



## Briefing: What is sustainable development?

Sustainable Development summarised:

- Integrated solutions to environmental, social and economic needs
- Making sure that improvements to quality of life reach everyone, especially those most in need
- Operation within the environmental carrying capacity of the earth and its habitats
- Using resources more efficiently and decoupling growth from environmental damage
- Ensuring an equitable access to environmental resources
- Recognition that decisions and actions taken locally have global impacts
- Action now to address sustainable development concerns, many of which will be global and long-term in nature
- Action at all levels of society, including increased power to act at a local level
- Acceptance that global issues are a local concern
- Win-win-win solutions possible, rather than trade-offs between social, environmental and economic issues.

### Key concepts

Sustainable development is a process, the aim of which is to create a society, both within the UK and across the world, where everyone has a good quality of life while maintaining and enhancing the environmental resources upon which human societies depend.

On the practical level, sustainable development is an approach that aims to integrate social, economic and environmental concerns. The UK Sustainable Development Strategy<sup>1</sup> describes the goals as:

- *Social progress which recognises the needs of everyone*
- *Effective protection of the environment*
- *Prudent use of natural resources*
- *Maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment*

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<sup>1</sup> *A better quality of life*, DETR, May 1999.

Integration is the key. Much development locally, nationally and internationally meets at least one of these four goals. However, progress in one area (for example economic development) has often been achieved at the expense of quality of life or environmental degradation. It is now accepted that good social conditions require strong economies, strong economies rely on environmental resources, and environmental conditions are inseparable from our quality of life.

This concept of integrated decision making is reflected in the idea of “economic, social or environmental **well-being**” referred to in the Local Government Act 2000 (see the briefing: [“Why sustainable development is important for local authorities and their partners”](#) for more on this). ‘Well-being’ is often used instead of sustainable development, and indeed the concepts can be interchangeable provided ‘well-being’ is used to describe an approach where all goals are considered; meeting a single social, economic or environmental goal is not necessarily sustainable (see the briefing: [“Policy integration”](#)).

Another related concept central to sustainable development is **quality of life**. According to the UK Strategy, the aim of sustainable development is:

*Ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come*

The strategy does not define what quality of life means. Without going into complex philosophical discussion, a simple definition could be “having one’s physiological and emotional needs met”. So we mean having our basic needs for food and shelter met, as well as ‘higher needs’ such as a satisfying job, and a pleasant environment to live in.

Focusing on improving quality of life or well-being for all leads to the following questions:

- How do we continue to improve our quality of life or well-being, and allow future generations to improve theirs, without irretrievably damaging the environment we depend on?
- How do we share, both within the UK and across the world, the limited environmental resources and support systems on which our quality of life is based?
- How do we ensure that everyone, particularly the poorest, benefit from improved quality of life?

These are difficult questions, reflected at the local level in the most pressing issues that we face such as:

- How do we provide more housing while protecting the countryside?
- How do we increase access to employment and services without increasing traffic, pollution and climate change?
- How do we tackle poverty and social exclusion, ensuring that employment opportunities are taken up by those in need?

Quality of life and environmental resources

The world’s environment provides the human race with resources and life support systems such as clean air and water. Yet human activities are putting the environment under unprecedented pressure. We see the effects in climate change, loss of habitats and species, depletion of natural resources, air and water pollution, loss of soils, and water shortages. These problems are signs

that we are currently living beyond the earth's **carrying capacity**. This means that there are limits to the demands and pressures that the environment can withstand without suffering severe and possibly irreparable damage. This damage in turn will have serious impacts on human society, now and in the future.

Improvements in quality of life have traditionally been perceived as inextricably linked to economic growth and increased material prosperity. However, in many instances, it is now clear that conventional economic growth is not enhancing our well-being and quality of life.

**Example:** Car use should improve our quality of life through increasing our mobility and our ability to access facilities. However, unfettered growth in car use has *reduced* the quality of life of many, particularly the poorer communities who often live next to busy roads. It has also caused problems for the wider community and the environment, in terms of congestion, noise, pollution, global warming and the health impacts of poor air quality.

**Example:** Regulatory constraints such as greenbelt policy, aimed at preserving the environment, are imposing constraints in the development of housing in south-east England. This has contributed to rising house prices, placing a heavy economic burden on many in the Home Counties.

So how do we deal with this conflict? The principle of sustainable development is that we need to look beyond the traditional approach and think innovatively. To tackle environmental degradation, we need to use fewer resources and we need to use them more efficiently. This principle of **eco-efficiency** has been memorably translated as the need to improve our use of resources by a factor of 10 in the next 30 to 50 years<sup>2</sup>, and to de-couple growth from environmental damage.

Many businesses and public institutions are already achieving massive improvements in the efficiency with which they use resources. One of the largest microprocessor companies in the world, S D Microelectronics, has stated that by 2010 they intend to emit no carbon dioxide (the main greenhouse gas), even though they expect production to be 40 times higher than it was in 1990<sup>3</sup>.

Such change in industrial practice can be driven by businesses themselves, and by government action. This has included taxation on pollution (such as the Landfill Tax and the Climate Change Levy in the UK) or by allowing companies to trade in pollution – a very successful scheme has been implemented in the US with regard to sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) emissions that cause acid rain.

Another way of improving eco-efficiency is thinking about what quality of life really means. A crunch issue in this country is motor vehicle use. Despite all the downsides, many of us still want to own a car, because it improves our personal quality of life by increasing our mobility,

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<sup>2</sup> By the Factor 10 Club, which was founded by a group of businessmen and scientists in October 1994.

<sup>3</sup> *Southface*, journal of Sustainable Buildings, Summer 2000.

and improving access and goods and services. Yet this aim can sometimes be met in other ways. For example, car share club cars can provide mobility without the need to personally own a car.

Through such innovative thinking, it is possible, at least in the short to medium term, to provide a growing world population with increased living standards while reducing the environmental pressures on the planet.

#### Sharing resources

The most challenging practical and political problem of the century is how we can share the earth's limited environmental resources and support systems whilst improving quality of life for all.

Historically, the vast majority of global environmental damage has been caused by the rich countries of North America, Europe and the Far East<sup>4</sup>. With the impacts of pollution increasingly becoming global (for example as regards Climate Change), and a requirement for development in the poorer parts of the world, action to protect the environment has taken on an increasingly global dimension.

As has been shown with the recent negotiations around the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, many developing countries are reluctant to act to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions before the Developed World (as the biggest polluters) reduce their pollution. The Developing World is also concerned that environmental improvements are linked to development of their economies and infrastructure.

These tensions between development and environmental protection are also apparent within the UK. Those in low-income areas are often disproportionately affected by environmental problems, for example pollution or energy-inefficient homes. Such problems have to be tackled in a way which improves the socio-economic conditions of poorer communities while improving their environment.

**Example:** By designing new homes to be more energy efficient, and by increasing the energy efficiency of existing dwellings, it is possible to reduce fuel bills, eliminate fuel poverty, create employment and reduce polluting emissions.

In both the developed and developing world, therefore, sustainable development has to be concerned with fairness and equality of treatment. One solution that has been suggested is the concept of **environmental rights**, where all in society are deemed to have a right to a clean and healthy environment. Another concept is that of **environmental space** where the total sustainable use of a commodity or environment is determined and then divided up equally among the nations of the world.

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<sup>4</sup> As the former Prime Minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, points out, if the whole world consumed the same resources the North does now, we would need ten worlds to satisfy our needs of environmental resources (hence Factor 10).

At present the UK is using more than its fair share of environmental space in relation to a wide range of commodities. It is also true that the affluent within the UK use more than their fair share of the nation's resources.

Regeneration and social inclusion

Sustainable development is not just about environmental protection. As both Agenda 21 (see below) and the UK Sustainable Development Strategy recognise, it is about equality, social inclusion, economic development and increased quality of life for all.

Creating **sustainable communities** requires the reduction of inequality between individuals and communities and the tackling of inter-connected issues of poverty, unemployment, low educational standards, crime and poor health in an integrated fashion.

**Sustainable regeneration** requires a concerted effort across many social, economic and environmental fronts. It requires a partnership approach, with national government, regional development agencies (RDAs), local authorities, businesses and communities working together to support local economies, improve the built environment, improve skills and enhance community facilities, transport, housing, health and community safety.

For regeneration to be effective, it has to be driven by identified local needs and solutions and aimed at creating self-supporting communities. This in turn requires that communities, including excluded groups, participate in the regeneration process from the outset and at every stage. The 88 neighbourhood renewal authorities are an obvious structure through which the links between regeneration and sustainable development can be made (see the briefing: [“Why sustainable development is important for local authorities and their partners”](#)).

[The means to achieve sustainable regeneration](#) is set out in a paper by the UK Sustainable Development Commission. Through its Productivity Plus work programme, the commission is also examining how economic, environmental and social goals can be reconciled at the national level (<http://www.sd-commission.gov.uk/wp/01.htm>). **BOTH LINKS DON'T WORK!!!**

Sustainable development strategies: international, national, regional and local  
There is now considerable international, European, national, regional and local agreement about both the need and means to manage for sustainable development.

An international action plan for sustainable development, called **Agenda 21**, was agreed at the Rio de Janeiro 'Earth Summit' in 1992. Agenda 21 included the issues discussed above as key principles. It also stressed the importance of community involvement in action for sustainable development and encouraged local authorities to work with all sectors of society (public, private, voluntary and community sectors) to produce a **Local Agenda 21**. The Local Agenda 21 emphasis was on joint working, recognising that change will only be possible when including a wide variety of actors and by drawing on a range of experience and perspectives.

In August 2002, a decade after Rio, the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) was held in Johannesburg. The main agreement reached in South Africa was the **Johannesburg**

**Programme of Implementation (JPOI).** The focus of the POI was more on poverty and global development than in 1992, with perhaps the most significant commitment being to halve the number of people living without sanitation by 2015.

The plan also sought to promote:

- corporate accountability
- good governance
- sustainable energy
- sustainable consumption and production
- sustainable fisheries.

Johannesburg placed a much greater emphasis on the *delivery* of a sustainable planet than had been the case at the Earth Summit, with a focus on building multi-stakeholder partnerships that would help move towards the agreed goals.

**Would be useful to include a sentence on Local Action 21 and mention that some authorities are now using this term rather than Local Agenda 21. ??**

The UK government set out the main commitments made at the WSSD to the Parliament's Environmental Audit Committee in February 2003 and also gave an overview of how it intended the UK to play its part. The government and the Sustainable Development Commission are now working to integrate the Johannesburg commitments into the government's programme and also to ensure that the current review of the national Sustainable Development Strategy takes the WSSD into account.

Details on the WSSD itself can be found at <http://www.johannesburgsummit.org> while more up to date information on progress since Johannesburg is available from <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/index.html>. The UK Local Government International Bureau (LGIB) provides information on a number of initiatives related to the work of local authorities on global sustainable development (<http://www.lgib.gov.uk>) while the Sustainable Development Commission website offers a range of materials on the agreements made in South Africa and progress by the UK in meeting the various elements of the agreement <http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/eac-wssd/progress.htm>.

The UK Sustainable Development Strategy, mentioned earlier, was published in 1999 and it is intended to prepare a revised strategy in 2005 following a review process involving key stakeholders including local government. In addition, Regional Sustainability Frameworks have been published for all the regions of England.<sup>5</sup> They provide a link between the National Strategy and local activity on sustainable development and outline a regional vision of what needs to be done.

The Prime Minister, Tony Blair famously encouraged all local authorities in the UK to adopt **Local Agenda 21** strategies by the year 2000. Local Agenda 21 is the process of addressing

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<sup>5</sup> See the briefing "Putting sustainable development into practice" for links to the regional frameworks

sustainability at the local level through the involvement of all stakeholders in the community. Importantly, the plans were generally led and facilitated through local authorities.

Guidance on producing LA21 strategies was produced jointly by central and local government in 1998<sup>6</sup>. By 2000, 357 of the 384 local authorities had a Local Agenda 21 strategy in place. Government guidance now encourages the incorporation of LA21 strategies and processes into the community strategy and local strategic partnership process, (See the briefing: “Why sustainable development is important for local authorities and their partners” for more on this).

## Defining sustainable development objectives, indicators and targets

Sustainable development is a complex process, requiring issues such as transport or housing to be addressed in an integrated fashion.

The key elements of a local or national sustainability strategy will be:

- Sustainable Development objectives, for example to reduce unemployment
- targets and indicators for each objective e.g. to reduce unemployment to x%
- an action plan to achieve objectives

Some, though not all strategies also include **indicators** for sustainable development, sometimes called **quality of life indicators**. Indicators are designed to reflect progress towards sustainability. One example is the national Quality of Life Indicators developed by the Audit Commission. (<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk>) which aim to assist LSPs in monitoring community strategies.

There is no definitive list of sustainable development objectives. The following list has been taken from guidance on sustainable development<sup>7</sup> and is based on objectives contained in the UK Sustainable Development Strategy, and previous guidance<sup>8</sup>. It can be supplemented with regional and locally agreed objectives if these are highlighted as important by consultation with stakeholders and the wider community.

GENERAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES	
Objective	Key elements of objective
Economy	

<sup>6</sup> *Sustainable Local Communities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Why and How to Prepare an Effective Local Agenda 21 Strategy*, DETR, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Guidance on Sustainable Development for the Audit Commission, produced by CAG Consultants in 2001.

<sup>8</sup> *Sustainable Local Communities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Why and How to Prepare an Effective Local Agenda 21, Strategy*, DETR, 1998.

Strengthen the economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve economic performance</li> <li>• Promote investment in modern plant, machinery, research and development</li> <li>• Invest in social assets: hospitals, water, sewerage, public transport.</li> </ul>
Support the local economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase local business diversity and support small businesses</li> <li>• Create a vibrant local economy.</li> </ul>
Maintain employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain high and stable levels of employment</li> <li>• Give access to satisfying and rewarding work.</li> </ul>
Reduce poverty and economic disadvantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tackle the causes of poverty and social exclusion</li> <li>• Close the gap between disadvantaged communities and the rest</li> <li>• Promote fairness at work</li> <li>• Reduce disproportionate unemployment among ethnic minorities.</li> </ul>
Encourage sustainable production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce the environmental impact of production</li> <li>• Encourage businesses to adopt environmental management systems and produce environmental reports.</li> </ul>
Reduce the social and environmental impacts of international trade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote a fair and open trade system that respects the environment</li> <li>• Raise quality of life of workers in global supply chain</li> <li>• Contribute to SD at a global as well as local level.</li> </ul>
<b>Society</b>	
Meet basic needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that everyone has the opportunity for a decent home</li> <li>• Reduce unfit housing stock</li> <li>• Reduce fuel poverty</li> <li>• Ensure access to affordable good quality food</li> <li>• Ensure affordable water.</li> </ul>
Improve access to services and facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide better access to existing services and facilities</li> <li>• Ensure better access for disabled people</li> <li>• Meet local needs locally.</li> </ul>
Promote equity and equality of opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce social exclusion</li> </ul>
Make arts and leisure available to all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maximise the benefit of arts and leisure for poor neighbourhoods, young people and ethnic minorities.</li> </ul>
Promote life-long learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise educational standards at all levels and close the gap between the high and low achievers</li> <li>• Ensure people can adapt their skills throughout their lives</li> <li>• Boost workplace learning</li> <li>• Maximise access to skills and knowledge.</li> </ul>
Encourage participation in decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empower all sections of the community to participate in decision making</li> <li>• Ensure access to information.</li> </ul>

Strengthen local community and cultural identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage and support community involvement</li> <li>• Improve awareness of sustainable development</li> <li>• Encourage individuals to do their bit</li> <li>• Value diversity and local distinctiveness</li> <li>• Make communities strong and viable.</li> </ul>
Environment	
Conserve energy and reduce climate change emissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use energy more efficiently</li> <li>• Obtain more energy from renewable sources</li> <li>• Promote vehicles which use less or no fossil fuel, or use it more efficiently</li> <li>• Increase woodland cover.</li> </ul>
Reduce traffic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce the need to travel</li> <li>• Improve the choice in public transport</li> <li>• Reduce traffic congestion</li> <li>• Develop sustainable freight distribution.</li> </ul>
Conserve resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use water efficiently</li> <li>• Safeguard water supplies</li> <li>• Use aggregates efficiently and encourage reuse</li> <li>• Use sustainable construction materials including sustainable timber and recycled alternatives.</li> </ul>
Reduce waste and promote recycling, reuse and recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move away from waste disposal to minimisation, reuse, recycling and recovery.</li> </ul>
Reduce land take and protect soil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reuse previously developed land</li> <li>• Bring empty homes back into use, and convert buildings for new uses</li> <li>• Protect soil</li> </ul>
Reduce pollution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce air pollution</li> <li>• Reduce pollution in rivers and coastal waters</li> <li>• Limit pollution to that which doesn't damage natural systems.</li> </ul>
Protect landscape and promote public access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protect the wider landscape</li> <li>• Protect special landscape sites</li> <li>• Protect individual features such as hedges, ponds and walls</li> <li>• Promote public access and enjoyment.</li> </ul>
Protect and enhance wildlife habitats and species	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reverse the decline in wildlife and habitats</li> <li>• Protect special sites and rare species</li> <li>• Protect woodland habitats</li> <li>• Value and protect the diversity of nature.</li> </ul>
Develop and protect the quality of the local environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote attractive streets and buildings with low levels of traffic, noise and pollution and green spaces.</li> <li>• Protect and enhance urban and countryside character.</li> <li>• Create or enhance places, spaces and buildings that work well, wear well and look well</li> <li>• Make settlements 'human' in scale and form.</li> </ul>
Protect urban and	Locate shopping and other key uses within existing centres.

town centres	
Protect historic and archaeological resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure that development takes account of history, and look for opportunities to conserve local heritage</li><li>• Retain the archaeological characteristics of the landscape.</li></ul>