

Maidstone Borough Council

External Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 14 July 2009

The Sustainable Communities Act

Report of: Overview and Scrutiny Officer

1. Background

- 1.1 At the Committee's last meeting, it was requested that the Director of Prosperity and Regeneration, Alison Broom, inform the Committee of actions the Council has or is planning to take with regard to the Sustainable Communities Act. The relevant extract from the minutes is as follows:

"A Member highlighted that the Sustainable Communities Act was dynamic and an exciting opportunity and Scrutiny could help officers to develop proposals. The Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager confirmed that the Act fell within the remit of the Corporate Services OSC, however permission could be obtained from the Chairman of that Committee to take on the review. The Committee agreed to request this permission and, subject to this, invite the lead officer to the Committee's meeting in July to provide an update on the Council's response to the Act."

- 1.2 The Chairman of the Corporate Services OSC, Councillor Paulina Stockell, has granted permission for the Sustainable Communities Act to be taken on by the External OSC.

2. The Sustainable Communities Act

- 2.1 Communities and Local Government provides the following summary of the aims of the Sustainable Communities Act 2007:

"The Sustainable Communities Act aims to promote the sustainability of local communities. It begins from the principle that local people know best what needs to be done to promote the sustainability of their area, but that sometimes they need central government to act to enable them to do so. It provides a channel for local people to ask central government to take such action. It is also a new way for local authorities to ask central government to take action which they believe would better enable them to improve the economic, social or environmental well-being of their area. This could include a proposal to transfer the functions of one public body to another.

The scope of the Act is very broad, covering economic, social and environmental issues. It does not limit the type of action that could be put forward, provided the action is within that broad scope. It is

for local people to decide what they think needs to be done to promote the sustainability of their area.

The Act is designed to strengthen the role of communities. It provides a simple process by which the ideas generated by local communities are fed through their local authority and a body known as the "selector" (which we envisage will be the LGA) to central government. As it will not be possible for all suggestions to be put direct to central government, local authorities and the selector will have a "short-listing" role. The government will consult the selector and try to reach agreement on which of the proposals on the short-list should be implemented. The government will respond to all of the suggestions that are short-listed by the selector and will publish an action plan setting out how it will take forward the suggestions that it adopts.

As well as enabling local communities and local authorities to make suggestions for government action, the Sustainable Communities Act also ensures that communities are better informed about the public funding that is spent in their area. New "Local Spending Reports" will provide quick and easy access to information about where public money is spent. This will enable local authorities, their partners and communities to take better informed decisions about the priorities they choose to pursue to promote the sustainability of their local community¹."

- 2.2 An invitation was issued on 14 October 2008 by the then-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, for local authorities to submit proposals under the Act. The deadline for the submission of proposals is 31 July 2009. These proposals should be sent to the Local Government Association which has been appointed as the "selector" under the terms of the Act.

3. Recommendation

- 3.1 It is recommended that Members consider how the Council is intending to make use of the SCA, and whether it would be of benefit for the Committee to be involved in this work.

¹ Communities and Local Government (February 2008) *Sustainable Communities Act 2007: A Guide*