

SO HOW CAN THIS ACT HELP US PROTECT OUR POST OFFICES, SHOPS, PUBS, LOCAL JOBS, HOUSING AND IMPROVE OUR COMMUNITY?

Local jobs and housing

Let's start with two basic issues that, if dealt with, could generate the local activity needed to keep shops, post offices, pubs and other local facilities open.

1. Local jobs and economic activity: How the Act can help.

Here are some ideas you could put to your citizens' panel.

- Somewhere near you there may be a large 'out of town' supermarket (or other superstore) with perhaps 1,000 car parking spaces. Did you know that the store does not have to pay non domestic business rates on those spaces? You could compare this with the position faced by local shops of having their trade affected by yellow lines and parking costs. Point out that this is not a level playing field for trade. So why not suggest the following idea to your local panel, urging them to make it one of the suggestions to be put to the Secretary of State (SoS).

'That the Secretary of State takes the power (or gives local authorities the power) to levy non domestic rates on all those car parking spaces – with a power for the council to allow discounts (perhaps up to 100%) if the supermarket, or other store, sources a stated percentage of goods for sale locally.'

The effect of this could be enormous: a boost for local farms and small businesses creating local jobs and economic activity. If that idea was put to the SoS by a large number of councils the requirement to 'try to seek agreement' would make it even more difficult for the Secretary of State to decline to at least reach a compromise position.

- Or take the situation faced by the growing number of small brewers, in both rural and urban areas. A nearby pub (say half a mile away), that might wish to buy their products might be owned by a pub company (many are) which might require the beer to be transported 50 miles to a depot before being sent back to the pub. So the beer is traveling 100 miles when it should travel less than one. You could point out that this puts up the price of beer, causes noise and environmental damage because of extra traffic, and restricts the possibility of growth (and so jobs) by the brewery. So why not suggest the following idea to your local panel, urging them to make it one of the suggestions to be put to the SoS.

'That the Secretary of State either takes steps to prevent this kind of requirement or gives local authorities the power to take such steps themselves e.g. using the planning system or by charging the

pub company for the environmental damage their practices are causing.'

This could lead to easier expansion by small brewers and more local jobs.

- Another local job creation (and CO₂ reduction!) policy would be to remove the hurdles to local energy generation schemes.
 - Woking Borough Council have managed to do this to an extent – with the result that they have provided cheaper electricity, less CO₂ emissions, local jobs and a 'cash surplus' that has been invested in local projects. But requirements relating to 'private wires' (as distinct from the national grid) still hamper progress.
 - A report (*REvision 2020*) produced for the south-western government region and regional assembly in 2005 shows that local energy generation could produce 7,000 jobs.
 - A report (*Green Alchemy*) produced by the London Development Agency in 2003 showed that local energy generation would produce 7,000 jobs in London.

So why not suggest the following idea to your local panel, urging them to make it one of the suggestions to be put to the SoS.

'That the SoS develops a strategy to enable councils to promote local energy schemes, and in particular reviews the requirements regarding private wire systems.'

- Other ideas, some of which have been suggested by the recent report of the Rural Advocate in 2007, published by the Commission for Rural Communities, are
 - That the Secretary of State should require all Regional Development Agencies to set up a standing recovery fund to help small businesses
 - That the ceiling for rate relief for small businesses is raised by increasing the eligible rateable value
 - That the Secretary of State should help councils' local food strategies, in order to encourage the development of local food industries/ agriculture.
 - That a 'jobs from local waste' strategy should be drawn up by the government in conjunction with local authorities and implemented.

2. Protecting and creating local housing: How the Act can help.

- An idea that came up repeatedly at our public meetings when campaigning for the Act was the issue of second or holiday homes. Time and time again we were told of towns and villages where the high proportion of second homes was destroying their community and causing the decline of local shops, as the areas are, literally, Ghost Towns for most of the year. Indeed this is not only a village or small town problem. A recent survey showed that one fifth of second homes are in London. In order to combat this why not suggest the following idea to your local panel, urging them to make it one of the suggestions to be put to the SoS.

'That local authorities are given the power (e.g. via the planning system or via penal council tax) to prevent further holiday homes, thus making more local housing available for people to live in 12 months per year.'

- Or you could suggest that your local panel suggests in its submission to the Secretary of State that:

- Statutory powers are given to non profit-making Community Land Trusts, which provide low cost housing for local people,
- That the government should remove capital gains tax reduction from the sale of second homes,
- That councils are given the power to create a separate fund for the revenue raised from council tax on second homes to be used for reinvestment in local affordable housing needs.
- That the Secretary of State sets targets for investment in areas where lack of local housing is an issue. The achievement of these targets could be achieved by an increase in the funding allocations made by Regional Assemblies.
- Your local authority is given extra powers to deal with the problem of lack of local affordable housing, as it sees fit.
- Government action to help housing co-ops, self-build schemes and bringing empty property into use.