

# Putting sustainable development at the centre in Northern Ireland

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**Sustainable**  
Development Commission

## PUTTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AT THE CENTRE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

### A response from the Sustainable Development Commission to the discussion paper on proposals for a sustainable development strategy for Northern Ireland

1. The Sustainable Development Commission is an advisory non-departmental public body, established jointly by the UK Government and by the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly. It reports to the Prime Minister, the First and Deputy First Ministers for Northern Ireland and the First Ministers for Scotland and Wales. The remit given to the Commission is to advocate sustainable development across all sectors of the UK, review progress towards it and build consensus on the actions needed if further progress is to be achieved. Our mission is to inspire government, the economy and society to embrace sustainable development as the central organising principle. Commission members are drawn from all parts of the United Kingdom; a list is at Annex 1.

2. The Commission warmly welcomes the decision of the Northern Ireland Executive to develop a sustainable development strategy for the Province, and to issue a consultation document on it. Members of the Commission were pleased to attend a conference, held in Belfast on 12 March 2002, to discuss many of the issues raised in the consultation document, and we have been in contact with Executive officials and other parties before and since then.

3. The following response does not seek to address many of the specific questions raised in the document, which are for the people and authorities of Northern Ireland themselves to determine. Instead, we offer the following observations on what appear to us to be the key issues of a sustainable development strategy for Northern Ireland.

4. We are pleased that the Northern Ireland Executive, in its Programme for Government, states that "sustainable development will be a key theme running through our work and priorities". Because of the pervasive nature of sustainable development, however, we urge the Executive to go further and to adopt sustainable development as the overarching objective of the Programme. With the eyes of the world upon it, and in the wake of the World Summit in Johannesburg, Northern Ireland has the opportunity to demonstrate the power of the concept of sustainable development to inspire and unite a whole Province to achieve a better quality of life for all its citizens and to bequeath a legacy of sustainable improvement to future generations.

5. Our Chairman suggested, at the March conference, that the next Programme for Government should, in effect, be the Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland. We understand that this idea is being given serious consideration within the NI Executive. We welcome this. To make a reality of it, the Programme would need to include some objectives specifically identified as contributing to the sustainable development of Northern Ireland, and a set of indicators of progress towards it. We discuss indicators in paragraph 13.



6. We recommend that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister should take personal responsibility for promoting sustainable development in Northern Ireland. They should be supported in this not only by the Minister for the Environment, but by other relevant Ministers, focused in a group or sub-committee of the Executive. Reflecting that, responsibility for sustainable development policy advice within the official structure of the Executive should be given to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). That Office should be given the staff and other resources to carry out that function effectively, as well as having access to expertise in the Department of the Environment (DOENI) and other relevant departments. We make this proposal to reflect our deep-seated belief that sustainable development should be at the heart of government, and not implying any criticism of the work done hitherto by Ministers and officials of DOENI.

7. We have welcomed the Executive's commitment to pursuing sustainable development. To ensure that this receives the political leadership and cross-party support required, we recommend that the Assembly itself should be given the opportunity to make a similar commitment. We further recommend that the Assembly should lay upon the Executive a duty to prepare an annual report on its actions to promote sustainable development, to be debated in the assembly. Finally, we urge the Assembly to consider tasking its Committee of the Centre, which scrutinises the work of OFMDFM, with holding that Office to account for its discharge of the additional responsibilities we propose that it should be given.

8. The consultation document quotes the four objectives for sustainable development adopted by the UK Government and asks whether they are appropriate for Northern Ireland. The SDC is engaged in a work programme on economic growth. One of the aims of this is to explore the implications of the fourth objective: maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment. The key question is whether a high level of economic growth can be compatible with the other three objectives or, to put it another way, what *kind* of economic growth is compatible with them. We would be happy to share our developing understanding of this complex but vital topic with the Executive and to help them consider its application in Northern Ireland.

9. It has been suggested to us that we might be able to play a part in developing a fifth objective, specific to the situation in Northern Ireland, reflecting the key role of peace as an integral part of sustainable development. We would be happy to work with others in this, if they think that we could play a useful role.

10. The consultation document also quotes the sustainable development principles which underpin the UK Government's objectives and asks whether they are the right ones for Northern Ireland. The SDC has developed principles of sustainable development to guide its own work, and offers them for wider application. They are at Annex 2. We invite the Northern Ireland Executive to consider whether these might be useful in developing their own understanding of how sustainable development can be pursued: we would be happy to discuss this with them.

11. It is important that the Executive's commitment to sustainable development is reflected in its policies and programmes, notably its spending priorities. We therefore support the proposal to that effect in the consultation document, with regard to allocations to departmental programmes and the integration of SD



indicators into Departments' Public Service Agreements and exercises to measure the impact of their plans.

12. As an adjunct to that, policies and programmes should be subject to integrated appraisal across the whole range of sustainable development, not as an addition to the existing burden of appraisal but as a coherent framework within which such appraisal is carried out. We are pleased that officials of the Executive are in touch with work being done by the UK Government to develop an Integrated Policy Appraisal tool.

13. We have already referred to the essential role of indicators in appraisal. We welcome the proposal in the consultation document to use the UK Government's 15 headline indicators as the basis for reporting progress in Northern Ireland. It is important that information on the whole of the UK, and on each of its component parts, should be available on a consistent basis. We also endorse the Executive's intention to develop its own set of priority indicators and perhaps a larger number of supporting ones. These would be a valuable adjunct to the national set, reflecting local priorities and circumstances. As such, they will be for local determination, but we will consider whether we can make any useful contribution in response to the forthcoming consultation on that.

14. We support the proposal to establish a Northern Ireland Forum for sustainable development. This could have a remit similar to ourselves, as suggested in the consultation document, in particular our role in advocating sustainable development across all sectors. We believe it is especially important that the Forum should offer advice, bring appropriate influence to bear and seek to stimulate action. In doing so, it should relate not only to the Executive but also to local government, other authorities and agencies, business, NGOs and community groups. It may be that a completely new body should be established for this purpose. But we invite the Executive, and others with an interest in this, to consider the possibility that an existing body – perhaps the Civic Forum or the Sustainable Northern Ireland Programme – could develop to become, or to provide, such a Forum. We would welcome links with a Northern Ireland Forum, eg through some shared membership, by sharing of information and by collaboration on work of mutual benefit. It could be a valuable ally in our efforts to relate effectively to every part of the United Kingdom. We would be happy to help the Executive and other interested parties to develop their thinking on this. We hope that our own experience, and our contacts with developments in Scotland and Wales, could be of particular value.

15. We welcome the opportunity afforded by devolution for experimentation and mutual learning. Specifically, we believe that the devolved administrations have much to teach the UK Government, as well as learning from its experience; and they have much to learn from each other. With members drawn from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and having now made one visit of the full Commission to each, we have been struck by the unique insights and strengths of each in its handling of sustainable development. We believe there would be great value in an occasional meeting of the Ministers responsible for sustainable development, and their key officials. It would also be valuable for sustainable development to be put on the agenda for some meetings of the Council of the Isles: these issues are of significance to all countries and at all levels of governance.



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16. We hope these observations are helpful. We would be pleased to discuss any of them with the Northern Ireland Executive, or with other interested parties. If the Executive wished to consult us again at a later stage in its thinking on any of these issues, we would be happy to discuss them.

Sustainable Development Commission  
September 2002

**MEMBERS OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION**

**Jonathon Porritt (Chairman)** Director of Forum for the Future; **Maria Adebowale** Director of Capacity; **Rod Aspinwall** Deputy Chairman of the Enviros Group and Professor of Environmental Management at Cardiff University; **Councillor Maureen Child** Lead Member for Finance, Edinburgh City Council; **Rita Clifton** Chairman of Interbrand; **Lindsey Colbourne** Coordinator of InterAct; **Anna Coote** Director of the Public Health Programme at the King's Fund; **Ed Crooks** Economics Editor, Financial Times; **Valerie Ellis** Assistant General Secretary of Prospect; **Nicky Gavron** Deputy Mayor of London and the Mayor's Advisor on Planning and Spatial Development; **Brian Hanna** President of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health; **Alan Knight** Head of Social Responsibility, Kingfisher; **Walter Menzies** Chief Executive of the Mersey Basin Campaign; **Tim O'Riordan** Professor of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia and Associate Director of the Centre for Social and Economic Research on the Global Environment; **Derek Osborn** Chairman of Stakeholder Forum for our Common Future; **Anne Power** Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Deputy Director of the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion; **Charles Secrett** Executive Director of Friends of the Earth; **Richard Wakeford** Chief Executive of the Countryside Agency; **Graham Wynne** Chief Executive of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; **Raymond Young** Board member of Forward Scotland, a member of the Scottish Welfare to Work Advisory Task Force and Chair of the Environment Task Force in Scotland; **Jess Worth** Campaigner with People and Planet.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

### WORKING PRINCIPLES

These Principles have been formulated to help the Sustainable Development Commission in delivering its work programme. We are a UK body, focusing primarily on the UK Government and other key sectors in the UK. These Principles are not therefore designed to be either a work of art or utterly definitive. Indeed, first and foremost, they are operational principles, in that we shall be using them to inform our own deliberations and to steer all external contributions we may seek from academics, partners, consultants and so on. They have been debated and agreed by the Commissioners themselves, embodying our own experience and conviction of what is most important in the sustainable development debate.

We acknowledge the work of many who have gone before us in seeking to define what is meant by sustainable development. We respect the fundamental importance of the principles agreed by governments in the Rio Declaration of 1992 at the Earth Summit. The principles elaborated by the UK Government in DEFRA's sustainable development strategy cover similar ground. And for a more elegant articulation of the relationship between humankind and the natural world, we warmly recommend the approach of the Earth Charter ([www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org)).

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### DEFINING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development provides a framework for redefining progress and redirecting our economies to enable all people to meet their basic needs and improve their quality of life, while ensuring that the natural systems, resources and diversity upon which they depend are maintained and enhanced both for their benefit and for that of future generations.

Sustainable development is inevitably a contested idea, dependent on finding the right balance between different and often conflicting objectives through much more integrated policy-making and planning processes. Putting its principles into practice demands debate, experimentation and continuous learning, and therefore requires a thriving democracy to allow it to evolve and flourish.

### PRINCIPLES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

#### 1. Putting Sustainable Development at the Centre

Sustainable development should be the organising principle of all democratic societies, underpinning all other goals, policies and processes. It provides a framework for integrating economic, social and environmental concerns over time, not through crude trade-offs, but through the pursuit of mutually reinforcing benefits. It promotes good governance, healthy living, innovation, life-long learning

and all forms of economic growth which secure the natural capital upon which we depend. It reinforces social harmony and seeks to secure each individual's prospects of leading a fulfilling life.

## 2. Valuing Nature

We are and always will be part of Nature, embedded in the natural world, and totally dependent for our own economic and social wellbeing on the resources and systems that sustain life on Earth. These systems have limits, which we breach at our peril. All economic activity must be constrained within those limits. We have an inescapable moral responsibility to pass on to future generations a healthy and diverse environment, and critical natural capital unimpaired by economic development. Even as we learn to manage our use of the natural world more efficiently, so we must affirm those individual beliefs and belief systems which revere Nature for its intrinsic value, regardless of its economic and aesthetic value to humankind.

## 3. Fair Shares

Sustainable economic development means "fair shares for all", ensuring that people's basic needs are properly met across the world, whilst securing constant improvements in the quality of peoples' lives through efficient, inclusive economies. "Efficient" simply means generating as much economic value as possible from the lowest possible throughput of raw materials and energy. "Inclusive" means securing high levels of paid, high quality employment, with internationally recognised labour rights and fair trade principles vigorously defended, whilst properly acknowledging the value to our wellbeing of unpaid family work, caring, parenting, volunteering and other informal livelihoods. Once basic needs are met, the goal is to achieve the highest quality of life for individuals and communities, within the Earth's carrying capacity, through transparent, properly-regulated markets which promote both social equity and personal prosperity.

## 4. Polluter Pays

Sustainable development requires that we make explicit the costs of pollution and inefficient resource use, and reflect those in the prices we pay for all products and services, recycling the revenues from higher prices to drive the sustainability revolution that is now so urgently needed, and compensating those whose environments have been damaged. In pursuit of environmental justice, no part of society should be disproportionately impacted by environmental pollution or blight, and all people should have the same right to pure water, clean air, nutritious food and other key attributes of a healthy, life-sustaining environment.

## 5. Good Governance

There is no one blue-print for delivering sustainable development. It requires different strategies in different societies. But all strategies will depend on effective, participative systems of governance and institutions, engaging the interest, creativity and energy of all citizens. We must therefore celebrate diversity, practice tolerance and respect. However, good governance is a two-way process. We should

all take responsibility for promoting sustainability in our own lives and for engaging with others to secure more sustainable outcomes in society.

## **6. Adopting a Precautionary Approach**

Scientists, innovators and wealth creators have a crucial part to play in creating genuinely sustainable economic progress. But human ingenuity and technological power is now so great that we are capable of causing serious damage to the environment or to peoples' health through unsustainable development that pays insufficient regard to wider impacts. Society needs to ensure that there is full evaluation of potentially damaging activities so as to avoid or minimise risks. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage to the environment or human health, the lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason to delay taking cost-effective action to prevent or minimise such damage.