

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Stephen Williams is Member of Parliament for Bristol West



In October I was asked to speak at a public meeting organised by the Sustainable Communities Campaign. By coincidence it was on the same day that Parliament debated two private members' Bills outlining how local action could combat climate change.

Private members' Bills are heard on a Friday morning. I am normally back in Bristol for constituency events but I considered the issues important enough to stay in Westminster for an extra day. The two Bills contained measures to encourage 'micro-generation' and to tighten building regulations so that new properties have energy conservation incorporated into the design. This is a neat summary of how we can tackle global warming by changing our sources of energy and reducing our demand for power.

The debate was frustrating, as it became clear that Conservative MPs were determined to 'filibuster' so that the Bills ran out of time. They succeeded in blocking the building regulations Bill. I caught a late afternoon train back to Bristol, slightly sceptical whether many people would turn out on a Friday night.

My scepticism was ill judged. The Elmgrove Centre was full and we had a lively discussion. The Sustainable Communities Campaign wants to introduce a Bill that would give local councils the option of drawing up a local sustainability plan. They would submit the plan to London with a request for the resources for implementation.

This is undoubtedly a good idea. But I think the inherent subservience to national government highlights what I believe is the main problem with government in our country. Britain is probably the most centralised democracy in the world. The supremacy of Westminster stifles local initiative. As a Liberal Democrat MP I want to give up some of my national powers so that local councillors working in partnership with local citizens can exercise them.

Let's take a few examples. Imagine that Bristol could set its own planning classifications, narrowing the current broad national categories. We could have controlled the proliferation of bars along Whiteladies Road. We could have removed restrictive covenants on properties so that if a community can support a local cinema then a developer can meet the need. We could control the conversion of family dwellings into student multiple occupancy. Imagine if Bristol had the borrowing or tax raising powers to fund major capital investment. We would not have had decades of obfuscation and frustration over whether Bristol can have a tram.

You don't need a vivid imagination. Such powers are taken for granted by our fellow European city regions and by American cities. I believe that localism is the key to sustainable communities.

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DRAFT 'STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT'

On October 25 Bristol Civic Society presented a copy of our 17 page response to the physical environment scrutiny commission. The officer presenting the City's Draft Statement expressed appreciation of the Bristol Civic Society input and was pleased to report 50 responses.

Now unfortunately only 16% of the comments made by community groups (including Bristol Civic Society) have resulted in alterations or amendments to the Draft Presentation to Cabinet on 8 December 2005.

At the time of writing the Civic Society is hoping for much more effective 'front loading' of community input before the 'examination in public'. We will keep you posted about this very important document.

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