

Stepping Up the Pace

SDC Summary Response to the UK Shared Framework for Sustainable Development and UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy 2005

Last year the SDC challenged the Government to take more decisive action in 20 key areas when defining its priorities and objectives for the review of its 1999 Sustainable Development Strategy. These challenges were set out in our April 2004 publication *Shows Promise. But must try harder* which was based on a review of Government progress on sustainable development since 1999. The Government has sought to address those challenges in the new Framework and UK Strategy and has certainly *promised* to try harder. The Strategy has been considerably improved and represents a real step forward in the process of delivering the changes we want to see if sustainable development is to become more reality than mythology.

In this summary we provide an overview of the UK's Shared Framework for Sustainable Development and a quick take on where we think the strengths of the UK Government Strategy lie, where we see key challenges ahead, and the areas where we want to see the Government taking action right NOW!

The UK's Shared Framework for Sustainable Development

One future – different paths is the UK's Shared Framework for Sustainable Development which includes a shared vision, principles and indicators for driving on shared priority themes. Thus recognising that there are still common challenges and goals.

As a UK body we welcome the establishment of a UK-wide strategic framework which offers strong direction and a unified purpose for the UK Government and Devolved Administrations. This will guide their own, individual, sustainable development strategies. The common, core set of indicators will enable progress to be monitored and reported on a UK basis for effective audit at home as well as against international commitments.

The Devolved Administrations now have experience in implementing new sustainable development approaches and have a distinct and substantive contribution to make.

In Scotland: **We welcome the Scottish Executive's commitment to consult on and bring forward the new Scottish sustainable development strategy during 2005. We will support this process.**

In Wales **We are pleased to accept the Welsh Assembly Government's invitation to contribute to its annual reports on progress in implementing the Assembly's Sustainable Development Scheme and its Action Plan.**

In Northern Ireland: **We support the Northern Ireland Executive's aim to launch its sustainable development strategy and supporting indicator set in 2005 and will work with them to take this forward.**

The SDC will continue to ensure that the UK Government and Devolved Administrations individually, and collectively, make an effective contribution to sustainable development. It is important that they work together to meet the shared goals.

UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy – *Securing the Future*

We have identified **250 new or significant commitments** in the 2005 Strategy. These are listed on our website at www.sd-commission.org.uk.

The Strengths

1. **Establishing SD as a cross-cutting Government and UK priority**

We challenged the Government to create a new Strategy which presented a unified front on sustainable development, as a core part of departmental programmes, and which was clearly led from the centre. To demonstrate this, we felt it was imperative that the Government mainstreamed the Strategy's principles into all policies and practices into all levels and all parts of Government to influence its priorities and resource allocation.

The Strategy makes a good start by committing to:

- a **new UK-wide vision** for sustainable development. The UK Government and Devolved Administrations have agreed a new framework goal for sustainable development. This builds on the objectives of the 1999 Strategy, but seeks to ensure that economic, social and environmental goals will be pursued simultaneously and not on a pick and mix basis. Action to deliver the vision will be critical to the success of the Strategy.
- New, unifying **principles** of sustainable development. These are to be used in all policy making across the UK. Significantly, these recognise the need to operate within environmental limits.
- A new set of UK-wide sustainable development **indicators**. These will give us a better picture of areas where action is needed and will flag up issues such as health inequalities. The SDC particularly welcomes the Government's commitment to developing a wellbeing indicator and investigating ways to better assess the UK's global impacts.
- **Action plans on SD for all Government departments by 2005**. Departments and their executive agencies will be required to produce action plans setting out how they intend to implement the commitments in the Strategy and report progress against these. The SDC wants to see Cabinet Ministers and the Green Ministers own these plans be held accountable for progress.
- **Sustainable Development Duties**: The Strategy commits the Government to applying sustainable development duties to all new bodies and existing bodies as appropriate – this is an excellent signal that the Government means business. The Government has already applied SD duties to key public bodies such as the National Assembly for Wales and the Greater London Authority to ensure that their policies are consistent with sustainable development.

2. **Leading by example**

To signal that it is serious about implementation, the Government will have to 'walk its own talk' and demonstrate sustainability in action. The 1999 Strategy lacked collected ownership across Government and had few champions. *We challenged the Government to ensure that all central Departments give a clear, strong and consistent lead towards sustainable development throughout Government and society.*

• **Sustainable Public Procurement**

The Strategy sets a goal for the UK to be recognised amongst the leaders in sustainable procurement across the EU member states by 2009. The SDC views this as a key opportunity for the Government to engage business, transform markets, and reduce carbon emissions. A new business-led Sustainable Procurement Task Force is being set up, which will devise a new national action plan. We hope that the action plan will set clear, measurable milestones towards the achievement of the 2009 target.

- **Carbon-offsetting**

Defra, DfID and FCO will be working together in 2005 to pilot offsetting carbon dioxide emissions from official air travel and looking to support projects which help to reduce our carbon demands. This is a good first step towards a 'carbon neutral government'.

Priority for Action NOW!:

All Government departments can start to offset the carbon emissions generated from their air travel as well as those from all the G8 and EU meetings taking place as a result of the UK Presidencies.

3. Starting to tackle some sticky issues

- **Community engagement**

The SDC wants to see the Strategy used to *actively engage key stakeholders, including communities and the wider public in the changes that are needed*, recognising that all stakeholders have a part to play in delivering the Strategy. The Strategy sets out how the Government is going to take a more active approach to changing attitudes and habits rather than relying on traditional regulation and information methods. We welcome the Strategy's new Community 2020 – Together We Can initiative. This seeks to reinvigorate community action on sustainable development by providing *both* practical support and engagement opportunities. The Strategy also recognises the vital role of education in ensuring that we have the necessary skills and knowledge to put sustainability into practice.

Priority for action NOW!:

The Prime Minister can follow up his commitment to reinvigorate community action on sustainable development, for example by calling for a high level conference involving Chief Executives of all Local Authorities to ensure strong leadership at the local level.

- **Sustainable Production and Consumption (SCP)**

Our current patterns of production and consumption need to change if we are to meet our climate change targets and minimise waste production. SDC advocated that SCP should be a *central element* of the new Strategy and we are delighted that it is one of the Strategy's four priority themes.

A new **SCP Business Task Force** will develop ideas for practical action. This will complement the work of the joint SDC/NCC **Sustainable Consumption Round Table**, due to report in March 2006. The Government will need to pay more than lip service to their recommendations if it is to make progress in this area. We are looking to DTI, Defra and HMT to work together to establish new targets and tighter timetables to achieve the transition to more sustainable products and production methods for many leading products and processes.

- **Taxation**

The Strategy recognises the role of incentives, including environmental taxes to meet its goals. HM Treasury will be evaluating environmental tax policy for the Budget in the light of this Strategy.

Priority for Action NOW!:

The Chancellor should ensure that the sustainability impact of all his Budget measures are assessed - not just the environmentally motivated measures.

4. Checking against delivery

The 1999 strategy was full of good intentions but remains largely unimplemented. Delivery and action have to be the key watchwords for this new Strategy and the SDC wants to see it *vigorously implemented and effectively monitored*.

- **An enhanced role for SDC**

The Strategy commits to a strengthened role for the SDC in holding the Government to account on its progress against SD. We very much welcome this new role, and the opportunity to ensure that this strategy has teeth right from the start.

- **Ensuring a 'living' document**

Communications and engagement are equally as important as the content of the Strategy. The Government is committed to involving stakeholders directly in taking the Strategy forward. From the end of 2005 the Government will pilot open and innovative ways to enable stakeholders to influence its decisions about the kind of projects, which would deliver the goals of the strategy. The Government must ensure that the views of stakeholders are fully taken into account and must avoid 'lip service'.

Future Challenges

- **Climate Change:** The Strategy has not pre-empted the review of the Climate Change Programme which is due to be completed later this year. The SDC will be looking to ensure that the review delivers on this key Strategy theme.
- **Transport:** The Strategy is particularly weak on comprehensive measures for tackling the negative impacts of transport. These require urgent attention if we are to improve mobility with less congestion and air pollution.
- **Promoting sensible "spend to save" decisions.** Current accounting rules actively prohibit a department from investing in energy efficient technology one year, reaping the benefits over several others, and recycling those savings into more energy efficiency measures. The SDC wants to see HM Treasury explore how it can revise current procedures to help.
- **Rationalising regional structures:** The current regional machinery for governance and policy delivery is confusing and needs rationalising if there is to be the necessary coherence for the pursuit of sustainable development throughout the regions. The SDC is currently reviewing the overall arrangements for delivering sustainable development in the regions including liaison with central government and the role of major regional bodies and strategies. We will make recommendations to the Government about improving effectiveness.
- **A new focus on wellbeing.** The Strategy acknowledges that economic growth does not automatically deliver improved quality of life. The SDC has long been calling for a radically different approach to measuring economic progress which recognises that not all economic growth supports the Government's environmental, social and environmental goals. We are encouraged that the Government has committed to developing a wellbeing indicator and investigating how far it might inform changes in policy and spending.
- **Operationalising the new vision and principles.** The Strategy must link to Spending Reviews, Public Service Agreements and Comprehensive Performance Assessments in order to have resonance throughout Government.