

# the Sustainable Communities Act

## analysis of proposals submitted by councils

Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme

LGaresearch report



# The Sustainable Communities Act: analysis of proposals submitted by councils

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose and aim

The purpose of this report is to disseminate the findings from an analysis of the proposals submitted by English councils under the Sustainable Communities Act for England 2007 (SCA), conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in August/September 2009, as requested by the LGA.

It aims to provide a snapshot of key patterns and trends emerging from the different types of local authorities (LAs) in the nine regions and with varying political control.

This report is intended primarily for councillors and officers from LAs (both those who submitted proposals and those that did not), government departments, and other interested organisations.

## 1.2 Background and process

On 14 October 2008, the provisions for the SCA were launched by the secretary of state. The SCA provides a process by which councils, communities, organisations and public bodies can put forward new ideas through their council. The process involves an invitation to submit proposals outlining new ideas for the further enhancement of economic, social and environmental sustainability, either at a local or national level.

The Local Government Association (LGA) has undertaken a statutory role as 'selector' of the submitted proposals. This involves the following key tasks:

- receiving and collating proposals from councils
- drawing up a shortlist from the submissions
- seeking an agreement with the secretary of state on which proposals to implement.

A new LGA panel of councillors from the four party groups involved in the LGA (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and no overall control (NOC)) has

been set up for the selection process. To support the process, the LGA, with LAs and other partners, has developed some key principles for assessment. One of these is that a proposal must:

- meet the basic tests of the SCA, for example, consulting and engaging the community
- be viable and credible, evidence-based, and make a convincing case for change.

Further details can be found on the LGA website at <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelid=561616>

## 1.3 Research questions

An analytical framework was used to answer seven research considerations.

- Identify the common issues emerging from the proposals and whether these relate to particular areas, type of authority, and political composition.
- Identify the key powers that are being requested by local government.
- Highlight the barriers and challenges that LAs are experiencing.
- Identify the big issues for each of the nine government regions and whether these are similar or distinct from each other.
- Identify the ways in which the LAs engage with their communities for SCA activity.
- Identify key proposed outputs and whether these are themed by specific groups of people, for example, those not in education, employment or training (NEET), or particular services.
- Highlight any other themes that emerge.

## 2 Overview: breakdown of the proposals

### Key points

- A total of 301 proposals were submitted by 90 lead authorities, with a further ten district councils contributing to joint submissions. Together, these represents 28 per cent of the total LAs in England (100 out of 353 authorities).
- The South West submitted the highest number of proposals (84 proposals or 28 per cent) followed by the London boroughs (45 or 15 per cent) and the South East (44 or 15 per cent). The region with the highest number of lead councils submitting proposals was the South West (18 councils, which represent 44 per cent of councils in the region).
- The greatest proportion of proposals was submitted by district councils (107 or 36 per cent), followed by unitary authorities (96 or 32 per cent). County councils (18 or six per cent) submitted the lowest proportion of proposals.
- The majority of lead councils that submitted proposals were under Conservative political control (44 councils). In contrast, just five Labour councils submitted proposals. However, councils controlled by the Liberal Democrats made the most submissions in terms of percentage of total councils controlled by that party (42 per cent).

### 2.1 Number of proposals

A total of 301 proposals were submitted to the LGA for short-listing, 18 of which were joint proposals. These 301 proposals came from 90 lead authorities, with a further ten district councils contributing to the joint submissions. This represents 28 per cent of the total authorities in England (100 out of 353 authorities). A lead authority is defined as the authority that gives the contact details on the proposal. A full breakdown of proposals by region, type of authority and political control is in Appendix 1.

### 2.2 Proposals by region

Of the nine government office (GO) regions in England, the South West submitted the highest number of proposals (84 proposals or 28 per cent). The London boroughs had the second highest number of proposals (45 or 15 per cent), followed by the South East (44 or 15 per cent).

Within each region, the highest number of lead councils that submitted proposals from one region was

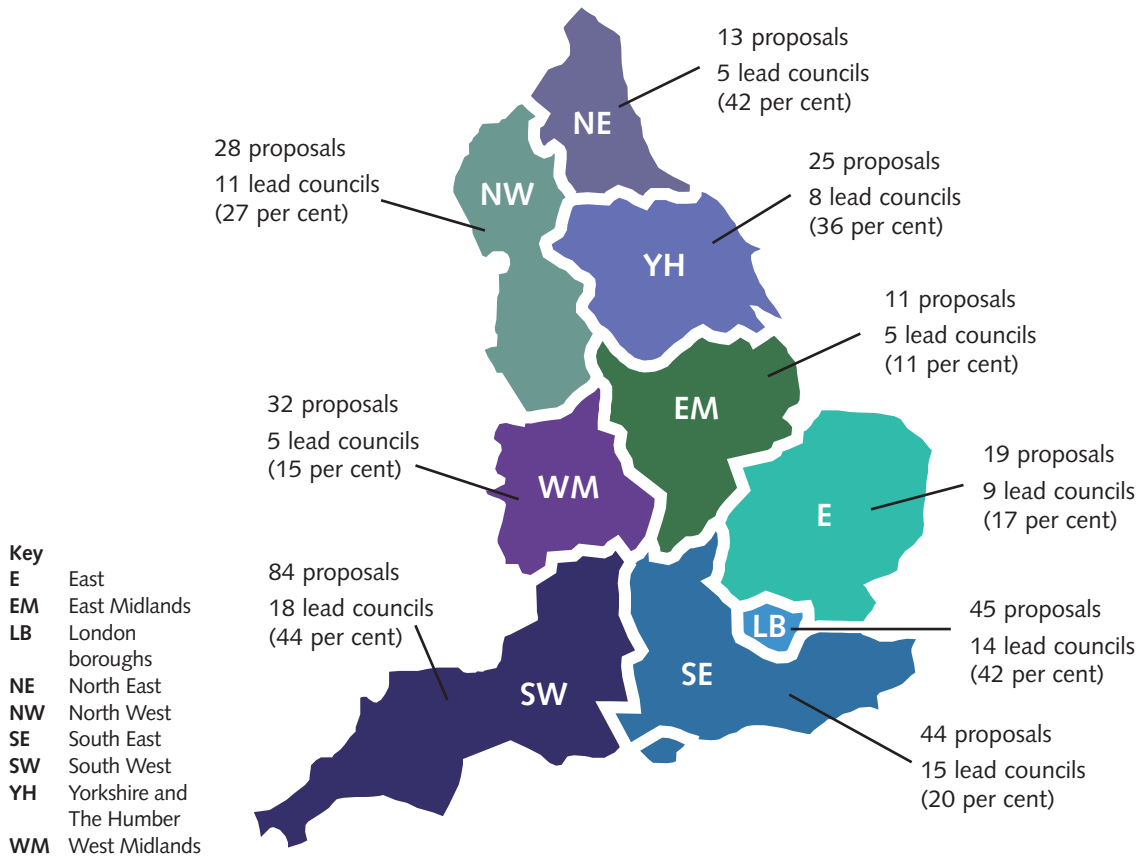
from the South West (18 councils, which represents 44 per cent of the councils in the region), and the second highest was the London boroughs (14 councils, which represents 42 per cent of the London councils). This analysis is depicted in Figure 2.1.

### 2.3 Proposals by type of council

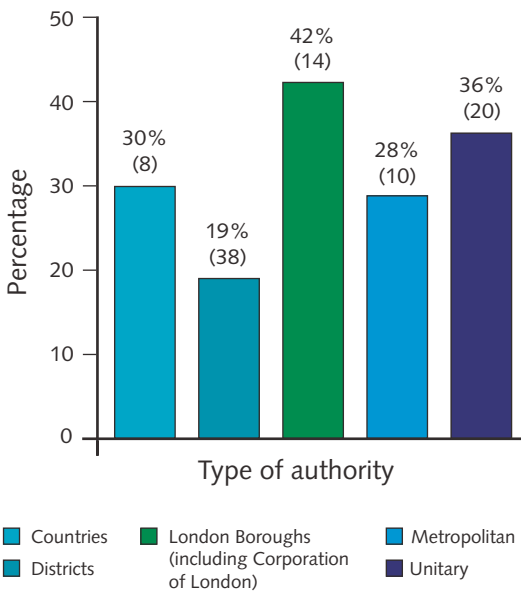
The greatest proportion of proposals was submitted by district councils (107 or 36 per cent), followed by unitary authorities (96 or 32 per cent). County councils (18 or six per cent) submitted fewest proposals.

Figure 2.1 shows the number of proposals, and the number of lead councils that submitted proposals by region. Figure 2.2 shows the percentage (and number) of lead councils of each type that submitted proposals. The highest percentage of proposals was submitted by London boroughs (42 per cent), but the greatest number (38) was submitted by district councils. This may reflect the relatively large number of district councils (201).

**Figure 2.1 The number of proposals and the number of lead councils that submitted proposals by region**



**Figure 2.2 The percentage of lead councils of each type submitting proposals**



**Figure 2.3 Number of councils submitting joint proposals (by type of authority)**

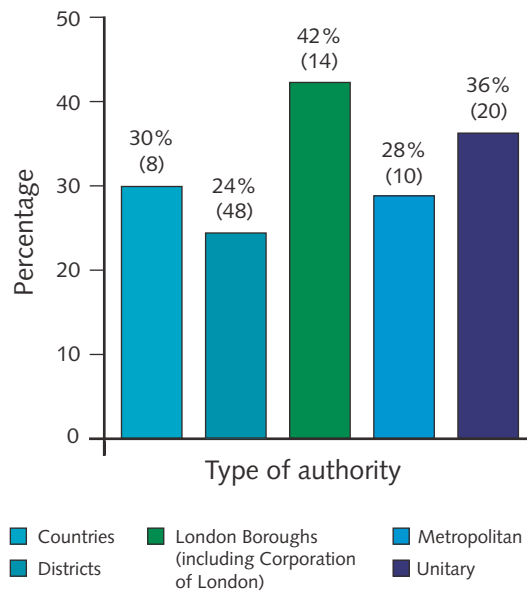


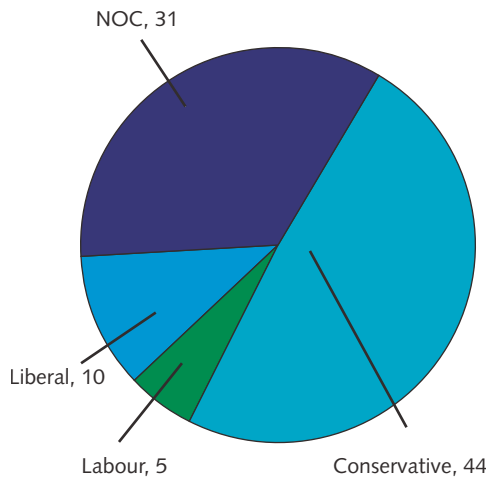
Figure 2.3 shows the number of councils submitting joint proposals by type of authority. When compared with Figure 2.2, it demonstrates that ten district councils were involved in joint proposals.



## 2.4 Proposals by political control

As shown in Figure 2.4, the majority of lead councils that submitted proposals were under Conservative political control (44 councils). In contrast, just five Labour councils submitted proposals.

**Figure 2.4 Number of lead councils that submitted proposals by political control**



However, councils controlled by the Liberal Democrats made the most submissions in terms of percentage of total councils controlled by that party. This is shown in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Breakdown of councils submitting proposals, by political control**

Political control	Total councils	Council submissions	%
Conservative	207	44	21
Labour	34	5	15
Liberal Democrat	24	10	42
No overall control (NOC)	82	31	38

## 2.5 Quality and consistency of the proposals

Given that this was the first opportunity for LAs to submit proposals under the SCA, it is perhaps not surprising that there was some inconsistency in terms of how the proposal forms were completed. For example, some did not follow the structure of the form, and varied greatly in the level of detail provided. Besides the effect this will no doubt have on an assessor's understanding of a proposal, the impact of such proposals will depend on the criteria used for assessment. The contrast between proposals suggests there was a lack of clear guidance available to LAs about the role of the proposal itself, for example, whether it was to present a full and comprehensive evidence base, or simply to introduce an issue for further discussion.

In addition, there was an apparent divergence in the way councils understood the requirements of individual fields within the form. The structure of the form meant the same point was repeated, most commonly in relation to outcomes. Another issue was the lack of distinction between short-term (or more immediate) outcomes and longer-term (or wider) impacts. This was an issue not only in relation to the more general justifications for proposals, but also in relation to the more specific areas of impact, for example, geographical area of impact (field 2.2) and beneficiaries (field 2.3). A lack of detail for field 2.4 ('What steps will you take to mitigate any adverse effects on sustainability from your proposal?') was common to many proposals, with many unable (or perhaps unwilling) to identify any unfavourable consequences. It was also often unclear if a proposal had been made jointly with, endorsed by or simply supported by another LA. Assessors will need to make these distinctions, and they may have to identify the potential adverse effects of proposals. The LGA should consider revising the form to clarify understanding and expectations, and encourage consistency.

## 3 Themes, 'levers for change' and common outcomes

### Key points

- The most common themes for proposals were environmental sustainability, planning and transport. The least common were adult social care, children and young people, and health. It is important to reflect here that the prevalence of proposal themes may not only reflect priorities locally, but also perhaps the conceptualisation of sustainable communities, an understanding of the SCA, and its considered relevance to the work of individual LA departments.
- Proposals were often relevant to a number of themes, highlighting the relationships between sustainable community issues and the need to tackle them with this in mind. Democratic renewal, finance and planning were most likely to effect change in relation to other themes.
- The approaches suggested by LAs in relation to reform could be categorized into five levers for change. Most commonly, LAs advocated devolution to the local level or more stringent legislation from central government. Relatively few submissions proposed changes that were relevant only to their local area. The vast majority of proposals would require blanket reform.
- Common proposal outcomes included: energy efficiency and reducing CO<sub>2</sub>, reducing waste, greater local influence in relation to planning, promoting eco-friendly transport modes, local control and maintenance of housing stock, retaining business rates for local reinvestment and access to local services.

### 3.1 Prevalence of themes

The proposals can be categorised under 13 headline themes, see Figure 3.1. The five most common themes for proposals were environmental sustainability, planning, transport, housing and regeneration, and economic development. The least common themes were adult social care, children and young people, and health. Figure 3.2 shows the most prevalent themes by regional areas.

#### Issues to consider in relation to headline themes

The prevalence of some themes may reflect priorities locally, as well as LA's understanding or conceptualisation of sustainable communities.

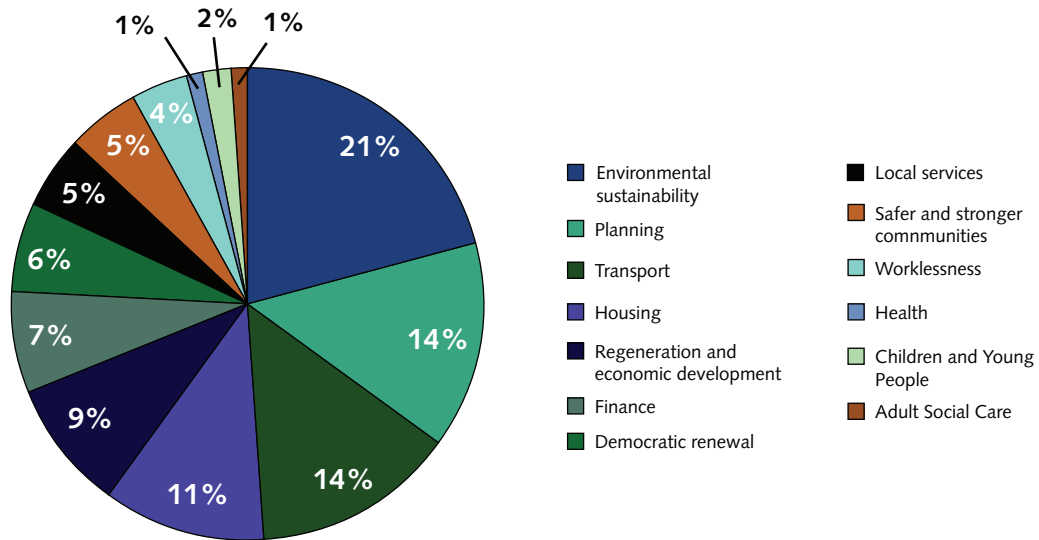
Some of the proposals sat within more than one theme and, for analysis purposes, were categorised as such. An example is South Ham District Council's proposal that LA planning

requirements be amended to allow private individuals and non-profit groups to build affordable homes for their own use. This proposal was relevant to both planning and housing policy themes, and thus highlights the interrelation between many sustainable communities issues.

Proposals relating to planning, finance and democratic renewal were most likely to cross over into other themes, emphasising their potential strengths in relation to change. Housing, regeneration and economic development, and local services were themes most likely to experience cross-over from these drivers.

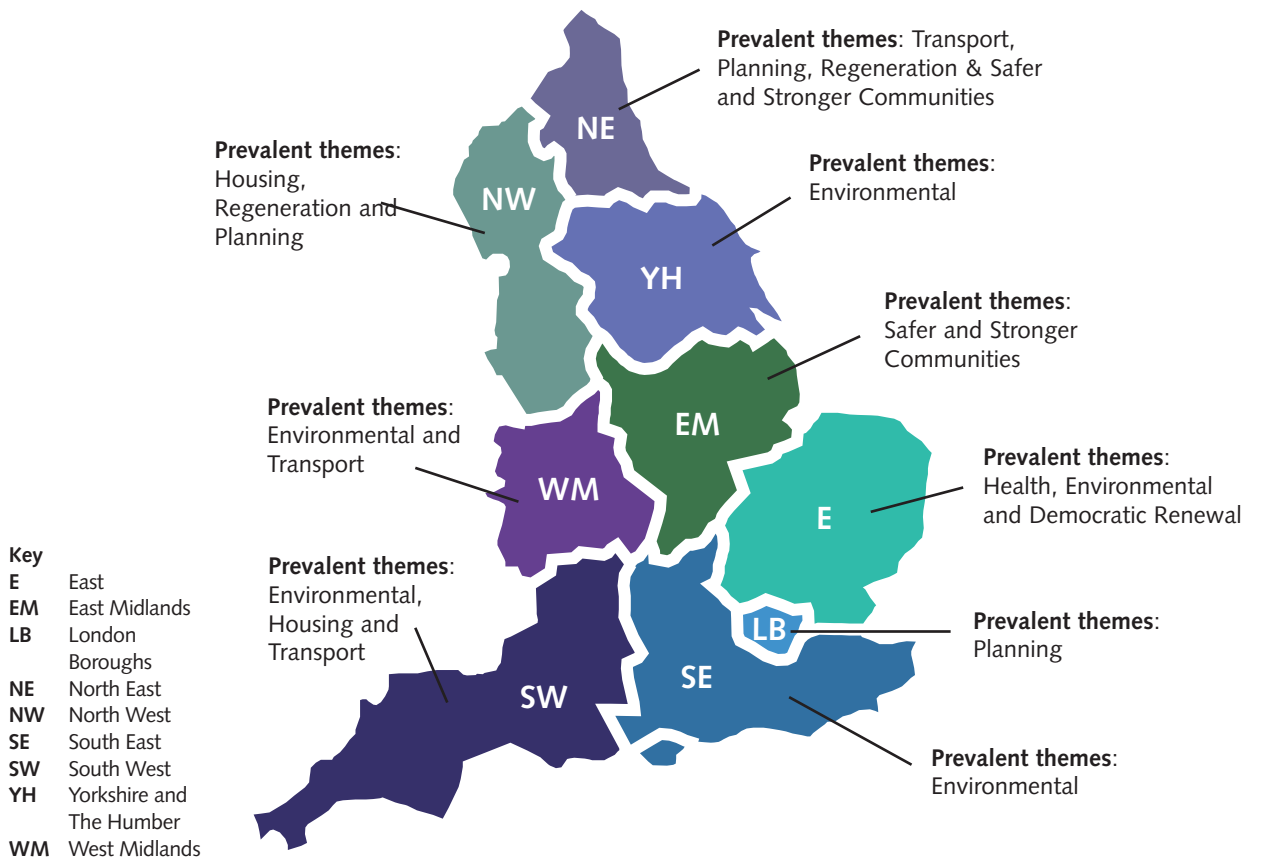
When reviewing proposals, assessors may well need to consider the scope, extent and direction of these relationships. This suggestion is explained and analysed further in section 3.3.

Figure 3.1 Proportion of proposals in relation to themes



Proposals were not limited to these themes, but these were the most common for each region.

Figure 3.2 Most common proposal themes by regional area



## 3.2 Barriers and levers for change

Proposals were also themed by their suggested 'lever for change', this is the action taken to break down barriers. The most commonly asked for lever for change was delegating powers to a local level. Even so, a considerable proportion of proposals still requested national government to strengthen legislation. Overall, proposals can be characterised by one or more of five levers for change. These are explained, along with the impetus for their suggestion, their prevalence amongst proposals, and the perceived barrier they responded to.

### A. Give power back to the local level via finance, decision making or transfer of functions

This was the most common lever for change and was in **43 per cent** of proposals.

*Perceived barrier:* national policy unable to appropriately direct change and target resources at a local level.

LAs argued delegation of power would encourage change to come from a grass roots level and allow reform to be directed according to local priorities.

### B. Strengthen or add legislation

This approach suggested targets (to increase expectations in outputs) or limitations (to restrict the behaviours or powers of individuals or groups) should be set and enforced by central government.

*Perceived barrier:* too little legislation at a national level.

This lever for change involved an imposition of change from 'above' and was in **25 per cent** of proposals.

### C. Prioritise the issue through funding, programmes and initiatives

The suggestion that government should raise the profile of certain issues was in **18 per cent** of proposals. Government could provide resources and the support necessary to effect change at a local level.

*Perceived barrier:* an issue was too low on the agenda or lacked the financial impetus to effect change.

By using this lever, change would be promoted rather than formalised or imposed.

### D. Use legislation to incentivise individuals or groups

This approach was in **12 per cent** of proposals, and encourages change in the behaviour of individuals or groups through incentives.

*Perceived barrier:* no financial incentive to act in a certain way or lack of the financial means to do so.

Most commonly, the tax system would be used to make certain actions more or less possible or appealing.

### E. Relax regulations to allow for more flexibility

This approach to change reduces legislation or barriers imposed at national or regional levels.

*Perceived barrier:* action is not possible due to stringent legislation.

Although only **seven per cent** of proposals made explicit reference to this lever for change, submissions relating to the delegation of powers at a local level were sometimes also concerned with a relaxation of regulations at a national level.

### Issues for consideration

Some proposals had more than one lever for change and, therefore, percentages do not add up to 100. When proposals are reviewed, the different types of levers for change, and the need for a combination of levers, must be noted.

Relatively few submissions proposed change that was only relevant to the local area from which they originated. The vast majority of proposals would require blanket reform.

### 3.3 Common themes and outcomes

Further analysis reveals that proposals relating to common headline themes (see section 3.1) could be categorised further into some common **outcomes**.

This section details the frequent outcomes emerging from the most common headline proposal themes, making reference to:

- the prevalence of proposals purporting to deliver this outcome
- the headline themes which were relevant
- the most common lever for changes indicated by the letters allocated to them in section 3.2, and shown in brackets
- if apparent, the prominent region/s or political control of LAs that made this type of proposal.

#### Theme 1: environmental sustainability

##### Outcome i) Energy efficiency and reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> (36 proposals)

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Environmental sustainability. Cross-over with transport, housing and planning	Strengthen or add legislation	SW Conservative, NOC

The most common proposals relating to energy efficiency and the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> are outlined.

##### The decentralisation of energy production

(11 proposals). Conservative or NOC LAs were more likely to submit this type of proposal and it was a particular issue for those in the SW and WM. LAs were split about the best lever for change, with a fair few believing the government should incentivise the generation of power within local communities through the tax system (D), while others thought the government should provide the storage facilities and funding necessary to make it possible (C). Another common suggestion was that power should be invested in the

LAs to develop a local energy strategy which identifies local energy demand and need (A). In order to make this possible, a couple of LAs requested mandatory sharing of localised energy consumption data (B).

##### Use of planning and housing policy to develop more energy efficient buildings or enable the production of renewable energy on site (10 proposals).

Additional regulations were most commonly suggested (B) in relation to the building control system or the maintenance of housing stock, to ensure that new and existing developments were energy-efficient or to provide the means to produce energy on site. This was proposed by LAs from a range of regions (with a slightly higher prevalence of those in the SW) and there was also a slightly higher prevalence of Conservative-controlled LAs making this proposal.

##### Outcome ii) Reduction of waste (20 proposals)

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Environmental Sustainability	Strengthen or add legislation	Regional split & slight prevalence of NOC

These proposals concentrated mainly on **reducing industrial waste**, although some were concerned with household waste. LAs suggested a range of levers for change, with the majority focused on increasing legislation (mainly in relation to supermarket packaging), while a few requested delegating power to the local level to effect change (mainly through the re-direction of landfill tax to the LA). Some made reference to the use of incentives.

##### Other less common proposal outcomes

Eight proposals related to the improvement and protection of the local environment in terms of **biodiversity and flood defence**. There seems to be some scepticism on the part of some LAs in relation to the focus and effectiveness of environmental organisations. Therefore, LAs were split on the best lever for change. Some wanted central government to give power back to the local level (A) to, for example, consent to and enforce work on local watercourses, while others indicated they would like further regulation (B) to ensure environmental organisations are forced to work more in partnership with the LA.

Another eight submissions proposed approaches to **sustainable food production** which were wide-ranging. Allotments were the focus on four proposals, with some LAs suggesting they be promoted through the planning system (C) or regulation be relaxed (E) to allow for the retail of allotment stock or for temporary allotment sites to become statutory sites after a number of years. While one LA thought government should direct farming policy to prioritise the growing of organic food (B), another suggested all shops and supermarkets be made to clearly label where food has originated from. A couple of LAs suggested the business rate system could be used to incentivise more sustainable food production (D).

## Theme 2: planning

A very clear theme running throughout almost all of the proposals relating to planning was the request for planning powers to be either delegated to or strengthened at a local level (A).

### Outcome i) Transfer of functions to the local level

Four proposals suggested a ‘transfer of functions’ in relation to spatial policy from the regional to a local level (most commonly county level). According to Hampshire County Council’s proposal, the abolition of higher-tier policy, such as the regional spatial strategy, would ‘enable closer links between planning and delivery of services such as transport, education and health, and enhance local democratic accountability’.

### Outcome ii) Greater participation of local people in the planning process

Ten more proposals requested reforms to allow local people a greater say in planning and appeals (also relevant to the democratic renewal theme). Suggestions included reducing the requirement to advertise planning proposals in the local press (allowing resources to be used on more effective media), making local appeal boards compulsory, empowering parish councils or ensuring planning inspectors have knowledge and understanding of the area. These types of proposals were most likely to have been submitted by SE, SW/ and LB authorities and by NOC or Conservative-led LAs.

The remaining proposals most commonly asked for power to be delegated in relation to more specific planning issues. Some of these submissions made reference to the impact of the planning system on access to affordable housing – these are addressed in theme 4: housing.

### Outcome iii) Reduction in derelict properties and abandoned land (12 proposals)

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Planning (and cross-over with regeneration and economic development)	Give power back to the local level via finance or decision making/strengthen or add legislation	LB & northern regions, NOC

Overall, the LAs submitting this type of proposal were keen to improve the public realm in order to promote business and reduce crime. Five of the proposals suggested that owners of derelict sites be forced to sell (most commonly through A), while four suggested there should be a legislative compulsion on owners of these sites to allow LAs temporary lease of the site, in order to make the land or premises available to community groups (B). This, in turn, would improve access to community ‘hubs’ or facilities.

### Outcome iv) A balanced local retail offer (10 proposals)

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Planning (and cross-over with regeneration and economic development)	Give power back to the local level via finance or decision making/strengthen or add legislation	LB, NOC

Ten LAs would like to have more influence over the local retail offer. This, they proposed, would ‘achieve a more balanced range of local shops and services’ (Hackney Borough Council) and ‘avoid saturation’ of betting shops, takeaways and off-licences (Islington Borough Council). In order to achieve this goal, many suggested stricter legislation be put in place to give the LA more powers in relation to a change of use (A and B).

### Other less common proposal outcomes

Five proposals referred to green space planning. These were varied and included a proposal for gardens to be excluded from the definition of brown field sites (Chorley Borough Council); the government to introduce 'a permissive regime that enables LAs to prioritise permaculture design principles in local planning policy' (Southwark Council); and a duty be placed on LAs to promote and 'recognise the value of gardens and urban green spaces in the life of the community' (Harrow Borough Council).

### Theme 3: transport

#### Outcome i) Eco-friendly transport (20 proposals)

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Transport and crossover with Environmental sustainability	Prioritise the issue through funding, programmes and initiatives	WM & southern regions Conservative

Just under half of the transport-related proposals concerned promoting eco-friendly transport. The majority requested central government target funding and programmes to improve sustainable transport infrastructure, such as buses, trains and cycles. The impact of such action was felt to be wide-ranging:

*'[the outcome of this proposal] reduces carbon emissions, increases use of public transport [...] improves access to local facilities for young people, reduces social isolation, encourages young people to take advantage of training/employment/other opportunities and be more involved in community activities ...'*

(Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council).

Others requested tax incentives for promoting car clubs and sharing, and concessionary bus passes for all young people.

#### Outcome ii) Road safety (nine proposals)

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Transport	Strengthen or add legislation	LB and southern regions, Conservative/NOC

Nine proposals related to road safety, with most asking for stricter legislation (B) in terms of speed limits and improved signage, with the emphasis on greater clarity (Brighton and Hove Council). Besides safety, there was also an emphasis on improving quality of life (Rother District Council).

### Other less common proposal outcomes

Eight proposals were about **parking**. These were wide-ranging although most involved strengthening the power of the LA to enforce parking restrictions or greater flexibility in relation to the designation of parking fares collected.

Seven proposals requested stronger and more formal legislative arrangements for LAs in the **strategic planning and delivery of transport (A)**. Some felt that The Highways Agency's rulings should not override those of local importance and relevance (for example, Dorset County Council), while others felt that LAs should have more control over public transport. South Tyneside Council felt that this kind of control would allow 'more flexibility and influence on addressing emerging pressures so that the city region can improve its economic competitiveness, regeneration aspirations and accessibility requirements to the wider area'. The remaining Transport proposals related to more general requests for improved infrastructure.

### Theme 4: housing

#### Outcome i) Well-maintained housing stock, both public and private (18 proposals)

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Housing and crossover with planning and finance.	Give power back to the local level via finance or decision making.	Regional split, Conservative.

The majority of submissions in this category proposed a council be given the power to collect finance through the housing system (A) and redirect this towards maintaining the housing stock or, in some cases, improving access to affordable housing. Most commonly, these LAs asked to retain 100 per cent of housing rent, while a few asked that LAs keep a larger proportion of right-to-buy receipts or stamp duty. South Kesteven District Council felt that this type of reform



would mean 'the standard of housing will be in better condition and the council will be better able to meet local needs'.

**Outcome ii) Reduce housing deprivation (13 proposals)**

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Housing and Planning	Split	SW & Conservative.

These proposals related to the use of the planning and housing systems to improve access to affordable housing, prioritise housing for local people and reduce homelessness. Although a range of levers for change was suggested, one of the most popular was the strengthening of the Community Asset Transfer Programme (CAT) (C). According to the proposal submitted by the Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, reform would make it 'easier for local communities to set up projects such as affordable housing schemes, or to buy local shops that are going out of business [and] manage them for the benefit of the community'.

**Outcome iii) Improve residential social environments (11 proposals)**

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Housing	Give power back to the local level via finance or decision making	Regional split, Political party split

The focus of these proposals was an increase in the power of LAs (A) to determine selective licensing in relation to private landlords and houses of multiple occupation. It was felt that such powers would increase the ability of authorities to 'remove the problem of anti-social behaviour that is a consequence of badly managed property' (Burnley Borough Council) and thereby improve the 'health and well-being of residents' (Liverpool City Council).

**Theme 5: regeneration and economic development**

**Outcome i) Business rates invested locally (14 proposals)**

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Regeneration & economic development and finance	Give power back to the local level via finance or decision making	Regional split Party political split

Just under half of the proposals relating to regeneration and economic development suggested LAs retain a proportion of business rates for reinvestment at a local level (A). Not only was it felt that this would allow for publicly-decided allocation of finances, but would also serve to 'strengthen the relationship between local businesses and councils' (Islington Borough Council). While some wished to re-direct this resource into the local economy, others were keen to realise a wider range of sustainable communities projects.

**Outcome ii) Promotion of small businesses (12 proposals)**

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Regeneration & economic development and finance	Use legislation to incentivise individuals or groups. Give power back to the local level via finance or decision making.	Southern regions Political party split

All 12 of these proposals called for local government to have more flexibility or discretion in allocating business rate relief subsidies to small businesses. This was usually inspired by the objective of promoting the viability of small local businesses (Birmingham City Council) while encouraging local businesses to act in a more sustainable way through locally-set criteria (A and C).

**Other less common proposal outcomes**

Four proposals called for local businesses to be promoted through relaxation of **procurement rules** and regulations.



The remainder of the proposals on regeneration and economic development were related to the use of the planning system to improve access to a balanced retail offer and community facilities, and these have been detailed in theme 2: planning and theme 4: housing.

### 3.4 Less common themes

Each of the following themes accounted for less than 10 per cent of proposals. Where clear **outcomes** emerged from some proposals (for example, local services, particularly in relation to post office closures) they have been detailed. In most other cases, however, grouping the proposals by outcomes proved harder to achieve, so details have been presented in a slightly different manner.

#### Theme 6: finance

Only a very small minority of proposals related solely to the issue of funding to LAs. These focused on a fair distribution of funding, suggesting rural weighting or improved systems for measuring demographic data. One LA appealed for increased flexibility in ring-fenced funding. The vast majority of proposals relating to finance were concerned with regeneration and economic development – proposals that see finance as a lever for change in itself. These have been addressed in theme 5.

#### Theme 7: democratic renewal

Besides the proposals made for better representing local voice with regards to the planning system (as already detailed) and local services (see theme 8), a number of other suggestions were made for improving democratic renewal. These included:

- reducing the voting age
- improving citizenship education
- elected officials being better represented at regional level and within neighbouring LAs
- holding local referendums
- use of business rates for community engagement activities.

These types of proposals were raised by almost all regions across the country and were not unique to a particular political persuasion.

#### Theme 8: local services

##### Access to local services (14 proposals)

Headline themes of relevance	Most common lever for change	Most prominent region or political party
Local services	Prioritise the issue through funding, programmes and initiatives	WM/YH/SW NOC, Conservative.

While the minority of these proposals made more general reference to the accessibility of local services, three made reference to widening access to **broadband**, while nine made **specific reference to the sustainability of post offices**. Of those promoting the latter, a few authorities felt local people should be better consulted before post offices are closed (A). The majority felt central government should, generally, do more to avoid closures (C). Several suggested the viability of the postal service might be promoted by increasing its role in relation to government and banking services. It was felt that this particular service had a huge role to play as a community hub, in helping to avoid social isolation and providing a service which 'improves the sustainability of local businesses' (Doncaster Metropolitan Council). Better access to local services, more generally, was felt to remove the need to travel by car.

##### Other less common proposal outcomes

The remaining submissions relating to local services were concerned with increasing pressure on **utility companies** to ensure fair and well-maintained access to, for example, water and electricity, and better representation of LAs on strategic bodies such as primary care trusts (PCTs).

#### Theme 9: safer and stronger communities

These proposals were split between those focusing on **crime and policing** (or the effects of nuisance behaviour) and those concerned with **removing the cause of crime and civil unrest**.

The former originated from regions across the country and included, for example, increasing LA powers to deal with civil enforcement (A). The latter addressed issues such as the easy availability of alcohol. LAs interested predominately in the latter would like to see more stringent or clearer legislation in relation to the sale of alcohol (B). These types of proposals most commonly came from LAs in the northern regions.

Both types of proposal were concerned with improving safety and reducing the fear of crime in local neighbourhoods, while those relating specifically to alcohol also made reference to promoting health.

Although there seemed to be a split in terms of political control, Labour did seem to feature more predominantly in relation to safer and stronger communities than it did for any other theme – possibly due to the region from which the proposals originated.

A few proposals were interested in the maintenance of the public realm, while one was interested in strengthening legislation in relation to animal welfare.

### **Theme 10: worklessness**

Although many of the LAs that made proposals relating to **regeneration and economic development** were interested in ultimately improving outcomes in relation to worklessness, those which made more specific reference to this issue were mainly concerned with the following issues.

**Education and skills** – The majority of these eight proposals focused on devolving adult education and skills funding from a regional level to a local level (A). It is not clear how informed these LAs were in relation to the current funding transfer from the LSC to local authorities, although one authority felt that this devolution was undermined by the existence of the Young People's Learning Agency.

**Benefits rules and distribution** – These proposals generally asked for current policy to be relaxed (E), for example, by allowing those receiving benefits to carry out paid work or volunteering in excess of 16 hours a week, in order to increase their skills and confidence.

### **Amendment of recruitment and selection policies to promote a more representative workforce**

– These proposals did not originate predominantly from any specific type of region or politically-backed LA.

### **Theme 11: health**

Relatively few proposals made reference to health. Those that did were focused on using the housing and planning system to ensure properties are built with health in mind, LAs are better represented on PCTs, and there are more stringent rules for selling alcohol.

### **Theme 12: children and young people**

Similarly, the issues raised concerning children and young people crossed over themes such as education and skills, and benefit rules and distribution, and are discussed under theme 10: worklessness.

### **Theme 13: adult social care**

Besides one proposal introducing a 'power to care' programme, there were few proposals relating to adult care. There were also only a couple of crossover themes: social housing (adequate facilities in the home) and benefit rules and distribution (an increased age restriction to the disability living allowance).

Given the higher prevalence of certain sustainable communities themes and the apparent priority given to them, this might perhaps be an area for further analysis. It may be useful to examine the extent to which the proposals submitted reflect the headline issues presented in the submitting authority's own community strategy. If there is a lack of alignment, this would raise questions about the understanding of the SCA and the extent to which individual LA departments feel that it is relevant to their work.

In terms of assessing proposals, given the inter-relation and crossover between themes and proposal outcomes, it is clear that assessors will need to give careful consideration to the potential scope and impact of individual proposals. The variance in the quality of proposals (as detailed in section 1.4) will no doubt impact upon this task.

## 4 Collaboration and community engagement

### Key points

- The **South West** had the greatest number of **joint proposals** (eight), each of which was supported by other organisations.
- **Joint proposals** were submitted from three GO regions: the South West, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the South East.
- Eight councils from Yorkshire and the Humber submitted six proposals with five different **combinations of councils**.
- Both Hertfordshire and Essex endorsed four proposals each, and Essex submitted a proposal that was endorsed by Hampshire and Hertfordshire.
- A range of people and organisations were involved in discussions and the development of the proposals. The most commonly consulted were the **general public** and **strategic bodies**. Fewer LAs consulted affected organisations.
- The LAs **engaged their communities** using existing and new people panels and a variety of other ways. The five most commonly used methods were people panels, web-based methods, public events, focus groups, and the media.
- Many of the LAs used **multiple methods of consultation**. This could reflect a desire to involve a diverse range of people using the methods most suited to each group.
- Around half of the proposals stated that **hard-to-reach people**, such as those with physical and learning disabilities, young people and older people were involved in discussions or the development of the proposals. Hard-to-reach groups were represented on community panels and in some cases they were invited to join new panels.
- Councils had gained the views of **voluntary and community groups** through methods such as panels, workshops, and web-based consultations.
- In the majority of cases, **consultees were in support** of the proposals. The initial analysis suggested there was confirmation of council support.

### 4.1 Joint proposals and supporting organisations

This section examines joint proposals and those submitted with support from other councils and organisations. The number of proposals mentioning partnerships or supporting organisations, split by region and number of lead councils, is shown in appendix 2.

### Forms of collaboration

There were three different types of collaboration over proposals. The first was for authorities to submit **joint proposals**, and 18 proposals were submitted by a lead authority with either single or multiple other authorities. The second type of collaboration was working in **partnership**, and 161 proposals made reference to support from other organisations. The third was proposals submitted by a single authority, but **endorsed** by other authorities: there were eight proposals of this type.

**Table 4.1 Joint proposals by region**

Region	No. of joint proposals	No. of lead councils	No. of council combinations	Total no. of councils	No. of proposals supported by other organisations
South West	8	4	6	8	8
Yorkshire and the Humber	6	3	5	8	0
South East	4	2	2	4	1

### Collaboration by region

The 18 joint proposals came from three GO regions. The South West submitted the greatest number of joint proposals (eight), with four different leads and six combinations of non-lead councils. All eight proposals were supported by other organisations. Yorkshire and the Humber submitted six joint proposals, with three different leads and five different combinations of non-lead councils, although all six proposals drew from the same pool of eight councils. None of these was supported by any other organisation. The remaining four joint proposals were submitted from the South East, with two different leads and two different combinations of non-lead councils. One of the four proposals was supported by another organisation. Table 4.1 is an analysis of this data.

In total, 161 proposals submitted by 69 councils were supported by other organisations. Table 4.2 shows the number of councils involved in this type of collaboration, and the regional distribution of the proposals. As illustrated in Table 4.1, the South West had the highest number of joint LA proposals supported by other organisations. Table 4.2 demonstrates the South West

also had the most proposals supported by other organisations (49). Submissions made jointly were not common to any particular theme for change.

‘Endorsed’ proposals are those submitted by one council but enclose a letter of endorsement from another (but not necessarily neighbouring) council. An initial analysis shows eight proposals were endorsed by other councils, although further work would need to be undertaken to examine this in detail. Eight lead councils submitted endorsed proposals; three from the South East were endorsed (variously) by Hertfordshire and Fareham, and the three from York, Bexley and Birmingham were endorsed by Essex alone. The seventh council to submit an endorsed proposal was Essex, and this was endorsed by Hampshire and Hertfordshire. The eighth council, Bury, submitted letters of support from the Fire Service, Police and PCT.

### Collaborating organisations

The organisations that supported proposals included a variety of local interest groups that may or may not have an immediate connection with the local council. Different working groups, such as local strategic

**Table 4.2 Regional distribution and number of proposals supported by organisations**

Region	No. of proposals supported by other organisations	No. of councils
East	13	8
East Midlands	11	5
London Boroughs	22	10
North East	6	4
North West	9	6 (including a proposal originating from a dissertation)
South East	27	12
South West	49	16 (including a proposal submitted by a single councillor)
West Midlands	11	4 (including a proposal submitted by an individual citizen)
Yorkshire and the Humber	13	4
Total	161	69

partnerships, other councils (including a parish council), the police and PCTs, were all involved with supporting proposals, as were more localised groups such as a post office task force, a residents' association, a parish council and a fire service.

## 4.2 Consultation and community involvement

This section outlines the ways in which local authorities engaged with their communities for SCA activity. It includes findings on:

- who was involved in discussions and the development of the proposal
- methods of consultation
- the extent to which consultees supported proposals.

### Who was consulted?

The LAs involved a range of people and organisations in discussions and the development of their proposals. The majority of the proposals stated there had been consultation with the general public (270 proposals). Over three-quarters of the proposals stated strategic bodies were consulted (232 proposals). These included local strategic partnerships and county councils. Key stakeholders had been consulted in 180 of the proposals. Fewer LAs reported having consulted affected organisations (84 proposals). Around half of the proposals stated hard-to-reach people were involved in discussions or the development of the proposals (150).

### Methods of consultation

These were the five most commonly used methods of consultation.

- **People panels** – around three-fifths consulted people panels (191 proposals) and a further nine specifically mentioned consulting young people's panels. Twenty-one consulted LA or expert panels.
- **Web-based methods** – around a fifth put information on a council website (70 proposals).

Others indicated they used online methods such as surveys (20 proposals) and e-bulletins (12 proposals).

- **Public events** – included launches, meetings and consultation events (36 proposals).
- **Focus groups** – in 27 proposals.
- **Media** – newspaper or magazine articles (23 proposals) and press releases (16 proposals).

Other less commonly used methods included workshops (16 proposals), surveys (13 proposals), and sending letters to organisations (13 proposals).

### Consultation with hard-to-reach people

Around half of the proposals stated hard-to-reach people were involved in discussions or the development of proposals (150). As shown in Table 4.3, many LAs involved more than one type of hard-to-reach group in the development of their proposals. Around two-fifths of proposals that had consulted hard-to-reach groups involved those with physical and learning disabilities (41 per cent or 62), younger people (41 per cent or 62), and older people (25 per cent or 37). Six had consulted other hard-to-reach groups such as religious groups. Around a third did not specify the type of group consulted (47 proposals).

In addition, two proposals mentioned the NEET group: one referred to removing the barriers to work for NEETs and one, under the theme children and young people, mentioned supporting NEETs through the recession.

**Table 4.3 Type of hard-to-reach groups consulted**

Hard-to-reach group	Number of proposals
People with physical/learning disabilities	62
Young people	62
Hard-to-reach group not specified	47
Older people	37
Black and minority ethnic people	31
Residents whose first spoken language is not English	12
Carers	9
Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people	7
Gypsy and traveller representatives	7
People who are unemployed	6
People living in rural areas	4
Others	7

In many cases the proposals were discussed by existing panels. However, some newly formed panels were involved in discussions and the development of proposals in, for example, Bristol, Islington and Lewes. One of the LAs sent emails and written invitations to join panels to churches, schools, charities, sports clubs and local groups (Lewes). This created a diverse panel including people living in urban and rural locations with a reasonably good geographic spread across the district and included males and females aged 17 to 65 plus. The following example shows how a newly-formed panel helped a council.

### Example

In **Islington**, the proposals were considered by a newly-formed panel which included residents from groups the councils had traditionally struggled to engage including a blind resident, a resident with learning disabilities, and a resident (with an interpreter) who spoke English as a second language.

At the panel meeting, the members looked in detail at a number of proposals. Their comments and indications of interest or enthusiasm enabled the council to sift further through the proposals, identifying those that were later considered and agreed by the council's executive.

Proposals mentioned hard-to-reach groups were represented on the community or citizen panels in, for example, Burnley, Bury, East Riding, East Riding, Redcar and Cleveland and Lewes. These LAs aimed to run panels which included a diverse range of different people. One example was the Making Chorley Smile Panel, which included people with a range of ages, gender, ethnicities, residence and employment status (Chorley). Another LA ran a citizen e-panel that hard-to-reach groups could join if they had internet access (Hackney). One of the LAs conducted a survey of their citizens' panel, applied weighting to ensure representation of those in hard-to-reach groups (Kent).

Approaches to consultation with hard-to-reach young people included sessions with young advisors (Waltham Forest) and focus groups with young people (Hereford).

The LAs consulted hard-to-reach groups on different proposal themes. Most commonly they were consulted on proposals relating to the environment (31), transport (31), and housing (26).

### Consultation with voluntary and community groups

Voluntary and community groups were consulted through methods involving discussions such as being members of panels and attending workshops. Other ways of disseminating information to members of voluntary and community groups, for example the use of web-based consultation and postal information, were also mentioned. The box below summarises some of the methods outlined in the proposals.

#### Some examples of methods for consulting voluntary and community groups

- Including representatives from the voluntary and community sector on panels of local representatives in, for example, Ashford, Bexley, North Yorkshire and Nottingham.
- Sending information to the community and voluntary forum (Brighton and Hove).
- Workshops for public, private and voluntary sectors and partners (Hammersmith and Fulham).
- Gaining feedback through a web-based consultation (Nottingham).
- Meetings with community representatives (Oxford).

### Were consultees in support?

The majority of proposals stated consultees were in support (267 proposals). In seven cases, some of those consulted were in agreement and others were not. The remaining proposals did not specify whether the consultees were in support or not. In some cases, the proposals stated how those consulted came to a

decision. For instance, some of the LAs asked consultees to rank the proposals in order of preference (for example, Kingston upon Thames).

Initial analysis suggested that there was confirmation of council support. Support for proposals was confirmed at council meetings (for example, Bexley,

Brighton and Hove, Chorley, Hereford, Kingston-upon-Thames, Newcastle, Liverpool, Southwark, Sheffield, West Devon, and Westminster). Further analysis would be needed to establish whether all of the proposals were approved by the councils.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

The most common themes for proposals were environmental sustainability, planning and transport. Common proposal outcomes included energy efficiency and reduction of CO<sub>2</sub>, reduction of waste, greater local influence in relation to planning, the promotion of eco-friendly transport modes, local control and maintenance of housing stock, retention of business rates for local re-investment and access to local services.

In terms of trends and patterns, the South West had the highest number of proposals (84), the highest proportion of lead councils that submitted proposals (44 per cent), and the greatest number of joint proposals (eight), each of which was supported by other organisations. Overall, district councils submitted the greatest proportion of proposals, whilst the majority of lead councils submitting proposals were under Conservative political control. However, councils under Liberal Democrat control sent in the most submissions in terms of percentage of total councils controlled by that party.

There were three different types of collaboration: proposals submitted jointly, councils working in partnership or having support from other organisations, and submissions that were endorsed by other authorities. Joint proposals were submitted from three GO regions: the South West, Yorkshire and the Humber and the South.

Eight councils from Yorkshire and the Humber submitted six proposals with five different combinations of councils. Both Hertfordshire and Essex endorsed four

proposals each, and Essex submitted a proposal that was endorsed by Hampshire and Hertfordshire.

Local authorities had involved a range of people and organisations in their communities and engaged them in discussions and the development of their proposals.

Given that this was the first opportunity for LAs to submit proposals under the SCA, it is perhaps not surprising that there was some inconsistency in the way proposal forms were completed. The contrast between proposals suggests that there was a lack of clear guidance available to LAs about the role of the proposal itself – for example, whether or not it was to present a full and comprehensive evidence base, or simply introduce the issue for further discussion. In addition, there were apparent discrepancies in the way councils understood the requirements of individual fields within the form.

### 5.1 Recommendations

Further work could be undertaken to establish the types of support given to proposals, as the terms 'endorsement' and 'support' are sometimes interchanged. We would recommend there is greater clarity in the definition of terms within the proposal.

It is also recommended that further analysis is carried out on whether or not all proposals were approved by each council and its elected members.



# Appendix 1: breakdown of proposals by region, type of authority and political control

**Table A1.1: East**

Number of lead councils: 9

**Political control**

Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	NOC
6	-	2	1

Number of proposals submitted: 19

Political control	County	District	London Borough	Metropolitan	Unitary	Total
Conservative	9	1	-	-	2	12
Labour	-	-	-	-	-	-
Liberal Democrat	-	6	-	-	-	6
NOC	-	1	-	-	-	1

**Table A1.2: East Midlands**

Number of lead councils: 5

**Political control**

Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	NOC
2	1	-	2

Number of proposals submitted: 11

Political control	County	District	London Borough	Metropolitan	Unitary	Total
Conservative	-	4	-	-	-	4
Labour	-	-	-	-	3	3
Liberal Democrat	-	-	-	-	-	-
NOC	-	4	-	-	-	4

### Table A1.3: London boroughs

Number of lead councils: 14

Political control			
Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	NOC
6	2	2	4

Number of proposals submitted: 45

Political control	County	District	London Borough	Metropolitan	Unitary	Total
Conservative	-	-	-	-	10	10
Labour	-	-	-	-	4	4
Liberal Democrat	-	-	-	-	4	4
NOC	-	-	-	-	27	27

### Table A1.4: North West

Number of lead councils: 11

Political control			
Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	NOC
5	-	2	4

Number of proposals submitted: 28

Political control	County	District	London Borough	Metropolitan	Unitary	Total
Conservative	-	11	-	2	1	14
Labour	-	-	-	-	-	-
Liberal Democrat	-	2	-	-	-	2
NOC	-	1	-	9	2	12

## Table A1.5: North East

Number of lead councils: 5

Political control			
Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	NOC
-	2	1	2

Number of proposals submitted: 13

Political control	County	District	London Borough	Metropolitan	Unitary	Total
Conservative	-	-	-	-	-	-
Labour	-	-	-	4	4	8
Liberal Democrat	-	2	-	2	-	2
NOC	-	-	-	-	3	3

## Table A1.6: South East

Number of lead councils: 15

Political control			
Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	NOC
11	-	1	3

Number of proposals submitted: 44

Political control	County	District	London Borough	Metropolitan	Unitary	Total
Conservative	4	13	-	-	2	19
Labour	-	-	-	-	-	-
Liberal Democrat	-	8	-	-	-	8
NOC	-	5	-	-	12	17

## Table A1.7: South West

Number of lead councils: 18

Political control			
Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	NOC
9	-	2	7

**Number of proposals submitted: 84**

Political control	County	District	London Borough	Metropolitan	Unitary	Total
Conservative	2	18	-	-	29	49
Labour	-	4	-	-	8	12
Liberal Democrat	-	8	-	-	-	8
NOC	-	16	-	-	7	23

**Table A1.8: West Midlands****Number of lead councils: 5**

Political control			
Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	NOC
3	-	-	2

**Number of proposals submitted: 32**

Political control	County	District	London Borough	Metropolitan	Unitary	Total
Conservative	-	4	-	-	14	18
Labour	-	-	-	-	-	-
Liberal Democrat	-	-	-	-	-	-
NOC	-	6	-	8	-	14

**Table A1.9: Yorkshire and Humberside****Number of lead councils: 8**

Political control			
Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	NOC
6	-	-	6

**Number of proposals submitted: 25**

Political control	County	District	London Borough	Metropolitan	Unitary	Total
Conservative	3	-	-	-	2	5
Labour	-	-	-	-	-	-
Liberal Democrat	-	-	-	-	-	-
NOC	-	3	-	10	7	20

## Appendix 2: breakdown of proposals mentioning partnerships or supporting organisations

**Table A 2.1 Number of proposals mentioning partnerships or supporting organisations, by region and number of lead councils**

Region	Number of lead councils	Number of proposals
E	8	13
EM	5	11
LB	10	22
NE	4	6
NW	6	9
SE	12	27
SW	16	49
WM	4	11
YH	4	13
Total	69	161

## Reference

Department for Communities and Local Government (2008). *Sustainable Communities Act 2007: A Guide* [online]. Available: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/681480.pdf> (8 October 2009).

The purpose of this report is to disseminate the findings from an analysis of the proposals submitted by English councils under the Sustainable Communities Act (SCA), conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in August/September 2009, as requested by the Local Government Association. It aims to provide a snapshot of key patterns and trends emerging from the different types of local authorities (LAs) in the nine regions and with varying political control.

The key findings of the report show that

- a total of 301 proposals were submitted by 90 lead authorities, with a further ten district councils contributing to the joint submissions
- the most common themes for proposals were Environmental Sustainability, Planning and Transport but proposals were often relevant to a number of themes
- the suggested approaches in relation to reform could be categorized into five levers for change
- the local authorities engaged their communities, including voluntary and community groups, using existing and new people panels and a variety of other ways.

This report is important reading for councillors and officers from LAs (both those who submitted proposals and those that did not), government departments, and other interested organisations.