

**Sustainable Consumption Roundtable
Response to 'Taking it on' Consultation**

September 2004



Sustainable
Development Commission

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All Consuming

The Sustainable Consumption Roundtable (SCR) is a joint initiative between the Sustainable Development Commission and the National Consumer Council. The Roundtable has been established to guide and inform Government policy-making towards the achievement of more sustainable consumption in the UK.

The Roundtable was formed in June 2004 and over its life span will be tackling some of the most intractable issues facing policy makers, business and consumers. Having recently formed, our contribution to the 'Taking It On' consultation' at this point is best expressed as setting out our direction, early plans, and where we hope the Roundtable can be most useful to government. As our work programme develops, we are looking forward to working closely with government in the development of a UK framework for Sustainable Consumption and Production.

Given the scope of the Roundtable, we are looking to the SDS Review to further understanding of consumption and help to open out the debate into areas such as the meaning and pursuit of well-being, improving engagement and the effectiveness of policies at a local level. There is also a need to develop robust methodologies for whole impact accounting and lifestyle modelling.

Sustainable Consumption

How to achieve an economy that supports sustainable consumption or indeed what this will look like is by no means yet fully understood. What is clear however, is that there needs to be a long-term commitment by Government and other stakeholders towards tackling inefficient resource use and over-consumption. Within this there needs to be reassurance that policy makers will take action towards achieving sustainable consumption, despite the political sensitivity of many of the issues.

To reinforce the long-term commitment to sustainable consumption, the Roundtable is considering the feasibility of setting a UK goal to develop a world-class policy framework for sustainable consumption, as measured by comparison between the UK and peer countries.

Businesses

Sustainable consumption is about consuming **ethically** (to minimise negative impacts on people and communities) and **efficiently** (to achieve maximum possible resource efficiency). However, many businesses find this concept difficult to grasp because it is seen as contradictory to their fundamental objectives of sales and profit growth.

One key area for the Roundtable will be shaping the sustainable consumption message for application to a business audience. This work will be most applicable to Q12 of the consultation: *'What steps do you think need be taken by government, business, and others over the short and long-term to help businesses make more sustainable products'*

In the next year the Roundtable shall be approaching the UK's largest companies to encourage them to actively embrace the Sustainable Consumption agenda. The Roundtable is seeking to make a compelling argument for sustainable consumption, framed within the language of commerce, to businesses and producers. Within this there will be a clarification of what sustainability means in practice and suggestions of how businesses can adjust their strategies to reinforce the Government's sustainable development objectives.

Consumers

No business willingly manufactures goods that have no market. Although consumer behaviour is harder for the Government to address, there must be action and commitment to develop sustainable consumption and production in tandem, in order to ensure the market in sustainable products operates effectively (in meeting peoples needs), efficiently and equitably in allocating resources.

Q14 of the consultation asks, '*What areas of consumption do you think need to be tackled first? Why? What actions need to be taken by whom?*' In its work programme the SCR is intending to identify and explore in detail the areas of consumption that are responsible for the highest environmental and social impacts and are most problematic to address. The exact areas will be determined at a later stage, but are likely to include, transport, food, housing and energy usage.

Changing Behaviour

Q13 of the consultation asks '*What steps do you think need to be taken by government, business and others over the short and long-term to help business and household consumers choose more sustainable goods and services?*'

In promoting sustainable consumer behaviour, policy makers need to be sympathetic to the fact that awareness raising and behavioural change are not the same thing. Although a majority of UK consumers profess to being aware of ethical issues when purchasing goods and services, ethical, 'green' and organic products command only a small share of the market place. Identifying and confronting the reasons behind this attitude-behaviour gap is clearly an important issue.

As a first step in our consumer lifestyles work, the Roundtable has commissioned research to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between consumer behaviour and environmental impacts. An early report on from phase 1 of consumer behaviour research will be available by the end of this year. From this firm evidence base, the Roundtable will then identify the key areas and determinants of unsustainable consumption. The results and conclusions of this lifestyle work, including practical advice and recommendations for action will be available in 2005.

Signed



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