



**Sustainable**  
Development Commission

## Department of Health

Sustainable Development Minister:  
Caroline Flint MP

**SDC Assessment**



# Checklist

## Sustainable Development Action Plan

1	Does the plan specify the period of time it will cover?	✓	Explains plan covers priority areas for 2006.
2	Does the plan specify which organisations it covers?	✓	Plan covers the core department – Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency will produce a plan and NHS Purchasing and supply Agency have Sustainable Development Strategy.
3	Has the organisation articulated what SD means for them?	✓	
4	Does the plan describe the benefits of having an SD approach to the organisation?	✓	
5	Does the plan acknowledge the Government's sustainable development goal?	✓	Plan includes definition of sustainable development goal but does not explain it is the UK Government's sustainable development goal.
6	Does the plan acknowledge the priorities of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✓	Plan acknowledges in the ministerial forward that there are four priorities.
	Does the plan mention one or more of the priorities of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✗	The plan does not refer to any of the four priorities.
7	Does the plan identify links to the priorities of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✗	The plan does not link departmental commitments to the four priorities.
8	Does the plan acknowledge the principles of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✓	The plan explain that <i>Securing the Future</i> sets out five guiding principles.
	Does the plan mention one or more of the principles of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✓	Plan mentions one of the principles.
9	Does the plan identify links to the principles of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✓	Plan explains links between departmental core business and 'Ensuring a Strong, Healthy and Just Society'.
10	Have the organisation's relevant executive agencies produced their own plan?	✗	MHRA will produce SDAP during 2006 and NHS PASA has draft sustainable purchasing strategy.
11	Does the action plan contain a work programme?	✓	
12	Does the plan include actions relating to commitments from the SD strategy?	✓	Contains actions relating to some relevant areas such as skills and procurement.
13	Does the action plan cover government policy?	✓	
14	Does the action plan cover operations?	✓	

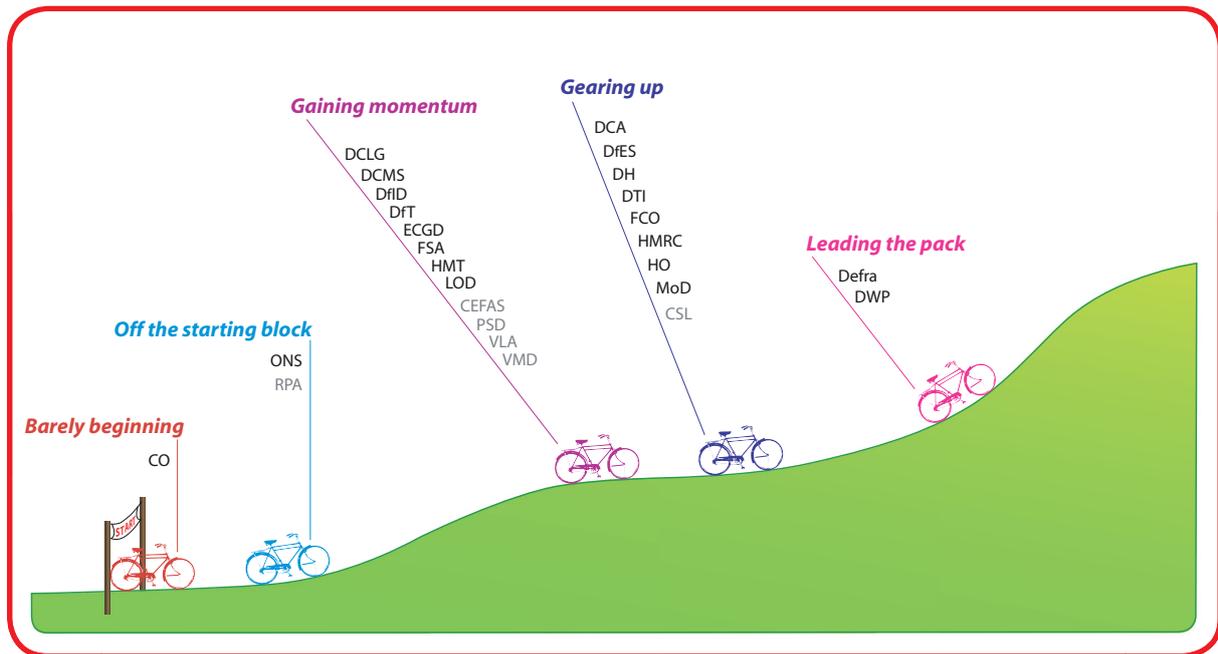
15	Was the plan publicly available by 13th January 2006?	X	
16	Does the plan outline any arrangements for strengthening SD capacity in the organisation?	✓	
17	Does the plan describe the infrastructure in place to deliver the plan?	✓	Steering Group established.
18	Does the plan make it clear who signed it off?	✓	
19	Does the plan designate who is accountable for the delivery of the overall plan?	✓	
20	Does the plan explain how the organisation will monitor progress against the plan?	✓	Sustainable Development Forum will monitor progress against the plan.
21	Does the plan describe how the organisation will report against the plan?	✓	
22	Does the plan describe how it links in to other reporting mechanisms within the organisation? E.g. the annual report	✓	Will report on progress in the Annual Report.
23	Does the plan commit to reporting against the plan on a defined regular basis?	X	It is not made clear if the department will report on a defined regular basis.

**Senior Accountable Officer:** Unknown

Status of Plan: Published 24.03.06

**Please note that the SDC rating is based on a competency framework and not straight addition of the scores in the table above. Please see main report for full explanation of the methodology.**

## How is DH doing?



### Background

The aim of the Department of Health (DH) is to improve the health and wellbeing of people in England. The department does this by leading and supporting NHS and social care organisations so they can provide fair, high quality services that offer real choice for patients, as well as best value for taxpayers.

### Context

In preparing the plan, the Department of Health set up a Sustainable Development Action Plan group to identify areas where more work was needed. Three operations-based themes emerged, which form the basis of DH's plan: travel & transport, procurement and social & community impacts. The initial working group put in place to develop the plan has now been expanded to include senior representation from across the department, including the Policy Hub, Human Resources (HR) and Finance

### Coverage

The SDAP covers the core department only. The department has two executive agencies. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency will produce an SDAP in 2006. NHS Purchasing and supply Agency have produced a Sustainable Development Strategy.

## Departmental view of Sustainable Development

DH's plan recognises the potential impact of the department's policies on sustainable development and vice versa. Improving life expectancy is one of the department's strategic aims and the plan recognises that one of the 20 UK Government's sustainable Development indicators is 'expected healthy years of life.' The plan highlights the inherent relationship between sustainable development and the

department's core business by making the links to its PSAs around improving the health of the population, reducing health inequalities and tackling the underlying determinants of health and health inequalities. In working to achieve its PSAs, DH recognises that it is making a significant contribution to *Securing the Future's* guiding principle "ensuring a strong, healthy and just society".

### Benefits of taking a sustainable development approach

The plan highlights two key benefits of a sustainable development approach: leading by example and influencing DH policy development. DH wants to demonstrate its activities as a "good corporate citizen." This is in line with its 2004 commitment in the *Choosing Health: making healthy choices easier* White Paper in which the NHS Chief Executive, Sir Nigel Crisp, has identified the role of the NHS as a good corporate citizen as one of his five new priorities for the next ten years.<sup>1</sup> DH's plan notes that tackling issues of waste, energy use and use of other natural resources, will enhance DH's working environment and its surroundings. However, it is surprising that DH limits its scope to demonstrating operational improvement in terms of the "relatively small" DH estate only and does not acknowledge its scope to influence activity on the NHS estate in any way. In the bilateral, DH explained that it can only give limited guidance to the NHS and as a business it already had an incentive to be resource efficient. DH acknowledged

that NHS trusts were already undertaking a number of good corporate citizenship initiatives themselves and NHS PASA consistently performed better against the Government Sustainable Development in Government (SDiG) targets than the core department. The SDC would like to see future DH action plans account for DH's role in supporting increasing sustainable development activity in the NHS.

The plan also recognises potential policy gains for DH by building sustainable development thinking into decision-making through appraisal against the sustainable development principles. The plan however does not explain why or how sustainable development appraisal will contribute to this but acknowledges that a sustainable development approach can help the department reduce inequalities – a key concern for DH reflected in their PSA targets: "By 2010 to reduce inequalities in health outcomes by 10 per cent as measured by infant mortality and life expectancy at birth."

## Link to *Securing the Future*

### Guiding Principles

DH's plan explains that a number of its key policy commitments in *Securing the Future* clearly relate to all of the Strategy's guiding principles. The plan particularly highlights the department's health impact assessment tool, joint work with DWP on work well-being, and its food & health action plan aimed at improving health through diet and nutrition.

### Shared priorities for UK action

The Joint Statement from the Public Health Minister and the Permanent Secretary included in the plan clearly acknowledges the four priorities for immediate action set out in *Securing the Future*. The department also acknowledges that building sustainable development thinking into the department's day to day activities will contribute to achieving the

UK's shared sustainable development priorities. However, the plan does not set out the priorities to which the department is best able to contribute, nor how the department is making its contribution to these through the actions it describes in its plan. It was explained in the bilateral that the department would highlight Sustainable Communities as a priority area to which it makes a significant contribution through

its health policies (e.g. through its action on health inequalities and by recognising the link between poverty and ill health). However, the plan does not include any specific actions relating to these area of work.

In future plans the SDC would expect DH to set out clearly how it is contributing to the four priority areas of *Securing the Future* with corresponding, prioritised, actions.

## Policy priorities

Although the narrative in the plan acknowledges DH's key contribution to sustainable development, the plan and its actions/targets are completely focused on the department's operational activity, reflecting the SDiG targets, rather than its policy contribution to sustainable development.

The plan does not set out any specific actions based on policy commitments. The plan however does make a commitment in the narrative to try and embed sustainable development into all departmental decision making. It was explained in the bilateral that the department felt that all of their policies and areas of work contributed to sustainable development in some way and it would therefore be extremely difficult to include or prioritise specific initiatives. The department had therefore sought to highlight the policy links in the narrative rather than include related

actions in the SDAP work programme table.

As the SDC SDAP guidance makes clear, departmental plans should cover both policy and operations. We would expect a key policy-making department such as DH to ensure that its SDAP covers core policy and not just operational activity. The plan should focus on key policy areas where taking an integrated sustainable development approach is key to optimising outcomes or which contribute most to the *Securing the Future* priorities.

It should also acknowledge DH's role in setting the standards for assessment for those regulating the NHS, e.g. the Healthcare Commission. If these assessment criteria do not reflect sustainable development principles and acknowledge success in putting sustainable development into practice, the department's efforts in this area will not be reinforced nor its performance improved.

## Leading by example

The key priorities for action which DH identifies and highlights in its plan are operations based. Many are linked to the Framework for Sustainable Development on the Government Estate (SDiG). It was explained in the bilateral that a Sustainable Development Action Plan Working Group was formed to identify the areas of work on which DH's action plan needed to focus. Whilst the themes in the plan are the chosen priority areas, they do not reflect all the work being done in the department.

The priorities for DH's plan are based around three themes which form the basis of the plan: travel & transport, procurement and social & community impacts. The overall objectives for these themes are:

- to enable a modal shift from travelling in cars to active travel
- to ensure DH contracts and contractors reflect sustainable development policies, and to
- identify the impacts that arise from the

management of the department's land, buildings and operations and address inequalities (eg workforces to reflect their local community etc).

The narrative of the plan seeks to explain DH's plans and thinking around each area, which is helpful.

The SDC's 2005 assessment of government progress against SDiG awarded DH only a one star rating and highlighted the department's need to particularly improve its performance against the Government's waste, travel and energy targets. The current plan does not specifically tackle waste and energy performance. However, at the bilateral, the Department provided a list of additional operational actions its SDAP which are now being considered and these address these areas of weakness.

## Securing the Future commitments

### Departmental commitment

DH's plan does not acknowledge or address the specific *Securing the Future* commitments for which they have a lead across government. It was explained in the bilateral that the department's approach to the plan was to focus on new areas of work. DH explained that the department already reported on progress against its strategy commitments to the inter-departmental Sustainable Development Programme Board, of which they are a member and did not want to duplicate this information in the plan. Moreover, the department explained some of the strategy commitments are no longer relevant, such as the work around healthy communities, due to departmental restructuring and lack of funds.

SDC would expect this explanation to be made clear in the plan so that there is a clear accountability trail between the allocated commitments in *Securing the Future* and the current situation. The SDAP is a public document, unlike the department's monitoring reports to the Programme Board which are internal working documents. The SDAP does not need to list all SH Strategy commitments but it should

DH's decision to prioritise sustainable procurement sits well with *Securing the Future's* cross-cutting procurement aims. DH has set out a range of related actions which are centred around exploring options to better integrate sustainable development into core procurement processes including training and management mechanisms. The plan notes that DH will "continue to set stretching targets for sustainable procurement" which are being taken forward by NHS PASA.

The plan notes that the department is offsetting the carbon emissions from business air travel – a Strategy commitment. DH is committed to being able to develop an appropriate reporting mechanism for this data to feed into the SDiG process by January 2006.

acknowledge the range of commitments that the department is reporting to the Programme Board, and should contain actions relating to prioritised commitments from *Securing the Future* or related or follow-on work.

### Cross-government commitments

The department refers to some relevant areas of the cross-government commitments but does not set out actions in the context of contributing to them. The plan includes actions on sustainable procurement. There is also a commitment to integrate the five principles of sustainable development into policy making as well as a commitment to investigate the skills set required to achieve this. However, the plan does not include any specific targets on this.

### Target setting

DH has made an attempt at specifying SMART targets. Whilst all actions clearly state the timescales for delivery, the desired outcome of specific actions is not always made clear nor how they will contribute to the overall objective.

## Policy making

### Sustainable Development 'proofing'

The plan does not describe the current mechanisms used to ensure policies are sustainable development appraised, nor whether such mechanisms exist. It was acknowledged in the bilateral that Regulatory Impact Assessments are currently not as effective as they should be in determining the wider impacts of policies, and are often applied too late in the process. The sustainable development team are currently writing a paper for the departmental policy committee, chaired by the Permanent secretary, on how to integrate sustainable development into policy thinking.

The department's plan recognises the potential policy gains to be made by ensuring DH policies are appraised against the five principles of sustainable development. In particular, the contribution a sustainable development approach can make to reducing health inequalities. Although the plan contains no specific targets on integrating the five principles into policy development, policy making is highlighted as an important area of work in the narrative of the plan. It is explained that the Directorate of Policy and Strategy will take forward action to include sustainable development in policy development, and that, during 2006/07, detailed action will be developed to ensure sustainable development is part of the policy appraisal mechanism. The department also commits to developing appropriate training tools for staff in this area. It was explained in the bilateral that work to develop a policy toolkit is underway and it is hoped that the toolkit will help policy-makers to consider of the wider implications of policies.

### Sustainable Development Skills

DH's plan includes some actions related to sustainable development skills as part of its social and community impacts priority. Discussions with DH in the bilateral revealed that there is work underway in DH to identify and address the sustainable development skills needed in the department. The department's Human Resources team is currently exploring the potential of introducing sustainable development into the departmental competency framework or as one of the staff objectives, as is currently the case with Diversity.

The Department is also working to integrate sustainable development into the induction package which is likely to include general sustainable development awareness as well as thinking about sustainable development in policy development. DH views the Professional Skills for Government (PSG) as a useful vehicle for developing sustainable development skills and the department intends to explore this further with Cabinet Office. The plan commits the department to checking how PSG can "support sustainable development principles." In bilateral discussions, the department expressed concern over the costs of NSG sustainable development training when the department is making energy efficiency savings.

The department is clearly exploring a range of key initiatives in this area which have the potential to start to effectively embed sustainable development thinking into policy development and the wider activities of the department. The SDC would expect to see future plans set out a clear skills programme based on the outcomes of these investigations (which should be reported in the department's SDAP progress report).

## Achieving Sustainable Development outcomes

### Infrastructure

Initially the department set up the Sustainable Development Action Plan Working Group to develop the action plan. However, this has now evolved to become the Sustainable Development forum and includes senior representation from across the department, including the Policy Hub, Human Resources and Finance. The group will oversee the implementation of the plan, including the integration of sustainable development into departmental policy development. It was explained in the bilateral that this new group met in June. The Permanent Secretary also attended the meeting, signaling his support to this area of work.

The SDC is pleased to note that the Working Group now has policy input which can help to ensure that DH's next plan includes actions related to key policies which make a significant contribution to the Strategy.

### Engagement

The plan has set out an objective to raise awareness of sustainable development across the department. DH plans to "reach all members of staff by 2007" through a series of measures such as regular staff updates through the staff intranet, as well as including messages in news outputs such as the internal Link magazine. The department also held a sustainable development fair in June 2006 which was attended by the Sustainable Development Minister. The aim of the fair was to raise awareness and ownership of sustainable development issues.

Further awareness raising measures will be included in the communications programme which is currently being developed by the communications team. The department explained in the bilateral that they plan to raise a series of sustainable development issues which will be linked to the priorities identified in the action plan.

## Monitoring and reporting

The plan contains actions for 2006 and explains that the Sustainable Development Forum will oversee the implementation and monitoring of the action plan. It was explained in the bilateral that the Sustainable Development forum will report on progress to the departmental Management Board twice a year.

The department plans to provide an update on progress against the plan in their Annual Report. However, the bilateral revealed that it

was not yet decided whether the report to the Management Board will be available publicly. Current reporting mechanisms were aimed at an internal audience. The SDC reminded *Securing the Future* commits departments to reporting publicly against their SDAPs. As space is often limited in annual reports, the department may wish to provide further reporting information on its website, cross referenced in the annual report.

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1 Choosing Health: making healthy choices easier, 2004, Page 95, The Stationery Office, London



## Strengths to build upon

	<b>Raising awareness of sustainable development and how it relates to/can impact the department's work.</b>
	<b>Work to develop appropriate training tools for policy makers.</b>

## Challenges for 2007

	<b>Ensure plan covers core policy and not just operational activity and set out prioritised actions relating to policy work (reflecting departmental contributions to sustainable communities).</b>
	<b>Ensure the plan sets out SMART targets.</b>
	<b>Include specific actions to take forward the department's work on integrating sustainable development into decision making and be clear what benefits the department is seeking to secure by doing so.</b>
	<b>Account for DH's role in supporting increasing sustainable development activity in the NHS.</b>
	<b>Encouraging a more robust role for the regulator and getting sustainable development into the assessment criteria of the developmental standards.</b>
	<b>Acting on sustainable development in policy terms and not just on operations.</b>



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