

Capability for Sustainability

Does today's Civil Service have the skills to translate challenge to opportunity?

DISCUSSION PROMPT

The UK faces an uncertain future if government has limited capability to maintain stability in the 21st century world's rapidly shifting context of; environmental limits, social change and global prosperity.

Its UK Sustainable Development Strategy – *Securing the Future* -sets out the guiding principles for achieving this and the priority areas for immediate action.

The Civil Service needs to be equipped to make the appropriate response and the Strategy commits the Government to doing so. However, its own capability reviews, internal processes, and competency and career frameworks do not actively reinforce leadership and skills for sustainable development. The signals are mixed.

How can the Government send a clearer signal?

Exchanging experiences for inspiration and innovation

- Permanent Secretaries are invited to consider how far existing civil service learning, development, and career frameworks support the Government's sustainable development objectives.
- Business guests are invited to draw upon their own experience of changing such frameworks to meet these new challenges in their own organisations.

This paper has been produced by the Sustainable Development Commission, National School of Government and Department for Environment and Rural Affairs, in consultation with Government Skills (the Sector Skills Council for Central Government).

1 DEFINING THE NEED

Same issue: two views

The challenge

“If we don’t act, the overall costs and risks of climate change will be equivalent to losing at least 5% of global GDP each year now and forever...”

The opportunity

In contrast, the costs of action... can be limited to around 1% of global GDP each year.”

The Stern Review, 2006

1.1 Leading transition

The Government has committed to **leading a transition to a more sustainable way of living** as it seeks to make an appropriate response to the challenges and opportunities presented by life in the 21st century.

Its goal and supporting principles to achieve this are set out in the **UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy, *Securing the Future***, which was launched by the Prime Minister in March 2005.

The Strategy and the Chancellor’s long term trends for the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review prioritise a sustainable development approach and immediate action in relation to: creating sustainable communities, climate change and energy supply, safeguarding and enhancing ecosystems and resource efficiency. These areas acutely illustrate the interdependence of environment, economy and society. (See Annex A for further detail)

However, the way forward is not always obvious, the issues are increasingly complex and global. There are many **unknowns, multiple causes, multiple effects, and multiple players**. These multi-faceted challenges do not sit neatly within the

boundaries of departmental responsibilities and require a **collective, joined up, corporate response** over the long term if they are to be tackled, whilst also maximising potential opportunities.

1.2 Does the Civil service have the capability?

Dealing effectively with this reality requires a wide appreciation of impacts across: systems and policies as well as possible chain reactions. **But traditional policy development and delivery will struggle to deal with increasing uncertainties and risks – particularly those in relation to environmental limits.**

Current evidence is showing that

Responses will “need to go beyond regulation and drive cultural change”.

Chancellor of the Exchequer, Stern Report response, 2006

Government has yet to adequately reflect its own sustainable development principles in policy appraisal and development, spending reviews, learning and skills opportunities, or estates management.¹

This is not news to Government. In the first round of Sustainable Development Action Plans (required by *Securing the Future*), departments and agencies highlighted their own need to better understand how to actively apply the principles of sustainable development in their everyday work. Most departmental plans however still envisage a programme of activity that is not yet complemented by a corresponding skills programme for sustainable development capability.

¹ For example, *Off the Starting Block: SDC assessment of government Sustainable Development Action Plans*, SDC, November 2006. and *Sustainable Development in Government Report – Fifth Annual Report 2006*, SDC 2007

2 WHAT BENEFITS CAN AN SD-CAPABLE CIVIL SERVICE DELIVER?

Sustainable development is not an optional extra, a “nice-to-have” add-on once the serious things have been sorted.

An integrated, sustainable development approach adds value to existing activity by making it more than the sum of its parts. It ensures that Departments reinforce each other’s policies, rather than undermining them and it ensures that they are well run, offering value for money with well-managed and effective use of their staff and natural resources.

The key elements of this approach are summarised below and outlined in more detail in **Annex B**.

Confident leadership through uncertainty and transition

Leading change by example, in situations where the solutions are not immediately obvious such as moving to a low carbon economy. Working through issues with stakeholders, new partners, and specialists in a flexible way, guided by general frameworks.

Strategic thinking which tackles cause not just symptoms

A “bigger picture” approach framing solutions and policies which address system changes as much as tackling immediate symptoms. So a school buildings programme would also maximise energy efficiency, employment, sustainable communities, health and learning environments.

Better Decisions based on more robust evidence and wider analysis

Having the skills, competency and policy drivers to seek data beyond specialisms. Analysing evidence across the social, environmental and economic spectrum in order to fully explore risks, interconnections and costs and benefits.

Higher operational efficiency

The sheer scale of Government operations – over 650,000 employees working in buildings that occupy over 2% of the UK’s land mass with a purchasing budget of around £13 billion per annum - means that it has the potential to make a huge positive impact on society, public expenditure and the environment. Government still needs to consistently exploit the potential of achieving sustainable development through its own management of its estate, its procurement or contract management practices.²

The pace and passion of a motivated workforce

Sustainable development provides a framework which can be shared by all and links to larger goals and values which have relevance to staff as workers and citizens.

Same issue: two views

The Challenge

To build 200,000 new homes a year by 2016 to meet demand.

The opportunity

Can we use the scale of new investment and new building to transform the market and deliver real environmental and social benefits for both new and existing homes?

Yvette Cooper MP, Minister for Housing and Planning, May 2006

² See *Sustainable Development in Government Annual Reports* at www.sd-commission.org.uk

3 BUILDING SD CAPABILITY – WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

A new core skills set is not required to improve sustainable development capability.

The current skills and competencies for civil servants such as leadership, strategic thinking and delivery are complementary and align with a sustainable development approach.³

However, sustainable development *does* require a new focus on the **context** for their application to ensure that learning and development frameworks reinforce sustainable development approaches to their full potential. **The scope of underlying knowledge required may also need to be broader in order to develop fully integrated solutions.**

Same issue: two views

The Challenge

“In 1950, there were ten people working for every pensioner; today there are just under four. In ten years time, on current trends this will reduce to three, and by 2050 there will be just be two.”

Jim Murphy MP, Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform, February 2007

The opportunity

“A combination of active labour market strategies, removal of structural financial barriers and the greater availability of flexible work and retirement patterns will make it possible for a lot of people to stay in work longer and potentially to save for longer.”

Stephen Timms MP, November 2005, Minister of State for Pensions Reform

³ For example, see **Annex C** on Professional Skills for Government

3.1 The National School of Government’s response

The National School of Government (NSG) wants **to ensure that civil servants are sufficiently equipped to lead and practice sustainable development** in line with *Securing the Future*. **which commits the government to:**

- **strengthen leadership capacity within departments and their agencies, for example by providing civil servants with better training in sustainable development...**
- **ensure that an understanding of how to apply sustainable development principles is a key part of policy skills for the future and that all policies are properly appraised against the new principles of sustainable development.**

The School runs a number of dedicated sustainable development seminars, particularly for senior civil servants. It is currently working with Defra and the Sustainable Development Commission to sustainable development “proof” its current curriculum.

However, whilst there is growing awareness of the “issues” such as climate change, there is much less understanding or consensus around how to develop leadership and management strategies to address them, especially ones that work within the broader sustainable development challenge of building sustainable economies and communities.

NSG, SDC and Defra have concluded that the existing dedicated seminars are insufficient to create the momentum required to ensure that sustainable development thinking and practice is increasingly applied, in a coherent and systematic way, to core business across government.

Sustainable development capability must be firmly and explicitly positioned in the government learning and skills agenda.

Without this it will be difficult to link to professional and career development and this will hinder the government's ability to respond to the challenges which the UK faces in the next decade.

The capacity building cannot stop at learning programmes. These will be in vain if civil servants do not return to departments where this learning is reinforced every day by the departmental processes and operational practice that they encounter.

Additional support methods will be needed such as coaching, secondment of specialist advisers into policy teams, and integration of sustainable development into the performance management goals of senior staff.

This means developing an environment where:

- Boards and directors are measured on their sustainable development performance
- Boards and directors expect staff to take sustainable development seriously as part of core business
- being able to demonstrate sustainable development understanding and thinking is seen to be as good for a civil service career at all levels, not as a specialist area which only Defra civil servants need to understand
- sustainable development approaches are expected, recognised, and rewarded.

Other professions have already started to sustainable development "proof" their skills. Engineers, architects, insurers and teachers are all evaluating how their professional development and training needs to be re-orientated to respond to the UK's future challenges, whether they be the development of climate proof infrastructure, promotion of energy efficiency in social housing or the equipping of citizens to understand and make a positive contribution to the changing world around them.

Major companies have also made it clear that sustainable development is prominent in their recruitment and leadership development programmes.

Why should the civil service be any different?

ANNEX A

Comprehensive Spending Review: The Chancellor’s Challenges

The Government has already identified five key, long term trends and challenges for the next decade as part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). This process is seeking to identify what further investments and reforms are needed to equip the UK to meet these challenges:

- **Globalisation** and the emergence of rapidly industrialising economies such as India and China.
- **Demographic and socio-economic change** including the rapid increase in the old age dependency ratio.
- **Technological change** looking at acceleration in the pace of innovation.
- **Climate and environmental change** examining further pressures on natural resources and greater risks from climate change.
- **Global uncertainty** with ongoing threats from international terrorism and global conflicts.

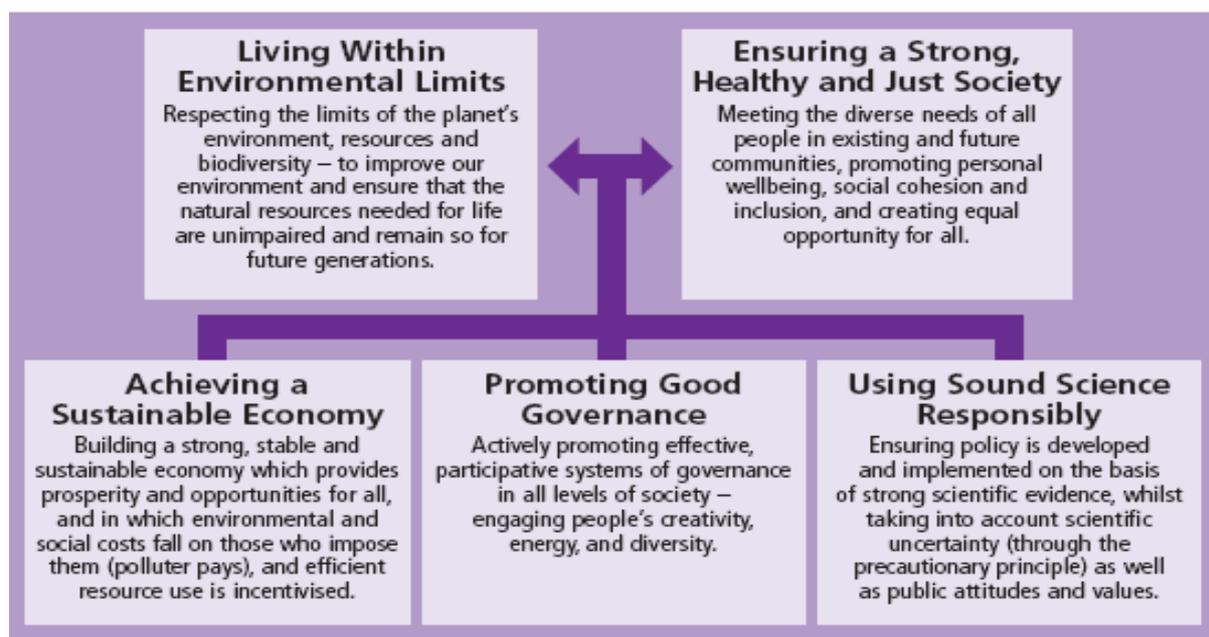
UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy

The UK Government’s sustainable development strategy – *Securing the Future* (March 2005) set out a framework goal for sustainable development which has been agreed across the UK:

“.....The goal of sustainable development is to enable all people throughout the world to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life, without compromising the quality of life of future generations. For the UK Government and the Devolved Administrations, that goal will be pursued in an integrated way.....”

Securing the Future also commits Government, across the UK to operationalising this thinking by **basin policy on five shared principles** (see Figure 1). These principles require the Government to act to ensure that we can live within environmental limits and achieve a just society by means of sustainable economy, good governance, and sound science – a powerful mechanism for policy integration.

Figure 1: Five guiding principles, *Securing the Future*, March 2005



ANNEX B

What benefits can an SD-capable civil service deliver?

1. Confident leadership through uncertainty and transition

The Government acknowledges that it needs to lead a number of key transitions to deal with long term challenges. For example:

- moving to a low carbon economy
- building new communities which take an integrated approach to providing water, waste and transport services and are energy efficient.

The Government is committed to lead by example through its own operations as well as its policy making and has set itself a number of goals to demonstrate this including:

- becoming carbon neutral by 2012
- cutting its carbon emissions by 30% over 2000 levels by 2020
- adopting carbon neutral air travel and sustainable procurement

Leading these transitions requires maximising the economic, social and environmental benefits and securing the cultural shifts that might be required against “business as usual” norms.

These are not traditional linear “command and control” situations with obvious targets to deliver to time and require the confidence to establish and work within more general frameworks, with new partners and to guiding principles. They require an effective response across departments, with civil servants confident in leading change where the ultimate solutions are not immediately obvious and need to be worked through with stakeholders and specialists in a flexible way, informed and reformed by learning and review.

These situations lend themselves to a more “transformational” leadership approach than

the “deliver to target” driven leadership which has traditionally been incentivised in the civil service.

2. Strategic thinking which tackles cause not just symptoms

Sustainable development requires broad, long term and inclusive thinking and requires a “bigger picture” approach which can frame solutions and policies which address system changes as much as tackling immediate symptoms. In this way, trade-offs and connections are highlighted, a wider range of risks can identified and minimised and policy appraisal improved. This is the age old joining-up challenge and the recent tranches of government capability reviews reveal that departments are still finding it difficult to lead change in cross-cutting areas.

For example, DfES and DH are currently concerned about childhood obesity and poor levels of pupil fitness and are currently focusing on nutritional standards to meet their related objectives. However, school food, and food in general, also impacts on the Government’s wider objectives relating to: carbon emissions, biodiversity conservation, animal welfare, labour standards, international development, local employment, community well-being etc. A single, long-term vision of school food that took account of these opportunities would avoid a barrage of fragmented, single-issue initiatives which may undermine each other and can be demoralising for those delivery agencies trying to put them into practice.

The Government is funding some of the largest capital investment programmes ever for hospitals and schools. To maximise their value for money, these programmes need to be designed to go beyond getting a new building in place to time and at look at improving the learning/healing environment, maximising local employment and maximising resource efficiencies now and into the future.

3. Better Decisions based on more robust evidence and analysis

Effective delivery is useless if you are delivering the wrong outcomes.

Civil servants need to have the skills, competency and drivers to seek data from beyond their specialisms and cross-analyse evidence across the social, environmental and economic spectrum in order to fully explore risks, interconnections and costs and benefits. In some cases this might require acquiring more specialist knowledge e.g. in terms of ecosystems, resource accounting or social change. In others it may be just ensuring that they have sufficient breadth of knowledge to pose the right questions to others.

4. Higher operational efficiency

The sheer scale of Government operations - over 650,000 employees working in buildings that occupy over 2% of the UK's land mass with a purchasing budget of around £13 billion per annum - means that it has the potential to make a huge positive impact on society, public expenditure (at a central and a local level) and the environment whilst simultaneously helping to deliver on its own sustainable development objectives.

At the very least, this means having the capability to develop resource efficient approaches which also offer cost savings - the big win-win discovered by business and now expected of a well-run organisation offering value for money.

Effective management of energy, water, consumables and resources of all kinds leads to direct cost savings through use of less resources and indirect savings in waste treatment/disposal services, carbon emissions etc. This is not rocket science and a message which government consistently promotes to business but is not yet consistently and effectively demonstrating itself through its own management of its

estate and its procurement or contract management practices.⁴

There is increasing evidence of effective practice in this area. For example, DfID is justifying its current investment decisions on video conferencing on an appraisal of the business benefits which goes beyond the obvious cost savings. The department has also considered the reduction in carbon emissions, staff development benefits (opportunity for a wider range of staff to learn from meetings involving overseas offices/aid partners), and facilitation of meetings that might otherwise have been prevented due to logistics.

5. The pace and passion of a motivated workforce

A sustainable development approach can support the Government's current emphasis on integrity in leadership and increase the sense of purpose and motivation felt by staff. Greater job satisfaction can be achieved when tasks are linked to larger goals that have relevance (across cultures) to people as workers and citizens.

Sustainable development also promotes a broader way of thinking which can enrich working practices by helping staff to work more inclusively with stakeholders and other colleagues, volunteer in their communities and improve their well-being e.g. through an organisation's support and promotion of sustainable travel and food.

Values matter at work and people often feel more comfortable and motivated working for an organisation whose values are aligned with theirs and which is seen to lead by example. The civil service competes with other sectors to attract top graduates. The graduate website milkround.com found that 40% of graduates had ruled out at least one potential employer because of the nature of their industry, or because it had a poor reputation for its environmental or employment practices.

⁴ See *Sustainable Development in Government Annual Reports* at www.sd-commission.org.uk

ANNEX C

Professional Skills for Government Framework

Professional Skills for Government (PSG) is a key part of the Government's Delivery and Reform agenda. It is a long-term change programme designed to ensure that civil servants, wherever they work, have the right mix of skills and expertise to enable their Departments or agencies to deliver effective services. PSG also seeks to provide clarity about the skills individuals need to develop and progress in the civil service and access to more consistent opportunities to develop those skills.



Sources:
www.psg.civilservice.gov.uk
www.nationalschool.gov.uk