.” Ian Chisnall, Brighton & Hove

“We did get the 18-month-later feedback... So we did get all the feedback from the council, what they finally put forward and everything, that was all e-mailed to us... it would have been better to have been spoken to face to face.” Ceri Galloway, Cambridge

“I can’t actually remember now, how I heard… I must have had a letter. Yes. I did. I think I’ve got a letter telling me that my proposal had gone through.” Helen Russell, Brighton & Hove

“Yes I think so, I can’t remember how it came through, whether it was from Local Works or the council.” Chris Rowland, Lewes

Some councils were very clear that they provided feedback to participants:

“Oh yes, absolutely. We kept them informed. As soon as we knew that they were moving on to next stage everybody was informed, and as I said, which ones were accepted and reasons why which ones weren’t. And this was sent to the panel so that the panel could see.” Cllr Dee Simson, Brighton & Hove

There was feedback to everybody who submitted so actually a letter went to everybody…[also] through the media and through council cabinet.”

Cllr John Rogers, Bristol

“With the shortlisted groups, we wrote at each stage of the process, this is what’s happening... Even when there was a lull with the change of government, we wrote saying “we’re not hearing anything at the moment, but as soon as we do... [we gave] feedback right up to the final decision.” Deborah Kinghorn, Officer, Bristol Council
“We wrote back to all the proposers and said what we tried to do, to feedback on what happened to their application, but also if we could, we made suggestion on how they might be able to take forward their ideas.” David Trethewy, Officer, Bath & North-East Somerset Council

“We kept the panel fully informed by e-mail and letter.”
Cllr Paul Scriven, Sheffield

“I sent out update emails as much as I could”
Laura Payne, Officer, South Hams Council

**Summary:**

Whilst councils did on the whole did provide feedback to participants, quite a high number of respondents said they did not receive feedback and it is important to ensure that this does happen.
2.11 What worked well and what didn’t work well

We wanted to gather an overview of the aspects of the process participants considered worked well and those they considered did not work so well. This would aid us in identifying areas of best practice that should be highlighted for the future and those areas where some improvement is necessary.

What worked well

In terms of aspects that worked well, respondents focused overwhelmingly on the nature of the citizens’ panels and the chance they gave people to make their voices heard. Many participants felt they were genuinely listened to in a way that had not happened before. In particular, participants praised councils for the way they organised their panels and gave people a chance to make their views heard in an open discussion forum:

“The fact that the discussion was open I thought was really good and they did have quite a mix of people there from other groups.”
Natasha Duckett, Redbridge

“It was a very open, very welcoming, and it made me grab hold with things which I didn’t always find it easy to come to terms with. Which I felt itself was really useful. We all tend to shy away from things which can raise questions, which are difficult. So it was an opportunity to feel like if we went down that path, we could start to answer them in a way which we could feel listened to.”
Michael Creedy, Brighton & Hove

“Well you got the opportunity to look at all the proposals and I suppose an equal opportunity to discuss them and to listen to other people, so anything you wanted to air or, the process actually allowed you a bit of insight into some of the proposed developments.”
Mike Brown, West Lancashire

A number of participants praised the quality of the person(s) facilitating or chairing the meeting:

“I think having a good facilitator who was able to… facilitate the group… allow us to talk… he was very good at giving us information about… the kind of thing that people may be able to get through parliament, you know because there’s no point saying you want something that’s not possible.”
Ceri Galloway, Cambridge

“And there were at times a couple of councillors who were very approachable and interested in it, and I think that made it, I think Dawn was a key figure in making it a positive experience. You are very dependent on the personality and, what’s the word, the engagement.”
Mary Evans, Exeter

Other people enjoyed the chance to consider a variety of different ideas:

“The process was quite interesting, we got quite an interesting original selection of different ideas. It wasn’t just one interest group lobbying for ideas”
John Le Corney, Sheffield

“Well I think most of the process worked well, I think because first of all it was different people who were allowed to bring their projects to that panel…, I liked the variety of the projects presented, they were definitely good.”
Maciej Welzman, West Lancashire

Some participants praised the feedback given by their council:

“They kept us informed all the way. That was a good thing about the process.”
Anonymous, Oxford

“Once they actually got the proposals together and submitted, they were reasonably good at communicating with people what the status of those proposals was; the number that actually went to govt, it was good, it showed the council actually made some effort, to get the proposals through to that stage.”
Tom Chance, Southwark

“I think at the local level it was fine, the experience of actually doing it was good, the feedback we got was fine, we felt that our ideas had been considered properly and the ideas that were rejected couldn’t be accepted for reasons we could understand and were well explained.”
Susan Kay, Exeter

And some just felt the experience was something different:

“Yes. It’s definitely different, unique as well I would say.”
David Williams, Sheffield

Figure 2.11a – What worked well

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No comment</th>
<th>Involvement of communities</th>
<th>Raising awareness on local issues</th>
<th>Open panel discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the point of view of councils, they were pleased with the involvement of communities and the way people responded to being involved. In many cases, councils also saw this as something completely different, giving people a say in a way they had not done so before:

“ I was impressed very much by the way the council let us join the meeting. We were allowed to – everybody was allowed to – have their say, but nevertheless it felt that we were doing things correctly and carefully.”
Anonymous, Exeter
“I think the way we did it, I think was very good. I think it brought together people who normally wouldn’t be brought together to make decision on things that are, they probably in the past never been asked to make decisions on, which is good.”
Cllr Dee Simson, Brighton & Hove

“I thought getting the residents to make choices went well... the level of the debate was great.”
Cllr James Barber, Southwark

“I think there was a lot of chance to put views across, mainly because, it happened to be the kind of members of public comprising were confident people. The community representatives were encouraged to speak, pushed to speak.” Matthew Bird, Officer, Lewes Council

“Trevor did make sure that everybody had the chance to speak. If somebody wasn’t saying much, he would say, Mrs so and so, what do you think? Also, number of people on the panel worked quite well.”
Shirley Brown, Cambridge

“We decided that we would allow the members of public to have as much control over the process as was legally possible really. And I think actually they did, they took control. I think they felt a little bit like we could have been more supportive. So instead of allowing them to have a lot of control, they felt like not enough guidance. But that’s always going to be a difficult thing to achieve.”
Cllr Ian Eiloart, Lewes

“I think what worked well is the political leadership in terms of saying we are giving up power, and not go against that really important principle. I think if politicians were to be on the panel, it would be a political spat and I wonder if it would have worked well. I think the fact that we did not just say we were going to have a panel, we actually gave the power and we trusted people to make the right decision for the city and its communities. I think that worked well.”
Cllr Paul Scriven, Sheffield

“I thought it was a very useful way of looking at issues that I wouldn’t have been involved in. I’ve never been involved in anything quite like that before.”
Ian Chisnall, Brighton & Hove

“I think, the panel make-up worked well, and the way which we structured panel. One thing we think worked quite well, although the Leader of the Council chaired it, he expressly said at the beginning of every meeting, ‘I’m not here to give my view, I’m not here as a politician, I’m just here to help facilitate the session.’ That worked really well.” Laurie Brennan, Officer, Sheffield Council

“The interaction that took place in the meeting between the residents and people on the panel, was good to see kind of workshops, it was very vibrant, it was well led, it was well chaired. And also the seniority of people who were involved from the council’s perspective I think helped demonstrate the representatives we were very serious about it as well.”
James Henderson, Officer, Sheffield Council

“I think there was some time delay, I think it took quite a long time.”
Cllr Dee Simson, Brighton & Hove

“Well there was quite a large number of people at the event who really did get involved, it mainly attracted people at neighbourhood level, you know, talking about local issues and sustainability issues.”
Anne James, Officer, Bristol Council

What did not work well

Figure 2.11b – What did not work well
By far the most common complaint was the lack of action after proposals were submitted and the time it took to receive a response. This criticism was made across the board, from members of the public, councillors and council officers. The phrases “black hole” and “disappearing into the ether” were repeated a number of times by respondents, who stressed the need for better feedback from councils and a clear time-scale from government for receiving a response to proposals.

“We didn’t know what happened afterwards. Not a clue. And I would have liked to know what happened with the ones that were sent up and why a lot of them were rejected at whatever level.” 
Cllr Janet Page, West Dorset

“It became a bit of a mixture at the LGA selector, what criteria they were using or what the government were using, we had no idea. There’s no kind of clarity about why something got accepted and some didn’t.” 
Anonymous, Oxford

“They could well have been informed more all the way through… more feedback… people should be informed all the way through.”
Peter Duppa-Miller, Bath & North-East Somerset

“The composition of the panel was a massive disappointment and the fact that they met in private meetings which the public weren’t allowed to attend.”
Tom Chance, Southwark

“I think it was the follow up that lacked.”
Natasha Duckett, Redbridge

“Follow-up didn’t work well, but the local election got in the way of that. Would have been nice to have had a bigger membership, you know more ideas to mull over… Getting publicity to generate more initial ideas could have been perhaps better. It all depends on whether you got more ideas or not.”
Cllr James Barber, Southwark

“A better defined time-scale.”
Mora Scalfe, Officer, York Council

“I think it would probably be useful to mention that the ideas rejected in the first round, and we probably didn’t get an awful lot of feedback from the government department, we did try and give feedback but I’m not convinced we did that absolutely thoroughly as we could have done.”
Laurie Brennan, Officer Sheffield Council

“I think some immediate feedback would have helped a lot because I can’t remember at which stage we got some feedback, but it was something that came. And then things disappeared into the ether. I don’t think there was any sort of conclusion to it, there was no follow up at the end of it, we’ll be in touch or. I just felt we got left dangling in space or something.”
Mike Brown, West Lancashire

“And there was a review of that was, as I said, it’s produced a lot of energy, the debate. Which was good. But the trouble is, when nothing happens, people become disillusioned.”
David Webb, West Dorset

The next most common complaint by members of the public was regarding the council’s process: that it could have been more inclusive, effective, or less bureaucratic:

“No, I think they used it in a way that was completely different from the impression I always got at the rallies and from CAMRA…almost as if the council had their own agenda and were just paying lip service to it; I just had no idea what happened next, so I don’t know whether it worked or not; I don’t think it was that well advertised by the council.”
Ian Shacklock, Islington

“I think it would have been good to have a meeting to discuss the outcome. Everything was done via email after the decisions were made about what we wanted to propose. It was all taken to the council and the council threw out one or two things that we thought were quite important and chose some things. They chose – the council chose – things that fitted with their priorities rather than ours.”
Ceri Galloway, Cambridge

“After the submission everything went quiet, not knowing what happened.”
Helen Russell, Brighton & Hove

“Some of these off the wall ideas could have been facilitated more to create something that was quite a significant change … and that appeared to be missing, it became quite bureaucratic.”
Anne James, Officer, Bristol Council

“I just think we need to take some layers out. I think early approving locally is a difficult thing … under the current government’s localism, the council would have to demonstrate what value we added to the debate almost, in our view. So it’s almost like, I’d rather, if the community want to put their idea forward, then they should, it’s almost like they don’t need the support here.”
David Threlthwey, Bath & North-East Somerset

 “[The council] it’s quite small. It is quite a bureaucratic process, and therefore costly, if you like, for a small council that don’t have that much need to do it. … I suppose you were asking earlier whether the community panel should have met twice or something, maybe it would have been good to have one that was for the views of the man on the street”
Bryony Wilford
“What I hadn’t been impressed with is what happened to them all [the proposals]… But if they don’t carry resources, then how many of them are actually going to happen?” John Le Corney, Sheffield

“I think the council were also uncertain of the process perhaps cause there wasn’t one, they were inventing of course cause it was all new and we were sat back there it was a bit unsatisfying, not knowing quite what was going to happen next.” Susan Kay, Exeter

The third most common criticism was that there could have been greater publicity and public involvement:

“Could have been wider community involvement.” Laura Payne, Officer, South Hams Council

“It would have been nicer to seen more people putting in suggestions, but this was almost like a sort of beta testing phase. The worst sort of, coming up with things that were directly relevant to their cause, and throwing it in there. I think we probably had enough work generated, although it would have been interesting to see more.” Michael Creedy, Brighton & Hove

“There was no invitation, you know, general invitation… They should have had more public meetings.” Kate Calvert, Islington

Summary:

It is clear from the answers to this question and indeed others that one of the major complaints of participants was the lack of feedback on what was happening to proposals. We therefore recommend that in addition to councils giving feedback to participants, government should provide a tracking mechanism for proposals so proposers know what the position is regarding their proposal and when a response will be given. It is also important that time-limits for responding to proposals are adhered to.

Recommendation 10

Government should ensure that there is a tracking mechanism for proposals so that proposers know what the position is regarding their proposal.
Section 3
Improving the Process
3.1 What could the council have done to improve the involvement of local people?

In terms of recommendations for improving the process of the Act in future, we considered firstly the steps councils could take to improve their processes and asked participants for their views on this.

The most common response was that councils should open up the process more to a wider cross-section of society, particularly under-represented groups, with 14 respondents expressing that view.

"Certainly in terms of social side of sustainability, I think engagement with communities, getting people's voices heard, I think there's so much more that could be done on that. It's the same thing with TCL, it tends to be middle class, fairly affluent, fairly literate... there is nothing wrong with that, unless they don't then engage further."

Matthew Bird, Officer, Lewes Council

"I think they could have made a bit more effort to have contact to mandate people to be part of it. One of the groups of people that didn't participate was business – they were invited. We should have bypassed the council and gone straight to government."

Ceri Galloway, Cambridge

"It would have been good to have some workshop or something on it to raise awareness amongst the general public and amongst interest groups."

Bryony Wilford, York

"You could always engage with more people. We could have maybe done some, I don't know, market research or around it as well, just to try and get the response to any others."

Mora Scalf, Officer, York Council

"The process of selection is always slightly panicked as far as I'm concerned, and potentially, I suppose you can say abused, because you could easily select people who were going to agree with you, or reflect a particular perspective."

Paul Carnell, Sheffield

Participants also felt councils could have improved the structure of the process, with greater planning and better follow-up being common themes:

"A bit of PR in the early stages about why it's useful to have this process; I would like to see maybe London council etc. or local government, sort of overarching structures to take more of a lead and really try and sell this to people as a way of making their voices heard... making sure people have a broad understanding of what can and can't be done I think would be helpful, timing etcetera, of the deadlines."

Uta Mitchell, former councillor, Lewisham

"[The Council could have] Allowed me to attend the meeting, that would have helped."

Tom Chance, Southwark

"Just to have been kept a little bit more abreast since it finished or to make a statement about the process as a whole so you understood exactly where it did begin and end so that you'd know what you'd be getting into. That would've been ideal to say well look there is this process, you are a part of it if you want to be and it will end at this point."

Mike Brown, West Lancashire

"I think what I would have liked to see is more information about what happened to the proposals. So, you had a nice website with where you track every proposal, to see where it came from, how far it got to in the process, what reasons for rejection were."

Cllr Ian Eiloart, Lewes

Another common theme was that councils could have provided more publicity:

"[In terms of Southwark's process] perhaps more obvious plan for a follow up...probably try to gain more publicity about it."

Cllr James Barber, Southwark

"They are not very good at publicizing things early enough, and they tend to do it through resident groups... I think they could make more use of digital technology."

Helen Pillinger, Bristol
“Improve advertising.” Andrew Manasse, Sheffield

“I think a little bit more kind of publicizing more generally, about how you can have your final say, people did vote on the website, but not a lot.” Cllr Paul Scriven, Sheffield

“I’m not sure how widely it was advertised. I don’t know how it was advertised, whether it was put in local press or national press or anything like that. I mean I suppose that would be a good way of doing it, at the local press. Or a website, anything like that. It probably was on the website.” Jenny Hawke, Brighton & Hove

The responses to this question suggest that there are three main aspects councils need to look at when using the Act: the design of the process, including the set up of the citizens’ panel (if the council adopts one); ensuring wide publicity of the Act and that there is broad involvement of the community, particularly under-represented groups. Local Works’ Best Practice Guide, available here: http://www.localworks.org/pages/publications provides advice and examples on these aspects of the Act.
3.2 What would you recommend to improve the process?

We asked participants for their recommendations to improve the process. This could be anything about the process, whether it concerned the council’s processes, the Local Government Association’s, government’s, or the Act itself.

“We asked participants for their recommendations to improve the process. This could be anything about the process, whether it concerned the council’s processes, the Local Government Association’s, government’s, or the Act itself.”

David Webb, West Dorset

“We would have been nice to have an analysis of what went through – at all levels – [it was] never explained why some suggestion didn’t go through…” Helen Pillinger, Bristol

“If I thought it had at least a chance of some positive outcomes. I feel a bit sorry for the officers who have to do a lot of work. And I think we need to streamline the process a little bit.”

Cllr Ian Eiloart, Lewes

“I think it would have been good at the two stages – after the agreement was made – to invite us and discuss with them whether we agreed with their priorities… government to invite us again to see whether we were happy about the outcome, because then I think we could have then actually said to the government, ‘hang on, this isn’t okay.”

Ceri Galloway, Cambridge

“It was disappointing to think that we went through all that and we got Exeter city council support and then basically nothing. Nothing happened.”

Anonymous, Exeter

“We could not see why based on the amount of work we’ve done on these, and the care which we put in putting them together, which met everyone of the criteria that was given to us, why they have been eliminated, the fact that it wasn’t in their interest to move them forward. That’s the key thing.” Ann Faulkner, Purbeck

“I think just the length of it really. But I know how the government is run and things can take time. I think it’s something that could be improved generally, not just local government but central government really. Things just need a bit more urgency. If anything needs to be changed, they should be allowed to get it changed quickly, rather than having lots of red tape.”

Jenny Hawke, Brighton & Hove

“The time-scale was unclear all the way through.”

Susan Kay, Exeter

“It just basically seemed to go very quiet since we submitted things… you could almost have a tracking thing… people could then comment on whatever went on at this stage”

Cllr John Rogers, Bristol

“Actually, processes is not the measure of success, the real measure is what comes out at the end.”

Cllr Ian Eiloart, Lewes

“I think it was January 2011 we [got a response from government to our proposals] having submitted something in 2009 and the response was a little bit poor.”

Laura Payne, South Hams

“I think it would have been good at the two stages – after the agreement was made – to invite us and discuss with them whether we agreed with their priorities… government to invite us again to see whether we were happy about the outcome, because then I think we could have then actually said to the government, ‘hang on, this isn’t okay.”

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Susan Kay, Exeter

“It just basically seemed to go very quiet since we submitted things… you could almost have a tracking thing… people could then comment on whatever went on at this stage”

Cllr John Rogers, Bristol
“Communications were partly the uncertainty because the government was playing hot and cold all the time, we never quite knew where we were going with it.” Andrew Manasse, Sheffield

“The Government says ‘Great, here’s an idea, that’s come up in genuine democratic community based way, but we’ll give it back to the council, and if it doesn’t happen because of the lack of the resources, well that’s the council’s fault.” John Le Corney, Sheffield

Improved feedback was another common recommendation of participants:

“They [the council] could have, for example, sent us the write up that they submitted to government and they didn’t, [what] I would have liked... is to have wider debates with more residents about certain issues. Or just get more people involved.” Uta Mitchell, Lewisham

“More obvious feedback from the LGA. Everyone submitted their idea with a contact detail, no reasons why LGA can’t more obviously write to those that gave the ideas.” Cllr James Barber, Southwark

“Just the follow up and the briefing – the briefing at the beginning and the follow up. The meeting itself was really good.” Natasha Duckett, Redbridge

“I think it was a real sort of gap in between any follow-ups. It would have been really useful to have more specific feedbacks so that anyone who submitted an idea had the opportunity to be told how things were progressing. I didn’t really get the impression that this happened.” Michael Creedy, Brighton & Hove

“It would have been nice to have a follow-up and networking meeting with all other groups who submitted suggestions. Would have been nice to cross-reference and learn from other groups and see if there was common thread” Helen Pillinger, Bristol

“If you want to be part of this people’s panel or whatever they called it there ought to be something a little bit more that you could do, but there’s nothing else that has happened, there hasn’t been another meeting or consultation or anything. So you felt like it was only a one-off.” Mike Brown, West Lancashire

“What I wanted was more feedback at later stages of the process. I wanted to know what was going to happen with our proposal, when we’ll know about it and what were we going to be told. And they weren’t able to tell us that. I don’t think it was in their hands either.” Susan Kay, Exeter

Another popular recommendation was for wider publicity, at a government level as well as at a local level:

“It [the invitation] should’ve been on the front page of the tribune.... they should have had more public meetings, A leaflet through the door saying “what one piece of policy would you like to change?”... an easy and useful sort of control check for each council, what are people really concerned about; if they had a website where people could go online... some sort of link to the leaflet.” Kate Calvert, Islington

“I think a little bit more kind of publicising more generally, about you can have your final say, people did vote on the website, but not a lot.” Cllr Paul Scriven, Sheffield

“More obvious feedback from the LGA. Everyone submitted their idea with a contact detail, no reasons why LGA can’t more obviously write to those that gave the ideas.” Cllr James Barber, Southwark

“I think it would be useful if the government did possibly give some examples ... if you kind of knew that was the one you were going for then you might be able to get through a little bit better... Time was also a bit short from when I first heard about it.” Anne James, Bristol

“I have one suggestion about the consultation [and reaching agreement process of the council] – it needs to be more open. More information needs to be given to interested parties outside of the citizens’ panel, outside of the local community assemblies, about how you can be involved.” David Williams, Sheffield

“Well I’m not sure if a larger panel would have been productive. But, you can always do more publicity, and always hope things run more smoothly, there are always so many ways to improve the process.” Cllr Ian Eiloart, Lewes

“Perhaps have three months ... more time, and I think more open discussion perhaps explaining in public what people have put forward... It’d be useful to find out information about what others had suggested and put forward.” Ian Shacklock, Islington

“As much as possible, try and to market this, to make sure that people understand what it is we are trying to do.” Chris Rowland, Lewes

“As I said, perhaps a little bit more connection between the panel and the council, but I think that’s probably as much as you could expect.” Ian Chisnell, Brighton & Hove
Summary:

The main recommendation people had, in addition to there being better feedback, was for there to be a clearly-defined timeframe to receive a response to proposals. We are pleased that Greg Clark announced in Parliament on 13th June that there would be a time-limit, likely to be six months, for government to respond to proposals. It is important that this time-limit is adhered to and we therefore recommend that both government and the Selector are vigilant in ensuring the time-limit is adhered to.

Recommendation 11

Government should adhere to the time-limit for responding to proposals and the Selector should ensure that government does so.
Summary of Results

Below is a summary of the key findings of this research:

1 People found the experience of participating in the Sustainable Communities Act to be a positive one and would participate again

• Most respondents found participating in the Sustainable Communities Act to be a positive experience, with 56% expressing this view as opposed to 18% who found it to be a negative experience.

• Most participants felt they were given a good chance to put their views across by the council, with 66% expressing this view as opposed to 14% who felt they were not.

• The majority of participants saw the experience as different to council consultations, with 62% expressing this view versus 15% who felt it was not different.

• Very encouragingly, participants stated overwhelmingly that they would participate in the Act again, with 95% of members of the public saying they would and none saying they would not, and 92% of participants overall saying they would participate again.

2 Participants were not well informed about their rights under the Act and a number of participants felt their council had not tried to reach agreement with them, as is required by the Act

• Most members of the public who participated were not aware of their rights under the Act, with 61% being unaware whilst 39% were aware.

• Most members of the public who participated felt their council did try to reach agreement with them, although only by a small margin, with 45% saying this did happen versus 33% who felt it did not.

3 Participants were disappointed with the time it took to receive a response from government to their proposals and a lack of information about the progress of proposals. A number of respondents were also disappointed with government’s response to proposals.

• 47% of participants complained about a lack of feedback once proposals had been submitted.

• 47% of participants did not know the outcome of their proposal.

• Just 8% of participants felt that the final outcome of proposals was positive.

• The most common recommendation for improving the process, given by 32% of respondents, was for there to be a time scale for the process and 29% of respondents called for more information about the progress of their proposal.
Appendix
List of Participants

Members of the Public:
Kate Calvert, Islington
Ian Shacklock, Islington
Shirley Brown, Cambridge
Ceri Galloway, Cambridge
Natasha Duckett, Redbridge,
Anonymous, Oxford
Tom Chance, Southwark
Ken Edwards, Wycombe
Helen Pilling, Bristol
Peter Duppa-Miller, Bath & North-East Somerset
Andrew Manasse, Sheffield
David Williams, Sheffield
Bryony Wilford, York
Paul Carnell, Sheffield
John Le Corney, Sheffield
Mike Brown, West Lancashire
Maciej Welzman, West Lancashire
Anonymous, Exeter
Mary Evans, Exeter
Susan Kay, Exeter
Gill Claydon, South Hams
David Webb, West Dorset
Ann Faulkner, Purbeck
Kim Gallagher, Purbeck
Chris Rowland, Lewes
Ian Chisnall, Lewes
Michael Creedy, Brighton & Hove
Helen Russel, Brighton & Hove
Jenny Hawke, Brighton & Hove

Councillors:
Uta Mitchell, Lewisham
(was councillor during first round of Act)
Anne Ward, South Hams
(was councillor during first round of Act)
James Barbar, Southwark
Leslie Clarke, Wycombe
Jean Teasdale, Wycombe
John Rogers, Bristol
Paul Scriven, Sheffield
Terry Snow, Mid Devon District Council
Ian Eiloart, Lewes
Dee Simson, Brighton & Hove
Janet Page, West Dorset

Council Officers:
Charles Meakins, Wycombe
June Campbell, Wycombe
Deborah Kinghorn, Bristol
Anne James, Bristol
Laurie Brennan, Sheffield
James Henderson, Sheffield
Mora Scalf, York
Laura Payne, South Hams
Matthew Bird, Lewes
David Trethewy, Bath & North-East Somerset