



Briefing:

Why sustainable development is important for local authorities and their partners

It is widely acknowledged that sustainable development is a central objective of local government modernisation. However practice often fails to live up to this. What are the 'hooks' in legislation and government guidance, that place sustainable development objectives at the heart of the local strategic agenda?

Some of the 'hooks' to sustainable development inherent in the power to promote well-being, community strategies, local strategic partnerships, the new political structures and best value are explored below. For each, the implications for sustainable development are then discussed.

Power to promote well-being

The **Local Government Act 2000**¹ provides significant new powers for local government to “do anything which they consider is likely to achieve” the promotion or improvement of the economic, the social or the environmental well-being to their area.

“The new powers differ in that they are not limited to functions, but allow authorities to respond to problems, issue and aspirations in their community, without regard to their legal powers. Although the power to ‘do anything’ is inevitably subject to possible constraints, it constitutes an important step towards the power of general competence long sought by local government”²

This means that :

- The role of local government as **community leaders** is now enshrined in law;
- Local government is able to be more **flexible and far reaching** in its response to sustainable development objectives;
- Whilst the power is drafted to promote social, economic and / or environmental sustainability *either separately or in combination*, **integration is** actively promoted.

Many of the changes needed to enable local authorities to act on the new power have now been provided by the **2003 Local Government Act**³. The Act follows on from the 2001 White Paper which discussed several areas of where councils’ need greater freedom and wider powers to deliver”. It offers increased flexibility to councils including:

The ability to trade in any service for which they have a strong performance, if that will help achieve best value in delivery. (High performing councils will therefore be able to trade across a wide range of their services). This is not restricted to the exploitation of existing assets.

The power to charge an appropriate fee for providing discretionary services.

A reduction in ring fenced funding, and the proportions of ring fenced capital support

What does this mean for sustainable development?

The new power places community wellbeing (integrated solutions to environmental, social and economic priorities) at the very heart of local government. ‘Community Wellbeing’ is increasingly becoming synonymous with the term sustainable development.(I’m not sure it is increasingly being used any more, but if you believe it is then happy to go with it) There are certainly advantages in using the term to cut through some of the language and jargon difficulties of sustainable development, although care must be taken to ensure that the global and long-term perspectives of sustainability are incorporated in the ‘well-being’ vision. See Briefing 1 for an explanation of the links between the two terms.

¹ [Local Government Act 2000](#)

² [LGA PowerPack: “Using the new wellbeing power” LGA 2000](#)

³ [Strong local leadership: Quality Public Services. Local Government White Paper 2001](#)

The new power to promote well-being, together with some of the flexibility delivered in the 2003 Local Government Act, present significant opportunities for sustainable development. Together, they present opportunities for integrated and strategic actions which move well beyond the boundaries of service provision.

More information on the use of the power of well-being can be found in “The well-being power” in the ‘CS and LSP’ Resources area.

Local authorities in England and Wales have a duty under the Local Government Act 1999⁴ to prepare a community strategy.

Government guidance on community strategies⁵ states:

(1) The overall objective of community strategies is to: “improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of each area in its inhabitants, and **contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK.**”

(2) One of the four aims of a community strategies is to: “**contribute to the achievement of sustainable development both locally and more widely, with the local goals priorities relating, where appropriate, to local, national and even global aims.**”

(3) The guidance lays out four key elements of a community strategy which include long term vision (emphasising the long term outcomes).

(4) It also lays out underpinning principles, which include , **engaging and involving local communities and a proper assessment of needs and the availability of resources**

(5) It emphasises:

integration: “Only by promoting and improving the economic, social *and* environmental well-being of their communities will community strategies contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK. A community strategy that covers only one of those elements will not suffice; nor will the duty be met by producing three separate strands dealing with economic, social or environmental issues in isolation. **A community strategy should cover all three in an integrated way**”. (Para 14).

National, regional and local sustainable development strategies: “In developing their strategies, local authorities and their partners should have **regard to the government’s sustainable development strategy** – which provides a national framework for integrating economic, social and environmental concerns – and work on regional sustainable development frameworks. “ Para 14.

Global responsibilities: “They should also take account of the ways in **which national and global concerns** – such as the mitigation of climate change and the protection of biodiversity – **can be addressed through local action.**” (Para 14.)

⁴ [Local Government Act 1999](#)

⁵ [“Preparing Community Strategies. Government Guidance to Local Authorities”. 8 December 2000](#)

This Guidance has now been backed up by the **2001 Local Government White Paper**. The White Paper makes explicit links to **sustainable development and integration**:

Ref: 2.8: “These [economic infrastructure, social capital and environmental quality] are not separate goals – sustainable development means addressing all of them at the same time”.

Ref 2.9: Discusses the role of Councils in championing community interests and local action which promotes ‘wider economic or environmental interests of the region or beyond.’

The White Paper places community strategies at the heart of the decision making process where “**consensus cannot always be reached, and so choices and compromises have to be made**” (Ref 2.3). In doing so it points to **making strategic choices for future generations not just dealing with immediate interests and issues** (Ref 2.3)

What does this mean for sustainable development?

The guidance provides a strong steer away from single-issue initiatives and towards integrated solutions.

Integrated sustainable development solutions need to be carefully and consciously facilitated and re-facilitated throughout the development of a strategy, and throughout implementation. The briefing [“Putting sustainable development into practice”](#) explores integration issues in more depth, whilst in the “CS and LSPs” Resources area the briefing “The well-being power” applies this to local strategic partnerships and the briefing [“Joined up working and policy integration”](#) outlines some of the key management tools for integrating sustainable development into the community strategy.

The new local government landscape provides many opportunities for integrated sustainable development solutions to be developed. Some of these opportunities include:

Partnership working: Integrated solutions require time to explore the commonality between different objectives, and to make informed decisions about conflicting aims. LSPs can be used to provide time for this reflection, and a focus for making hard choices. The advantages of pooling experience and combining efforts mean that lasting actions can be arrived at. However many LSP, especially those in the 88 neighbourhood renewal authorities, are not currently taking, or able to take this time and are therefore forgoing a rare opportunity for co-ordinated action for sustainability.

Linking sustainable development and regeneration agendas: The 88 neighbourhood renewal authorities do, however, have an opportunity to make clear links between the regeneration agenda and sustainable development. Through the combination of LSPs and neighbourhood management, they have the opportunity to make integrated decisions which address sustainable development objectives locally. This can include job creation, neighbourhood and building design, using community empowerment funds to increase capacity locally, and to re-examine

objectives to address crime, social exclusion, food poverty, fuel poverty, etc from the perspective of sustainable development principles.

Closer working with the land use planning system: The recent Planning Green Paper has made strong links between the community strategies process and the local land use planning process. This means that there is greater opportunity to link local priorities to the land use plan, to link local people and communities into the process and to develop solutions which have land use solutions into the wider planning process.

Example from practice: [North Warwickshire Borough Council](#). North Warwickshire's community plan is the outcome of a broader consultation that also covered the local plan and the area business plan.

Example from practice: [North Shropshire District Council](#). By using their LA21 Strategy as a basis for their community strategy, North Shropshire District Council is aiming to ensure sustainability underpins the whole strategy.

Thinking globally, acting locally within the modernisation agenda? Many feel that community well-being is narrower in scope than sustainable development, and misses the emphasis on long-term and global issues. There is concern that there is a tension between local priorities and the global priorities of sustainable development, or worse, that in the process of identifying local issues, global and long term concerns will be lost.

The briefing "[Systems for integrating sustainable development into the community strategy](#)", in the 'CS and LSPs' resource area, explores the links between community involvement and sustainable development and places emphasis on good process management, facilitation skills, access to information and community development work. Within this context, practice shows that the tension between local and global priorities can be reduced.

Linking vision to action: Community strategies guidance emphasises working towards a long-term vision and identifying community aspirations. The ideal is that such a vision then informs short, medium and long-term action planning, where actions combine to work towards achieving the vision.

Visioning has a bad name, fuelled by many examples of poor visioning process, producing wish lists which raise expectations, dissipate energy for action and are then ignored by policy makers. However, there is now a body of learning from the LA21 movement about how to make visioning work and to link the vision to action. There are a range of techniques which can be used to connect visioning directly to action planning, in a way which incorporates the integration processes outlined in the briefing "[Why sustainable development is important for local authorities and their partners](#)". These include Future Search⁶ and the Back Casting process used by the Natural Step⁷ process.

⁶ More information about Future Search can be found from www.futuresearch.net

⁷ More information about the Natural Step process can be found from www.naturalstep.org

Local Strategic Partnerships

Whilst the **guidance on local strategic partnerships**⁸ itself has very little to say about sustainable development, it describes the main purpose the local strategic partnership as bringing together: “at the local level the different parts of the public sector as well as the private, business, community and voluntary sectors so that different initiatives and services support each other and work together.”

The guidance stresses:

Local, strategic decision making

Integration of objectives

Delivery of the community strategy.

This guidance is now supported by the **2001 Local Government White Paper**. The main implication for the way that sustainable development objectives are integrated into LSPs, is the steer to reduce the number of partnerships, area based initiatives and ring-fenced funding. (Ref 2.38).

Ref 2.39: “From now on they [local partners] will have wide discretion as to how and when to rationalise their partnerships. LSPs will be able to slot any statutory partnerships into their emerging structure – also a freehand to rationalise other partnerships, bringing them together in mergers, nesting etc”.

The LSPs in the 88 neighbourhood renewal authorities are currently open to scrutiny by the government offices, through the **LSP Accreditation Framework**. Again, the current guidance on accreditation makes little explicit reference to sustainable development, however it does refer directly the Community Strategy which places sustainable development at the heart of the agenda, and to effective, representative and strategic decision making. The use of this framework will be reviewed following the first year of use in 2002. Many government offices are exploring the relationship between the accreditation checklist and the objectives of community strategies, including that of sustainable development.

What does this mean for sustainable development?

The white paper recommends nesting partnerships within the umbrella of the LSP. Many LSPs are now operating as umbrella strategy bodies, and government policy calls for dovetailing between existing partnerships. LSPs are increasingly linked to action partnerships, through which policy is carried out and strong links with the community are developed, feeding into strategy development.

This provides opportunities for strong relationships to be developed between the LSP and sustainable development fora, such as LA21 partnerships, air quality partnerships etc, to act as action groups with direct relationships to the LSP. Sustainability fora often act as networks for a wide range of voluntary and community organisations taking action on a range of issues. The briefing “[Systems for integrating sustainable development into the community strategy](#)” in the ‘CS and LSPs’ Resources area, explores this relationship in more detail.

⁸ [Local Strategic Partnerships: Government Guidance, DETR, March 2001](#)

Sustainable development through partnership. A strategic partnership bringing together the key sectors and agencies, to work on common objectives, offers a great potential for moving towards sustainable development. The building blocks include:

- **Building sustainable development principles into the core Partnership Agreement for the LSP.** See the briefings [“Making community strategies sustainable: an overview”](#) and [“The power to promote well-being”](#) in the ‘CS and LSPs’ Resources area.
- **Learning from others and drawing on a wider range of skills and expertise.**
- **Access to good information about sustainable development solutions.** The dissemination of such information is one of the tasks of the Local Sustainability team at the IDeA. (See the briefing [“Joined-up Working and Policy Integration”](#), and [“Putting sustainable development into practice”](#) for links to other sites).
- **Management and evaluation processes which build sustainable development into the process.** (See the briefing [“Joined-up Working and Policy Integration”](#) within the ‘CS and LSPs Resources area)
- **Strong links between the strategic focus of the LSP and action groups.** (See the briefing [“Systems for integrating sustainable development into the community strategy”](#) in the ‘CS and LSPs’ Resources area)

Examples from practice: [Sustainable Northern Ireland Programme \(SNIP\)](#). LSPs in Northern Ireland are not quite the same as the English and Welsh models because of the different responsibilities of local government and different funding streams from the European Union. But the vigorous effort being made by SNIP to ensure that sustainable development is at their heart have relevance to all LSPs and community strategies

Example from Practice: [The LA21 team in Croydon](#) are actively working with the community strategy and LSP teams to influence the agenda and ensure that sustainability knowledge is used to strengthen the LSP process.

The Local Government Act 1999 established the legal framework for Best Value. It stated that local authorities “shall have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State under this Section.” Subsequently guidance was issued as Government Circular 10/99¹. This made several important statements on sustainable development. The most frequently quoted is that:

“Best Value Reviews will need to give effect to the principles of sustainable development. New performance targets generated by Reviews need to reflect the principles of sustainable development, set out in *A Better Quality of Life – a strategy for sustainable development for the UK*, and summarised in *The Government’s sustainable development strategy: What does it mean for local authorities?* Where authorities have LA21 and any community strategies in place, Reviews will provide an opportunity to give such principles practical effect through the setting of consistent performance targets. (Para. 17.)

The government issued new draft guidance on Best Value and performance improvement in 2002.⁹ This contains a separate section on sustainable development. (Paragraphs 50 to 53.) Most importantly it opens by saying that sustainable development does not contradict Best Value’s drive for economy, efficiency and effectiveness:

“Consideration of sustainable development and equity are inherent parts of the effectiveness criteria, and are therefore fundamental to best value”. (Para. 50.)

Further guidance on Best Value and performance improvement was issued by ODPM in the spring of 2003.¹⁰ This new guidance applies to principal English local authorities only although other guidance has or is in the process of being issued to other authorities.

This guidance seeks to move the emphasis of Best Value away from the framework for action and towards the achievement of results and also takes account of the introduction of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). In relation to competition and procurement the new guidance views environmental sustainability as well as social and community considerations to be important and states that Best Value should be considered to be:

“The optimum combination of whole life costs and benefits to meet the customer’s requirement”.

It highlights a variety of whole life factors that should be considered including fuel efficiency and also notes the importance of other issues such as diversity, employment conditions and the benefit to local people. (Paragraph 62).

Government guidance on the well-being power also advocates that the Best Value review programme supports improvements in social, economic and environmental well-being. The Local Government Act 2000 gave local authorities the power to promote the well-being of their area. Paragraph 13 of the guidance arising from section 2 of the Act makes the new power ‘subject to the general duty of Best

⁹ *Draft Circular on Best Value and Performance Improvement*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, July 2002.

¹⁰ *Circular 03/2003: Local Government Act 1999:Part 1 Best Value and Performance Improvement*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, March 2003.

Value'. It goes on to say that:

“Local authorities will wish to reassess their Best Value Review programme to ensure that it is cast in sufficiently strategic terms to support the delivery of improved well-being in their area, in particular concentrating on cross-cutting issues such as community safety, promoting neighbourhood renewal and tackling social exclusion”.

Corporate governance and Comprehensive Performance Assessment

The advice on Best Value from both government and the Audit Commission makes clear that local authorities must be able to demonstrate that they are implementing their corporate policies. The Audit Commission's guide to Best Value inspections¹ lists key questions that inspectors must ask. One of these is:

Does the service support corporate aims and the community plan?

As part of Best Value, therefore, local authorities must be able to demonstrate that their activities support the council's sustainable development policies.

The new methodology for Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) follows the same approach.¹

Key questions for the corporate assessment are:

What is the council trying to achieve?

How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?

Inspectors will therefore be assessing how well sustainable development policies are being implemented and what has been achieved.

What does this mean for sustainable development?

Sustainable development does not contradict Best Value's drive for economy, efficiency and effectiveness quite the reverse. Indeed, the most recent guidance on Best Value reinforces the need for authorities to take on board wider environmental and social concerns in all procurement decisions. Sustainable development cuts across all local authority activities, and consequently it must be systematically considered within corporate planning processes, especially annual business planning. For real improvements in sustainability performance, councils must first adopt sustainable development as a strategic objective. This will then inform the Council's policy development, service planning and action programmes, that will in turn deliver more sustainable outcomes.

Although Best Value is only one component of corporate planning, it is very influential in determining the future direction of council activities. It offers an invaluable opportunity to consider how well the authority is supporting sustainable development, and to make any necessary changes. Equally, if sustainable development is forgotten during the Best Value process then local authorities could very easily set off down unsustainable paths. Once decisions are made it will be difficult to change course.

Example from Practice: [Bedford District Council](#) used its Sustainable Development Action Planning workshops for staff to support Best Value Reviews.

For more information see the 'New Structures' Resources area.

New political management structures

Under the Local Government Act 2000 all English councils had to introduce new political management structures by May 2002. The government has proposed four models. See the [“Routemaps”](#) briefing in the ‘CS and LSPs’ Resources area for details of the models and how management of the authorities should be conducted.

All councils must prepare constitutions describing their new structure and how responsibilities are allocated. The DETR (now DTLR), LGA and IDeA have published a guide to preparing the new constitutions for English local authorities.¹¹

What does this mean for sustainable development?

The power to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their community, and the duty to draw up a community strategy have already been discussed. Given the overarching nature of the power and the duty many 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.

Many councils have prepared constitutions that do not mention sustainable development. In early constitutions responsibilities are often divided purely on a functional basis, eg housing, leisure. This may be necessary for 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. It must be remembered that the constitution is not static and many will be amended over the next months and years as the new structures and responsibilities establish themselves.

Good corporate management of sustainable development (or of the community strategy if the sustainable development strategy has been incorporated as required by the new White Paper¹²) 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.

Example from Practice: [Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council](#) has introduced a leader and cabinet model. Under the new structure the importance of sustainable development is underlined by the fact that it is referred to in the Leader of the Council’s portfolio.

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. The Council has established six ‘scrutiny commissions’, one of which is a Sustainable Development and Social Justice Scrutiny Commission.

(For more information see the ‘Best Value’ Resources area.)

¹¹ *New Council Constitutions: Modular Constitutions for English Local Authorities*, Department of the Environment Transport & the Regions, Local Government Association, and Improvement & Development Agency, 2000. With further updates available from the DTLR web site.

¹² *CM5327 Strong Local Leadership - Quality Public Services*, DTLR, December 2001.

Corporate Functions for Managing Sustainable Development

Function	Responsibility?
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 councils 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 revising council policies as necessary.	Ex and/or O&S
6. Implement the sustainable development policy.	All
7. Check that decisions and implementation by the council, executive and committees are in line with sustainable development Policy.	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 budget is one that 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.