



Briefing:

## How can sustainable development be promoted through executive structures and council constitutions?

Part I of the Local Government Act 2000 gives local authorities powers to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their community. It also confers a duty on local authorities to draw up a community strategy for well-being that promotes sustainable development.

Given the overarching nature of the power and the duty, local authorities have begun to think about the management structures that are required to give effect to these new responsibilities, and to include references to well-being or sustainable development in the constitution, committee and member roles. Regional assemblies are also giving thought to how their management structures can promote sustainable development.

Despite making a commitment to sustainable development in their corporate objectives, many councils have prepared constitutions that do not mention or include sustainable development. Responsibilities are often divided purely on a functional basis, eg housing, leisure. This may assist day-to-day management, but tends to mitigate against a strategic, integrated and innovative approach that is often desired by auditors, inspectors and by the council itself.

Good corporate management of sustainable development (or of the community strategy if the sustainable development strategy has been incorporated) requires some essential management functions to be in place. The table below suggests what these functions might be, and which part of the management structure might take responsibility. *These are merely suggestions*, and local authorities may take a different approach.

**The important thing is to ensure that the essential functions for managing sustainable development within your council are written into the constitution, and are allocated to named portfolio holders, committees or others.**

Most councils will go through a process of changing or amending committees and constitutions once a year. This will be a good time to introduce any proposed changes. Changes to committees usually happen in May after a new council has been elected or after the annual meeting of council. Proposed changes must be fed through the decision making officers and bodies including council management board and the executive prior to agreement at annual council.

**The revision of council constitutions is an opportunity to ensure that the council’s political management structures promote sustainable development.**

Corporate functions for managing sustainable development

<b>Function</b>	<b>Responsibility?</b>
1. Develop and review the council’s sustainable development policy as part of the community strategy.	FC, Ex and O&S
2. Integrate sustainable development into the Council’s policy framework under the community strategy.	Ex
3. Ensure that sustainable development is addressed in the council’s approach to Best Value, procurement and service improvement.	Ex and O&S
4. Involve stakeholders in decisions about sustainable development.	Ex, O&S and AC
5. Keep up to date with new national sustainable development targets and objectives and revise council policies as necessary.	Ex and/or O&S
6. Implement the sustainable development policy.	All
7. Check that decisions and implementation by the executive, regulatory and area committees are in line with sustainable development policy.	FC, O&S and Ex
8. Monitor sustainable development conditions in the area and the impact of council decisions upon them.	O&S, RC, AC and Ex
9. Resolve conflicts and maximise integration when sustainable development and other policies conflict.	Ex
10. Ensure that members and staff understand the sustainable development impact of their decisions.	Off
11. Check that the budget promotes sustainable development.	Ex, O&S

**Key:** FC=Full council; Ex=Executive; RC=Regulatory committees; AC=Area committees; O&S=Overview and scrutiny; Off=Officers

The full council

The full council’s opportunity to influence sustainable development is limited, given that most of the council’s plans and strategies are developed by the executive and sometimes by overview and scrutiny, and are merely passed to council for approval. But with the introduction of new political management structures, some councils have been experimenting with modernised council meetings. Innovations include ‘question time’ when the public and backbenchers can

question portfolio holders, and monthly seminars on a single theme. The latter may also include contributions from interest groups or experts. Both of these offer new opportunities for initiating debate about the sustainable development performance of the council.

Job descriptions for councillors

Increasingly councillors are being given 'role profiles' or job descriptions, and this can include a responsibility for promoting sustainable development.

**Example from practice: London Councils** A comprehensive job profile, produced by the Association of London Government (ALG) Allowances Panel, has been widely used by London councils. This includes five purposes, of which one is "to champion the causes which best relate to the interests and sustainability of the community and campaign for the improvement of the quality of life of the community in terms of equity, economy and environment."<sup>1</sup>

The executive

Executives with cabinets normally allocate 'portfolios' of responsibilities to cabinet members. The portfolios often reflect the functional divisions of the council, and can therefore easily miss opportunities for integrated approaches to promoting sustainable development. Some authorities have charged portfolio holders with cross-cutting responsibilities such as sustainable development.

One executive member should clearly have responsibility for ensuring that the council implements its sustainable development policy and keeps the policy up-to-date. This executive member will often, therefore, need to engage with other portfolio holders to ensure that sustainable development is being addressed within their areas of responsibility.

**Example from practice: [Bristol City Council](#)** has two deputy leaders, one of whom has special responsibility for sustainable development and social justice. There is a separate executive member with responsibility for environment, transport and leisure who has responsibility for operational services.

**Example from practice: [Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council](#)** has included responsibility for sustainable development in every cabinet member's portfolio so that responsibility is spread throughout the services.

**Example from practice: [North Warwickshire Borough Council](#)** has adopted alternative arrangements, but draws on some of the features of cabinet forms of constitution. It has seven portfolio holders centred on cross-cutting themes that mirror the key headings in the corporate plan: social inclusion; community planning, sustainability and partnership; staff care and development; quality service provision; crime and disorder; democratic renewal.<sup>2</sup>

Regulatory Committees

The planning development control function will be particularly important in terms of encouraging more sustainable patterns of development, but other regulatory committees will

---

<sup>1</sup> From: *Strengthening Local Democracy – Making the most of the constitution*, ODPM, July 2003.

<sup>2</sup> From: *Strengthening Local Democracy – Making the most of the constitution*, ODPM, July 2003.

also have sustainability impacts. All regulatory committees should have systems in place for ensuring that their decisions support the council's sustainable development policy.

#### Area committees

Sometimes, and perhaps increasingly in the future, councils will delegate responsibilities, functions and budgets to more local levels through area panels, committees and the like.

For sustainable development, area structures are useful. Combined with overview and scrutiny committees they can provide a local, community input to community strategies and can promote and achieve many local sustainable development projects in communities. They can also monitor and draw attention to the sustainability impact of council policies on their area.

Many councils that have developed local area management anticipate delegating further decisions and resources to area level in the future. This offers an opportunity to strengthen their contribution to sustainable development.