

The UK's National Strategy for Sustainable Development: a better quality of life

Background

In 1994, the UK was one of the first countries to produce a national sustainable development strategy, as called for at the 1992 "Earth Summit" in Rio. Following the change of government in 1997, it was announced that a new strategy would be prepared.

In May 1999, the Government published a *better quality of life*, its new strategy for sustainable development for the UK. [www.environment.detr.gov.uk/sustainable/quality/life]. This builds on the earlier strategy, in particular by emphasising the social dimension of sustainable development, alongside economic issues, the environment and resource use, and is based firmly on the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

The strategy will be reviewed in 2004 to take account of new developments and changing priorities.

Process for developing the nsdd

The Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) under the leadership of the Deputy Prime Minister was given responsibility for preparing the new strategy.

A consultation document, *Opportunities for change*, was produced by DETR in consultation with other Government departments which identified central themes and set out specific areas where views would be welcomed. The aim of the

four month consultation exercise was to promote awareness and understanding of sustainable development, and to gain information and ideas about what needs to be done.

50,000 copies of *Opportunities for change* were distributed and it was available from the internet. More detailed supplementary papers on key areas such as sustainable business, forestry, tourism were also produced for consultation. A shorter summary leaflet for the general public was printed which included a tear-off questionnaire to allow people to contribute easily.

In order to raise awareness and promote involvement, a series of regional consultation events were organised by DETR. The Deputy Prime Minister wrote to the government's sustainable development advisory bodies and to the relevant statutory bodies to seek their views. A number of NGO groups, for example the Sustainable Communities Action Network, discussed *Opportunity for Change* at community events around the country and at a national conference.

By the end of the consultation period, over 1100 written responses were received by DETR, including 315 local authorities, 238 individuals, 126 environmental organisations and 88 from the private sector. 2900 completed questionnaires were returned by members of the public. The responses were summarised in a document available on the internet. There was broad

agreement on the Government's approach, in particular the emphasis on social dimension alongside economic and environmental issues was welcomed.

An Inter-Departmental Steering Group was established to develop the strategy. This was chaired by DETR with representatives of other Government Departments. It met every one or two months to review progress on drafting the strategy. Particular sections of the strategy were drafted by lead teams, in consultation with relevant areas of Government. For example the DETR and Dept of Trade Industry took the lead in drafting the chapter on a sustainable economy.

The draft document was circulated widely across government, and formally approved at Cabinet level. The Prime Minister signalled his approval and provided a foreword to the strategy. Publication of the strategy was announced in parliament.

Aim and objectives of the strategy

The 1999 strategy recognises the Brundtland definition of *sustainable development* and expresses it as **"ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come."**

This requires meeting four main objectives at the same time, in the UK and the world as a whole:

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone
- effective protection of the environment
- prudent use of natural resources; and
- maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment

The strategy is a "catalyst" for change. "It identifies priority areas

for action, and indicators and targets to measure progress, against which the government will expect to be judged. It sets out action that the Government has already taken and further initiatives that are planned, and highlights what others can do. The Government will use the strategy as a framework to guide its policies. It will encourage others to do the same."

Principles

The strategy contains ten guiding principles and approaches that the government will take into account when formulating policy. These reflect key themes from the Rio Declaration, the previous 1994 strategy and the views of the public in response to consultation:

- putting people at the centre
- taking a long term perspective
- taking account of costs and benefits
- creating an open and supportive economic system
- combating poverty and social exclusion
- respecting environmental limits
- precautionary principle
- using scientific knowledge
- transparency, information, participation and access to justice
- making the polluter pay.

Translating principles into action

To make progress towards sustainable development, it must be built into policies and decisions. The Strategy emphasises that we need "to find a new way forward. We need greater prosperity with less environmental damage. We need to improve the efficiency with which we use resources. We need thriving cities, towns and villages based on strong economies, good access to services and attractive and safe surroundings"

Sustainable development in the UK cannot be considered in isolation from sustainable development elsewhere. Our lifestyles have an impact on the rest of the world. We have a moral duty to help the poorest people in the world as we move towards a new global society. Allowing international inequalities to grow could jeopardise social stability and sustainable development for all of us."

The strategy sets a broad framework for action by government and other sectors of society, and concentrates on key objectives to deliver a sustainable economy; build sustainable communities; manage the environment and resources; and achieve international co-operation and development.

Measuring progress

To help measure progress, identify areas for action and connections between them, the strategy outlines about 150 indicators of sustainable development. The indicators were developed following extensive public consultation, which among other things, led to the inclusion of an indicator on the level of crime. The final set of indicators include a sub-set of 15 **headline indicators** intended to focus attention on what sustainable development means and to give a broad overview of whether we are achieving "a better quality of life" :

- GDP
- investment (in public, business and private assets)
- proportion of people of working age who are in work
- indicators of success in tackling poverty and social exclusion
- qualifications at age 19
- expected years of healthy life

- homes judged unfit to live in
- level of crime
- emissions of greenhouse gases
- days when air pollution is moderate or high
- road traffic
- rivers of good or fair quality
- populations of wild birds
- new homes built on previously developed land
- waste arisings/management

"The aim is for all the headline indicators to move in the right direction over time... Where a trend is unacceptable, the Government will adjust policies accordingly..."

Implementing the strategy

Progress towards sustainable development as set out in the strategy will be facilitated by a number of processes:

Beginning in 2000 the Government will produce an annual report on progress against each of the headline indicators, and Government action taken and proposed in priority areas

A new Sustainable Development Commission will review "the state of sustainable development in the UK as revealed by the indicators; whether action being taken by each sector is, in its view, sufficient; and if not, what more needs to be done." This Sustainable Development Commission will include key stakeholders from government the private and voluntary sector

The government will consider making sustainable development a statutory requirement for all new government bodies, and will consider this for

existing government bodies where relevant

A Cabinet Committee on the Environment, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister which co-ordinates policy on sustainable development was set up in 1997

New units have been formed in the Cabinet office of the Prime Minister on poverty/social exclusion and women's issues

The Committee of 'Green Ministers' has been revitalised and its remit has been broadened from operational issues, such as energy efficiency in government, to promoting sustainable development. The Ministers have agreed that by March 2000 each Department should have a strategy in place to raise awareness of sustainable development within the Department; including initiatives such as staff training and green housekeeping campaigns.

Parliament established in 1997 an Environmental Audit Committee to consider how policies and programmes of Government Departments and non-departmental public bodies contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development

Following publication of the nssd, publicity leaflets were produced for business, local authorities, the voluntary and community sector and the health sector on what the nssd means for them. These are available free from DETR and from the internet

Public commitment to sustainable development is being promoted by the *are you doing your bit* advertising campaign, which will focus on small actions that people can do to protect the environment. In 1999/2000, the

budget was increased to £7 million, largely for TV campaigns. This will be reinforced by regional promotional events with a focus on school children.

Promoting sustainable development at the subnational level

Following devolution, the new devolved administration in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will have the opportunity to deliver policies for sustainable development, which reflect their institutions, their landscape their culture and their way of life. Thus while some of the policies described in the nssd apply to the UK as a whole, others are exclusive to England. References are also included to parallel policies and related examples in Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

One of the key sub-national institutions are the new Regional Development Agencies set up in 1998 to promote regional development. The Act which set them up states that they have a statutory purpose to contribute to sustainable development in the United Kingdom. The other key sub-national institution are local authorities which have set up nssds of their own, known as local Agenda 21s. The government has set a target of 2000 for all local authorities to have a local Agenda 21 in place.

Lessons learned from the UK experience

The UK Strategy provides one example of a national strategy for sustainable development. While we believe it has many strengths, it will be kept under review. Particular points to note are given below:

A strategy for sustainable development is quite different from an environmental strategy, since it is broader and needs to cover the integration of economic, social and environmental objectives

The widest participation in the preparation of an nssd is important to ensure ownership by all government Departments and other stakeholders in civil society and the private sector. Consultation has to be active rather than passive, by structuring it in ways that will engage different sectors and levels of knowledge

The publication of the final document is just the start of a long process. All levels of government and sectors of society have a part to play in implementing the strategy and taking action to achieve sustainable development

Indicators - a broad set and a few headline indicators (which cover everyday concerns and thus help focus attention on what sustainable development means) - are important for monitoring the achievement of economic, social and environmental objectives and progress towards sustainable development

Annual progress reports are a way to encourage implementation and demonstrate progress

The strategy preparation and follow up can be managed by a sectoral Ministry (such as Environment) or by a more central body, such as the Finance Ministry or Cabinet office. An independent body, such as a Sustainable Development Commission, can be used to monitor progress and promote the involvement of all sectors in reporting. It can assess whether

action being taken by each actor, including the Government, is in its view sufficient; and if not, what more needs to be done

A high profile dissemination strategy is necessary to promote the strategy to various stakeholders once it has been agreed. This may combine mass advertising such as TV campaigns, with targeted campaigns for key groups such as the health sector. As many stakeholders as possible should be involved in the dissemination strategy.

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