

FIVE STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Context

In the *Children's Plan* Government highlights its commitment to make "the UK the best place in the world for our children and young people to grow up". There is a strong focus on better integrated service planning, stronger delivery of quality services and a drive for better outcomes for children and young people, particularly the most vulnerable.

In order to achieve this Government states that sustainable development is a "non-negotiable for children's well-being." DCSF's sustainable development action plan (SDAP) *Brighter Futures, Greener Lives* outlines three key commitments to ensuring that sustainable development is integral to a brighter future for the young people of today and tomorrow.

- Leading change in the system (working with delivery partners to drive change)
- Lead by example
- Educate and empower young people for life in a sustainable world.

The action plan provides a strong platform to embed sustainable development thinking into all aspects of service provision for children and young people; from the type of services they access to the quality of places they play in. However, while the SDAP provides the framework and opportunity, there must be even greater endeavours to ensure that sustainable development is built in, not bolt on, to secure a better future for generations to come. The SDC's 2007 publication *Every Child's Future Matters* gives extensive evidence of where additional focus and action is needed.

Young people's well-being and empowerment

The *Children's Plan* and *Aiming High* set out clear goals to improve the life chances for young people and their ability to strive for a better future for themselves and their communities. DCSF recognises that protective factors play a strong part in ensuring young people are able to participate fully and positively in the opportunities presented to them.

While the *Every Child Matters* framework tackles many of the socio-economic risk factors associated with limiting young people's chance for success, it does not examine the significant risks that are presented by environmental factors, at a local or global level. Nor does it take into account that children and young people who experience the greatest social and economic hardships are the most likely to be exposed to poor quality and degraded environments, impacting further on their life chances and routes to health and success.

21st century policies for young people must take account of the challenges ahead and be conscious of their impact on both local and global communities. There is a need to ensure that all policies and services for young people are examined for their sound sustainable approach, making them better policies for the present as well as tackling the challenges to come.

Since young people have the greatest stake in the future, it is our responsibility to empower them to look after the planet in adulthood and, crucially, to question and challenge the practices of present-day decision-makers.

Sustainable development is very often seen as a niche subject, appearing as an after-thought to strategic planning, and often only giving consideration to traditional “green” issues. That said, there are excellent examples of holistic, integrated thinking in the sector, driven by passionate individuals, but stubbornly outside the norm. Sustainable development thinking needs to inform the design of services for young people at a more fundamental level. It is important not to expect local authorities and third sector organisations to act independently to drive change. Clear signals, messages and a cohesive approach from Government will raise the profile of sustainable development and give a clear indication that it really is a non-negotiable for children’s well-being. Government should give greater consideration to leadership, integrated service planning, regulation, workforce training and the capacity of the youth sector to meet these ambitious challenges.

The following five strategic priorities would represent a step change in embedding sustainable development within policies for young people in England

➤ **Priority 1** – Capacity is built within the children and young people’s workforce to apply sustainable development to policy and practice.

We need a workforce that is able to take a systemic, integrated, long-term approach to sustainable development at a leadership level in all service areas that impact on children’s lives, from safeguarding to planning, active travel to leisure. At a practitioner level, we need a workforce that is able to think and act on sustainable development within their work and empower young people to do the same. Sustainable development is identified as an important outcome of projects delivering benefits to young people, and commissioning requirements and quality assurance processes should reflect this. Joined up working through integrated and targeted youth support surfaces new opportunities for sectors to take a consistent approach to sustainable development.

The third sector brings welcome diversity to the services available for young people, often working in the most challenging settings. However this sector has limited resources to drive up its own capacity to deliver long-term sustainable development approaches, and support is needed for third sector organisations to achieve this more effectively.

➤ **Priority 2** - Young people are engaged in sustainable development thinking in formal and informal education settings, driving up their understanding of 21st century challenges and empowering them to shape decisions that affect their future.

Some young people are fortunate enough to access thinking on sustainable development through schools, youth work and community projects. However the picture is far from consistent, and vulnerable young people, for example those who have interrupted their formal education, often have the most limited access to positive environments, play, good nutrition and community participation, and have the most to lose if these inequalities are not addressed.

Investments such as DCSF’s positive activities programmes and empowerment agenda offer routes to raise young people’s stake in their local environments and services, and are welcome. This approach needs to be woven into a much wider range of local planning and decision-making processes so that young people’s rights to healthy and sustainable environment are properly met.

➔ **Priority 3** - A formal education curriculum that recognises sustainable development as a key context for 21st century learning.

Young people need to acquire new skills through formal education if they are to become part of the solution to global challenges. This means developing the confidence to challenge old patterns of behaviour, listening, expressing points of view, weighing evidence, cooperating, thinking critically, seeing patterns, participating in decisions, making informed choices, tackling real problems – these are the skills necessary for sustainable development.

Sustainable development is not a single subject, but a way of thinking that pervades and enriches all subjects in a relevant and engaging way for learners. Progress has been made in the secondary curriculum, but further work is required to ensure that these skills are offered coherently and through the delivery of the primary curriculum, diplomas, training courses and further education and work-based learning.

➔ **Priority 4** – Young people access facilities that demonstrate excellence in sustainable practice and design.

Site planning, space design and modelling sustainable operations will significantly impact on the well being of young people, supporting their health and social development as well as encouraging awareness and action on local and global environmental themes. Capital programmes funded by the public purse should set high standards of sustainable design or risk saddling new or refurbished facilities with heavy financial and environmental burdens in future. Facilities should demonstrate excellence in recycled material use, passive design, and be geared to long-term, low impact operation, with whole life costs minimised through energy, water and material efficiency.

In general, spaces that young people use – such as play spaces, parks, leisure centres and schools – should all be regarded through the same lens. Likewise they should attempt to make visible their sustainable design features so that the young people using them can see and understand what benefits they bring.

➔ **Priority 5** – Effective, consistent signalling from Government about the importance of sustainable development in local delivery.

Policy initiatives, funding priorities, remit letters, ministerial speeches, press notices, KPIs of key programmes, sector targets, national indicators, tender specifications, stakeholder communications – all of these influence how local authorities and youth sector agencies make decisions, and all have the potential to drive sustainable development thinking. Sustainable development is the ultimate joining-up agenda, throwing up synergies and efficiencies in delivery that are rarely obtained within conventional structures and boundaries.

Sustainable development policy and good policy are one and the same thing, driving up the quality of children’s well-being now and in the future. A louder, more consistent, longer-term commitment to sustainable development thinking should be at the core of all strategic policy and delivery for young people.