

Sustainability indicators for waste, energy and travel for Scotland

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Sustainable
Development Commission

“Sustainability indicators for waste, energy and travel for Scotland”

Comments by the UK Sustainable Development Commission

1. The Sustainable Development Commission welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Scottish indicators consultation paper. We broadly support the development and collection of a set of sustainable development indicators for Scotland, reflecting specific circumstances in Scotland and the policy responsibilities of the Scottish Executive.

General comments

2. Sustainable Development is a notoriously tricky concept to articulate in a practical way. The choice of an indicator set for Scotland is a crucial public statement, as, in choosing a set of indicators, the Executive will be setting out a very public stall on what sustainable development means in practice.

3. As the ENTEC report says “An approach that focuses exclusively on W-E-T issues only addresses a limited component of the sustainable development agenda”. As the Commission has already commented to the Executive, while the W-E-T strategy has been a useful start in promoting sustainable development Scotland, we believe that the time has now come for a fully fledged sustainable development strategy for Scotland. The indicator set chosen needs to reflect this strategy, which should include a fully formed vision of what a sustainable Scotland would look like.

4. A sustainable development strategy for Scotland would build on the existing W-E-T strategy to incorporate other parts of the sustainable development agenda not currently reflected in the suggested indicator set. It should include economic indicators, a wider range of environmental issues (including biodiversity, which, as a non-W-E-T issue, sits somewhat uncomfortably within the current indicator set) and a wide range of social and social justice issues, such as crime, housing and education.

5. The usefulness of such a set as a public policy tool will be limited unless there is a clear strategy, with targets and milestones, for the delivery of the agreed vision of a

sustainable Scotland. This is a major failing of the indicator set which is used by the UK Government, which is useful and informative, but lacking in teeth. Once the Scottish indicator set has been finalised, we would like to see the development of detailed targets for each area, on which progress should be reported to the Scottish Parliament on an annual basis. These reports should include scenarios and forward projections to illustrate the likely effect of current policies and new initiatives, and some analysis of the interactions between different indicators (eg on travel and greenhouse gas emissions). It would also be very useful to identify for each key indicator the Minister who has lead responsibility for the Executive's role in delivering it.

Number of indicators

6. As both the consultation paper and the ENTEC report make clear, indicator sets can have many uses. Small numbers of high level indicators are extremely useful as a communication tool. Larger indicator sets more easily allow organisations to relate operational decisions to trends. In the Commission's work – especially on the assessment of business sectoral strategies, and the development of a methodology for assessing agricultural policy – we have found that attempts to apply a single set of indicators – even a very small set of core indicators - to drive behavioural changes in very different operations has usually failed. We think that this is also a risk in the approach being proposed to Scottish indicators. How, for example, could a retail business assess its performance against an indicator on fuel poverty?

7. In our view, therefore, it needs to be recognised at the outset that while a small set of indicators could be useful as a communications tool, and in painting a picture of Scotland's sustainability as a whole, it is unlikely to be applicable beyond the realm of high level public policy. It is therefore crucial that progress on a broader set of indicators is tracked, in order that these will be available for use by different sectors of Scottish society.

Choice of indicators

We have a number of comments below on the specific choice of indicators:

a) It is critically important that the indicators should be capable of monitoring performance in Scotland (a) over time and (b) relative to other parts of the UK (including individual English regions). To meet the first objective, the Executive will need to make a commitment to collecting and publishing data in the form specified over a given period of time (we suggest five years in the first instance). For the latter, it is extremely important that the Executive should, as a minimum, collect and publish data on the UK's Government's 15 core indicators, which also form the basis of the indicators being developed in Wales, and which are also collected for individual English regions. These could be supplemented with indicators which are especially relevant to the Scottish policy context.

b) In terms of the choice of indicators for the core set, we note that two of the three resource use indicators do not yet have an available data source. We note the ongoing research in DEFRA, and will be interested to see whether a solution will be found to the difficult issue of how to aggregate very different materials and resources within a single measure. But at the moment, it seems a little heroic to assume that this problem will be resolved.

c) While we recognise that Scotland already has an established and published set of social justice indicators, we think that, for the completeness of the sd indicators, some of the social justice indicators should be included and reported on within the sd set. Economic indicators should also be included.

d) There is an ongoing debate amongst experts in indicators on whether we have to rely on proxies of welfare or whether we can get behind them to measure the thing we are really interested in. The example often given is travel, where we are really interested in access to services: measuring journeys etc is a poor proxy for that (we would rather travel less but have better access, eg because the service is closer). The choice of the wrong indicator can focus policy on the wrong thing, eg on improving roads (or even buses) rather than resiting hospitals etc. Since travel is one of the WET components, it would be appropriate for the Scottish Executive to make special efforts to develop better indicators in that area, blazing a trail from which others in the UK and more widely could learn.

e) There is very little in the indicator set to assess how successful the Scottish Executive is being in connecting with the Scottish people on the sustainable development agenda. There is, for example, no measure of public awareness of sustainable development, or, more subjectively, how Scottish people rate their quality of life overall. We would like to see the hard data-driven indicators supplemented by work based on public perception, which could then be tracked over time as a broad measure of success.

f) As education has such a central role to play in promoting sustainable development, it would be useful to see the spread of sustainable development thinking through the education system tracked over time.

g) Finally, in presenting the indicators, it is important to be clear that while some of them measure outcomes driven by current day behaviour (eg CO2 emissions) for others (eg sea level changes) there is a time lag between actions and results.

We hope that these comments are helpful to the Scottish Executive in finalising its indicator set, and will be following the further development of this initiative with interest.

28 September 2001