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6<sup>th</sup> December 2006

Dear Sir/Madam

**Environment & Rural Development Committee Meeting on Sustainable Development**

Many thanks for your invitation to the Sustainable Development Commission to appear before you on the 13<sup>th</sup> December and provide its perspective on the role of the Scottish Parliament in delivering sustainable development.

Ahead of this appearance, I thought that the following information would be of use in helping frame some of the views we would like to outline on the 13<sup>th</sup>.

Firstly, it will perhaps be helpful to outline who the Sustainable Development Commission is, and our work within Scotland as well as across the UK as whole.

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) is the Government's independent advisory body on sustainable development. The Commission reports to the Prime Minister and the First Ministers for Wales and Scotland. Established in 2000, the SDC is chaired by Jonathon Porritt and comprises 19 Commissioners supported by a policy secretariat. The SDC Vice-Chair for Scotland is Professor Jan Bebbington.

The SDC secretariat comprises almost 50 staff based in our offices in London, Cardiff, Belfast and Edinburgh. Our work covers a wide range of policy fields, and we aim to provide evidence based advice on the development of sustainable development across the UK. An increase of funding from the Scottish Executive and the UK Government is allowing us to upscale our work in Scotland, and we expect a staff team of five to be in place in January 2007.

It is also worth noting that the SDC Welsh team is involved in similar discussions with the Welsh Assembly about its own work on sustainable development, so our comments are framed with this wider discussion in mind.

In drawing up this response we have used expertise from Commissioners and the Secretariat, and have also compared our experiences of engaging in policy work within UK Government and the three devolved administrations.

It is worth starting by recognising that within the Scottish Executive's Sustainable Development Strategy – *Choosing Our Future* – the role of the Scottish Parliament is clearly recognised. Paragraph 14.22 notes that:

“The Partnership Agreement stresses the importance of robust Parliamentary arrangements to hold the Executive to account. Just as sustainable development challenges the Executive to change its way of working, so it presents challenges and opportunities for the Parliament: to encourage public access and participation in the issues and hold the Executive to account. **The Executive will work with the Parliament to explore new and effective ways of achieving these aims.**”

Within *Choosing Our Future* the Scottish Executive has also established clear roles for the SDC to play, noting in Paragraph 14.26 and 14.27 that:

"We need to ensure that the SDC in Scotland is well placed to advise government by:

- producing a strategic assessment of performance ahead of the next strategy
- reporting on an annual basis on progress in delivering the strategy
- providing access to authoritative advice that is based on clear evidence
- highlighting best practice in sustainable development in other countries, and building on current links in the EU, the OECD and other international organisations.

The SDC also has an important role to play in promoting sustainable development in Scotland: encouraging a climate of opinion, promoting wider public debate and shared learning, and developing partnerships with key organisations and sectors."

We would therefore hope that in these two interlinked parts of the Strategy common cause can be found to ensure successful delivery of sustainable development in Scotland.

I trust that you find the attached of use ahead of the evidence session itself. Also, may I say that the Sustainable Development Commission would welcome an opportunity to provide further advice on how governance of sustainable development within the Scottish Parliament might function, should the Committee see that further work is needed once it has reviewed the findings of this meeting.

Yours faithfully



**Maf Smith**  
Scottish Director

## **Introduction**

Firstly, it is important to note that in reviewing integration of sustainable development into the work of government or legislatures, it is clear that there is no one approach. Indeed, the application of sustainable development into the work of governments or parliaments is a relatively recent step.

However, we fully support the intention of the Scottish Parliament's Environment & Rural Development Committee to look into this issue, and hope that we can provide insight to take this discussion further.

Overall, we would recommend that sustainable development is mainstreamed within the work of the Parliament, and therefore of its committees. Sustainable development is all about making the links between what have too often been seen as unrelated policy areas, and ensuring that environmental, social and economic concerns are taken into account, while actively promoting good governance and using sound science responsibly.

Within the Scottish Executive we see it as critical that sustainable development is a shared responsibility across departments. The leadership of the Cabinet Sub Committee on Sustainable Scotland helps set the tone of this integration within Parliament. When the Parliament and its Committee's are working to hold the Scottish Executive to account it is important that there is also a shared understanding of the cross cutting nature of sustainable development.

Given this fact about sustainable development we do not see that it should be or be perceived to be the sole responsibility of one part of Parliament. Rather the Scottish Parliament should put in place structures of governance to ensure that as a concept it is understood across Parliament, and its practice and delivery is accepted and demonstrated in all that the Parliament does.

We would further note that much has been achieved across the UK to date. Current focus has been on establishing frameworks and strategies to guide delivery of sustainable development policies. While the work of the SDC highlights that governments still have much further to travel in terms of sustainable development delivery, this delivery does require good structures and we are seeing these now being put in place. We feel that while examples from abroad are useful, particularly relevant to the Scottish Parliament will be examination of how sustainable development is being delivered within the Scottish Executive. If the Scottish Parliament better understands how the Scottish Executive is acting in this area, it will be better placed to assess related policies as a part of its own work.

## **A UK Shared Framework: Principles for Sustainable Development**

There are five principles for sustainable development that the UK Government and devolved administrations have signed up to within *One Future – Different Paths*. These are:

- **Living within Environmental Limits:** Respecting the limits of the planet's environment, resources and biodiversity – to improve our environment and ensure that the natural resources needed for life are unimpaired and remain so for future generations.
- **Ensuring a Strong, Healthy and Just Society:** meeting the diverse needs of all people in existing and future communities, promoting personal well-being, social cohesion and inclusion, and creating equal opportunity for all.

- **Achieving a Sustainable Economy:** building a strong, stable and sustainable economy which provides prosperity and opportunities for all, and in which environmental and social costs fall on those who impose them (Polluter Pays) and efficient resource use is incentivised.
- **Promoting Good Governance:** actively promoting effective, participative systems of governance in all levels of society – engaging people's creativity, energy and diversity.
- **Using Strong Science responsibly:** ensuring policy is developed and implemented on the basis of strong scientific evidence whilst taking into account scientific uncertainty (through the Precautionary Principle) as well as public attitudes and values.

The SDC supports these five principles, and would recommend that in its work the Parliament uses the same set of principles. Doing this will create a shared understanding within government about the task at hand.

Worth highlighting is the leading role the Parliament can play in delivery of the principle of Good Governance, as well as ensuring delivery of all five within the work of the Scottish Executive, and demonstrating how the Parliament can also lead by example in its own operations.

### **Mirroring Governance within the Scottish Executive**

We would note that one way in which the Scottish Parliament can better assess progress in delivery of sustainable development would be to look at structures established by the Scottish Executive itself, and seek to mirror these – as much as is practicable – within Parliament structures and its work holding the Scottish Executive to account.

While delivery of the Scottish Executive's sustainable development strategy – *Choosing Our Future* – is being led by the Environment Department, delivery of the commitments within the Strategy is shared across all departments within the Executive. As such it would be an incomplete picture if the only Scottish Parliament committee looking at sustainable development were the Environment & Rural Development Committee, although we would expect it to maintain a close interest in delivery of the Strategy in general and relevant parts in particular.

However, responsibility for the Sustainable Development Strategy is shared across the Scottish Executive and its departments. This means that committees assessing the different policy areas and “facing” particular departments need to develop a clear understanding of which elements of sustainable development are relevant in their own work.

It is these committees that must therefore work to ensure they have a clear understanding of sustainable development, so that they can see clearly relevance or not of proposed policies to the five principles.

Options here might include each committee putting a day aside to seek views of relevant Scottish Executive departments on how their work over the preceding year has helped deliver sustainable development. Similarly the Audit Committee might use time within its schedule to assess delivery of sustainable development within the work of other public bodies.

However, we would also recommend that committees look to ensure that sustainable development is factored into the general work of the Committees in holding inquiries and reviewing draft bills.

## **ERDC Meeting on Sustainable Development – views of the Sustainable Development Commission**

Furthermore we see that there is an important role for the Presiding Officer in ensuring that the Parliament takes sustainable development into account in its work. As the First Minister chairs the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Sustainable Scotland, a mirrored approach in the Scottish Parliament would entail the Presiding Officer working to ensure delivery of this cross cutting issue within the Parliament.

### **The SDC's Role**

*Choosing our Future* gives the SDC a number of roles. These include reporting on an annual basis on progress in delivering the strategy, producing a strategic assessment of performance ahead of the next strategy and a more general role of promoting sustainable development in Scotland.

As such, we would hope that Parliament takes a close interest in our annual reporting, as well as our strategic assessment of performance and progress in 2008, and we would welcome any future opportunities to present our findings to relevant Parliamentary bodies once published.

### **Developing a Checklist for Sustainable Development?**

We note that in its letter to the SDC the Committee asked whether a checklist of key questions the right approach; and if so, what should be on such a checklist.

In answering this, we would refer back to the UK Framework. Better than a checklist would be a set of questions that reference the UK Framework. These could be as follows:

- Does this proposal help Scotland to live within its Environmental Limits?
- Does this proposal help to ensure a Strong, Healthy and Just Society?
- Does this proposal help to achieve a Sustainable Economy?
- Does this proposal help promote Good Governance?
- Does this proposal use strong science responsibly?

We note that within the SPICe paper commissioned by the ERDC, Annex I shows both a Scottish Executive analysis of a recent Bill, and the Welsh Assembly Government's Sustainable Development Policy Integration Tool developed with Forum for the Future.

We support the work of the Scottish Executive in assessing bills in a way that mirrors the UK Framework Principles. This approach provides space for reflection on the issue of sustainable development, but must not be seen as an add-on to the work of preparing or subsequently debating bills. A yes/no approach is not always practical either.

There is also merit in looking at the Welsh Assembly Government's work in which policies can be assessed as making different contributions (the full spectrum is undermining, poor, neutral, fair, good or excellent) to delivery of sustainable development.

These different possible "marks" are important: delivery of sustainable development will entail balancing competing policy demands, and it is not only acceptable but right that different policies will have different priorities (broadly categorised as economic, environmental or social). However, delivery of these priorities should be done without undermining other principles within sustainable development and it is here that the work of Parliamentarians can have greatest impact on debating the priorities within different policies.

**Support for the Scottish Parliament**

It is also worth noting that for the Scottish Parliament to be effective in its work on sustainable development, it will need effective support and resourcing. The Scottish Parliament should consider introducing sustainable development within the ongoing training and development for committee clerks, MSPs themselves and for SPICe staff members. Opportunities exist for specialisms to be created either within SPICe or within the office of the Presiding Officer.

There will also be opportunities for the Scottish Parliament, under the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament's own Corporate Body to look how its own work and operations contribute to sustainable development. Not only would this help to demonstrate to those within the Parliament and to Scotland as a whole that the Parliament was serious about its duty to help deliver sustainable development but would also help send a signal to all those in the Parliament about its importance and how it can be integrated within operational work. There are already good examples within the Parliament here and we would encourage the Parliament to have a fresh look at how sustainable development can be used as a management tool within its own operational work.