



3rd March 2006

Consultation on *Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future*

Response from the Sustainable Development Commission

1 Introduction

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) is the Government's independent advisory body on sustainable development, reporting to the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales. Through advocacy, advice and appraisal, we help put sustainable development at the core of Government policy. The 2005 UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy (UK SDS), *Securing the future*¹, charges the SDC with the role of 'watchdog' for sustainable development. The SDC will officially take up this role from April 2006.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's (ODPM) consultation paper on the future of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), *Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future*.

2 Summary of main points

- There is much to welcome in the consultation paper, in particular the aim that "delivering sustainable communities is the core purpose of Community Strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships".² However, the consultation paper could go further to ensure that the LSP process fully contributes to delivering sustainable development. This SDC response therefore explores how the LSP process could be strengthened to support UK Government sustainable development principles and priorities (see section 3, which expands on this point)
- The consultation paper states, "sustainable communities embody the principles of sustainable development". As such, the UK SDS should be the starting point for policy on LSPs, Sustainable Community Strategies (SCSs), and Local Area Agreements (LAAs). In particular, the SDC recommends that the UK Government's sustainable development principles form the framework from which policy and guidance on LSPs and SCSs are developed. This is in line with the UK Government's goal that the principles should form the basis of *all* policy in the UK (see section 3.1)

¹ HM Government, *Securing the future: delivering UK sustainable development strategy*, March 2005.

² ODPM, *Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future*, December 2005, p9.

- The degree to which LSPs help to deliver sustainable development will be an important measure of ODPM's own contribution to the UK SDS (section 3.1)
- LSPs and SCSs have the potential to make genuine improvements to local quality of life and to help deliver sustainable development at the local level (see section 4)
- To ensure that sustainable development is the core purpose of LSPs, and that SCSs, LAAs and SCS action plans share a common purpose, the SDC recommends that delivering sustainable development should be an explicit part of LSPs' role. The SDC also recommends that any new guidance on LSPs should use the five sustainable development principles as its basis (see section 4.1)
- The UK Government should publish new guidance on SCSs which fully reflects the new UK SDS, and ensures that the concerns brought out in the Egan Review are addressed (see section 4.2)
- The sustainable development principles, applied at a local level, should be used as the basis for both Local Development Frameworks and SCSs. This should bring about more coherency between the two, as well as provide local planners with a sustainable development framework that goes beyond land use planning (see section 4.2.1)
- LSPs need to be able to capture and address cross-cutting issues, including sustainable development. The SDC recommends that LSP guidance should specify how LSP structures could best support sustainable development objectives. This could include: employing a 'sustainability co-ordinator' and/or ensuring that there is a sustainable development champion on the executive board. Sustainable development should also be written into the remit of LSPs (see section 5)
- The SDC recommends that sustainable development be fully incorporated into each LAA block. Guidance should clearly explain how sustainable development can be addressed within each block and how it can be delivered as a cross-cutting issue (see section 5.1)
- Legislation to put LSPs on a statutory footing could provide an opportunity to embed the delivery of sustainable development by LSPs through legislative means. The SDC recommends that the Government considers how this might be done. This would be in line with the UK Government commitment in the UK SDS "to apply sustainable development duties on new bodies as they are created as appropriate to their role and remit, and to assess whether a specific duty should be applied to key, existing bodies in priority areas"³ (see section 5.2)
- The UK Government should consider, as part of its response to the SDC's *The Next Steps* report, how Government Offices can best help to integrate delivery of sustainable development at the local level through the LAA process (see section 6)
- Significant gaps exist in LSP skills and learning, especially in relation to integrating social, economic, and environmental issues to address the area's wider or more long-term environmental impacts. It is crucial that these gaps are filled, and the SDC will be looking for evidence of genuine improvement in this area over the next two to three years (see section 7).

³ HM Government, *Securing the future: delivering UK sustainable development strategy*, March 2005, pp156-157.

3 Overview

There is much to welcome in the LSP consultation paper. The paper sets out a number of areas for improving arrangements, including encouraging local leadership, enhancing governance arrangements, joining-up thinking, and improving co-ordination of public services. There is also a strong emphasis on the importance of using a clear evidence base and analysis of actual local needs in development in SCSs, which we welcome.

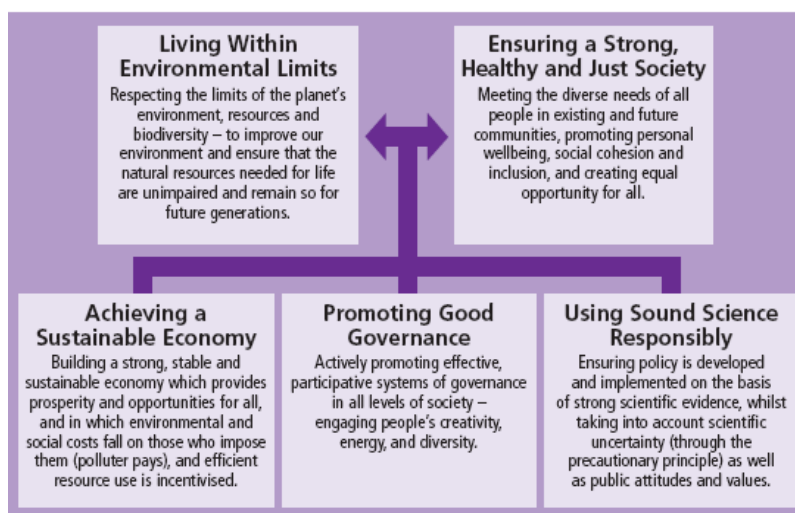
Most significantly, the consultation paper sets out that “delivering sustainable communities is the core purpose of Community Strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships”.⁴ Sustainable communities are about delivering sustainable development at the local level, and as such should “embody the principles of sustainable development”.⁵

This is particularly welcome. However, the SDC feels that the consultation paper should go further to ensure that the LSP process fully contributes to delivering sustainable development at the local level. This SDC response to ODPM’s LSP consultation therefore explores how the LSP process could be strengthened to support UK Government’s sustainable development objectives.

3.1 UK Government sustainable development strategy

‘Sustainable communities’ is one of four shared priorities for delivering action on sustainable development in the UK SDS. Sustainable development therefore provides the framework for the sustainable communities agenda. As such, the UK SDS, should be the starting point for policy on LSPs and SCSs, as well as LAAs - one of the key delivery mechanisms for LSPs and SCSs. This will be particularly important as Community Strategies are reshaped into *Sustainable* Community Strategies.

In fact, the UK Government is already committed to putting sustainable development at the heart of policy. The UK SDS is owned and signed-up to across Government. *All* departments have a responsibility for its delivery, including ODPM. Moreover, to achieve this goal, the Strategy sets out five principles which should form the basis for *all* policy in the UK:



⁴ ODPM, *Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future*, December 2005, p9.

⁵ ODPM, *Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future*, December 2005, p47.

In other words, the Government wants “to achieve [its] goals of living within environmental limits and a just society, and [it] will do it by means of a sustainable economy, good governance, and sound science”.⁶

Policy and guidance from central government on LSPs, SCSs, LAAs, as well as local government in general, will need to use the sustainable development principles as a starting point in order to support UK Government sustainable development objectives.

The UK SDS also sets out four priority areas for immediate action across the UK:

- sustainable consumption and production
- climate change and energy
- natural resource protection and environmental enhancement
- sustainable communities.

The consultation paper sets out that delivering the fourth of these priority areas, sustainable communities, is the core purpose of both LSPs and SCSs. We welcome this ambition, provided that it takes into account the wider sustainable development agenda.

There is much to welcome in the consultation paper in terms of integrating sustainable development and sustainable communities into the LSP policy agenda. However, the SDC believes that there is more to be done before the agenda takes adequate account of the wider sustainable development picture, of the UK SDS, and of the new principles of sustainable development. Indeed, new Government guidance and policy will need to do so in order to ensure that:

- (a) sustainable communities is genuinely the core purpose of LSPs and SCSs, and
- (b) the move to *Sustainable Community Strategies* helps to improve delivery of sustainable development at the local, national and global level - it is essential that non-local issues, such as climate change and energy, are addressed too.

The SDC recommends that the UK Government’s sustainable development principles form the framework from which policy and guidance on LSPs, Sustainable Community Strategies and LAAs is developed. This is in line with the UK Government’s goal that the principles should form the basis of *all* policy in the UK.

As the SDC moves into its new ‘watchdog’ role from April 2006, we will be looking at the contributions Government Departments are making to the UK SDS. The degree to which LSPs help to deliver sustainable development will be an important measure of ODPM’s own contribution.

4 The role of LSPs and Sustainable Community Strategies

LSPs and SCSs have the potential to make genuine improvements to local quality of life and to help deliver sustainable development at the local level. Indeed, in many cases they already are. As such, The UK SDS recognises that “local authorities and their partners ... are pivotal to delivering sustainable communities”.

⁶ HM Government, *Securing the future: delivering UK sustainable development strategy*, March 2005, p17.

4.1 The role of LSPs

LSPs have become “a vital part of the institutional arrangements of modernised local governance”.⁷ As the Audit Commission recognises, partnerships at the local level “can provide flexibility, innovation and additional and human capital resources to help solve problems”.⁸

Sustainable development is complex and multi-faceted, and requires innovative and cross-disciplinary solutions. So the responsibility for delivering it cannot rely on one organisation alone; partnerships are essential. LSPs are therefore an important mechanism for tackling sustainable development issues at the local level.

The consultation paper sets out that LSPs’ role will be: to ensure that a Sustainable Community Strategy is produced; to develop and drive delivery of their LAA; and to agree an action plan for achieving Sustainable Community Strategy priorities.

The consultation paper sets out a vision for the role of LSPs in a box underneath paragraph 35. To ensure that sustainable development is genuinely the core purpose of LSPs, and that SCs, LAAs and SC action plans share a common purpose, the SDC suggests that an addition should be made to “The Role of LSPs” as set out in paragraph 35:

- **To ensure that delivering sustainable development is the core purpose of Sustainable Community Strategies, Local Area Agreements, and Sustainable Community Strategy action plans.**

The SDC also recommends that any new guidance on LSPs should use the five sustainable development principles as its basis.

4.2 The role of Sustainable Community Strategies

One of the core objectives set out in the consultation paper is for SCs to become “the overarching local plan”. We welcome this ambition, but note that for a strategy to be truly ‘sustainable’, it must put sustainable development at its core. Guidance and objectives will need to be explicit about this if the change from Community Strategy to Sustainable Community Strategy is to be more than just a name-change exercise.

The Local Government Act 2000, which provides the legal basis for Community Strategies, states: “Every local authority must prepare a ... community strategy ... for promoting or improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area and contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in the United Kingdom”.

As the consultation paper recognises “many Community Strategies have, in the past, struggled to articulate how they will address the area’s longer-term and cross-boundary issues”.⁹ The Egan Review¹⁰ proposed that local leaders needed to take a more cross-disciplinary and integrated

⁷ Warwick Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, OPM and the University of the West of England, *Research Summary – Local Strategic Partnerships: Formative Evaluation and Action Research Programme 2002-2005*, A report for ODP and DfT, January 2006.

⁸ Audit Commission, *Governing partnerships: bridging the accountability gap*, October 2005.

⁹ ODP, *Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future*, December 2005, p10.

¹⁰ ODP, *The Egan Review: Skills for Sustainable Communities*, 2004.

approach to social, economic and environmental issues and, to reflect this change, that Community Strategies should become Sustainable Community Strategies.

To help ensure that Sustainable Community Strategies do begin to take a more cross-disciplinary, cross-boundary and integrated approach, **the SDC recommends that:**

- **the UK Government publishes new guidance on Sustainable Community Strategies. This will need to reflect the new UK SDS, and ensure that the concerns brought out in the Egan Review are addressed.**

The consultation paper includes a useful outline (on page 18) that could form the basis of such guidance. However, the guidance would also need to:

- **be framed within the context of the UK SDS**
- **outline how the new sustainable development principles should guide the development of Sustainable Community Strategies. The ‘Using Sound Science Responsibly’ principle, for example, supports the need for SCSs to be built upon robust data**
- **explore how SCSs can effectively address cross-boundary issues. This should include guidance on using footprinting, making links to relevant regional strategies¹¹, as well as to the UK SDS which addresses sustainable development issues across the UK and beyond**
- **highlight examples of existing good practice**
- **explore how all LSP partners could work together to support local communities and local environments through their operations and procurement practices**
- **provide guidance on how local authorities’ statutory power to secure economic, social and environmental well-being of local areas can be used to support the delivery of sustainable development in relation to Sustainable Community Strategies. Studies suggest that the Well Being power has not so far been a driver behind LSPs’ work.¹²**

4.2.1 Local Development Frameworks

The consultation paper highlights the disconnection between land use planning frameworks and SCSs. Feedback that the SDC has received from local practitioners supports this conclusion.

Local plan-makers are already required to exercise their functions with a view to contributing to the achievement of sustainable development through Part 3 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.

The sustainable development principles, applied at a local level, should be used as the basis for both Local Development Frameworks and SCSs. This should bring about more coherency between the two, as well as provide local planners with a sustainable development framework that goes beyond land use planning.

¹¹ This will be dependent on the Government’s response to the SDC’s independent review of sustainable development in the English regions – *The Next Steps: an independent review of sustainable development in the English regions*, November 2005.

¹² Warwick Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, OPM and the University of the West of England, *Research Summary – Local Strategic Partnerships: Formative Evaluation and Action Research Programme 2002-2005*, A report for ODPM and DfT, January 2006

5 Governance

We agree that LSPs should, where possible, be given the autonomy to develop in ways that suit local needs. However, the consultation paper does recommend that LSPs should include an executive board underpinned by local thematic partnerships. The paper also specifies that the executive board should be made up of all the key interests in the area.

This is a good start. Including all key sectors is important. However, LSPs also need to be able to capture and address cross-cutting issues, including sustainable development, and have some means of keeping a 'sustainable development' overview of local needs.

The SDC recommends that LSP guidance should specify that LSP structures reflect the need to prioritise sustainable development. For example, LSPs might want to consider:

- **employing a 'sustainability co-ordinator' (Birmingham LSP currently has one for example), and / or**
- **ensuring that there is a sustainable development champion on the executive board.**

As outlined in section 4.1 (above), sustainable development should also be written into the remit of LSPs.

5.1 LAA structures in relation to LSPs and Sustainable Community Strategies

LAAs are becoming an increasingly important and influential part of local governance arrangements. LAA guidance suggests that Sustainable Community Strategies should set out the overarching vision and priorities for the area and that LAAs should set out the detailed outcomes, indicators and targets which relate to the strategy.

In practice, however, our feedback from local practitioners and stakeholders is that it is often the LAA that influences SCSs, as well as LSPs, and not the other way around. This is a result of the significant amounts of funding attached to LAAs. To secure funding, LSPs and SCSs are often structured around the four priority blocks of LAAs: Children and Young People, Safer and Strong Communities, Healthier Communities and Older People, and Economic Development and Enterprise.

The danger is that cross-cutting issues, particularly sustainable development and sustainable communities, are often of secondary importance in relation to the four blocks. The consultation paper does state that sustainable development would need to be considered LSPs' core business. However, our experience tells us that without the attachment of funding, and without the right structures in place (see section 5), sustainable development can often become sidelined.

The SDC recommends that sustainable development is fully incorporated into each LAA block. Guidance should clearly explain how sustainable development can be addressed within each block and how it can be delivered as a cross-cutting issue.

Other cross-cutting issues, such as tackling the wider determinants of health, should also be addressed.

5.2 A possible legislative foundation for LSPs

The consultation proposes that a statutory duty to co-operate in the production of SCSs be placed on key statutory agencies, and that the local authority might have a duty to involve the voluntary, community and private sectors in this process.

Whilst we agree that such a duty would help to set LSPs on a better footing and enable an enhanced delivery role, the Government would need to ensure that the statutory agencies involved have the resources to meet this requirement. With over 360 LSPs in England, effective engagement with all LSP requires a significant amount of resource. The Environment Agency, for example, is currently involved in 284 LSPs but does not have the resources to engage with every LSP in England.

A duty might also provide an opportunity to embed the delivery of sustainable development by LSPs through legislative means. The SDC recommends therefore that the Government considers how this might be done before drawing up any legislation. This would be in line with the UK Government commitment in the UK SDS “to apply sustainable development duties on new bodies as they are created as appropriate to their role and remit, and to assess whether a specific duty should be applied to key, existing bodies in priority areas”.¹³

6 Accountability

Government Offices (GOs) play an important accountability role, reporting on local performance to central government. The consultation paper sets out that LSPs will report formally to GOs on performance against the outcomes and indicators in the LAA every six months. The SDC believes that there is an opportunity here for GOs to assess the degree to which LAA outcomes deliver on the UK Government’s four sustainable development priorities. Following the SDC’s report on the regions, *The Next Steps*¹⁴, the Government is considering how the GOs can help to deliver UK Government sustainable development policy through all their activities in the region.

The UK Government should consider, as part of its response to the SDC’s report, how the GOs can help to support delivery of sustainable development at the local level through the LAA process.

7 Capacity Issues

The consultation paper identifies that new skills will be needed to develop and maintain effective LSPs. Sir John Egan also identified the need for skills in joining-up social, economic and environmental disciplines.

We support the findings from initial research that significant gaps exist in LSP skills and learning, especially in relation to integrating social, economic, and environmental issues to address the area’s wider or more long-term environmental impacts. It is crucial that these gaps are filled, and the SDC will be looking for evidence of genuine improvement in this area over the next two to three years.

¹³ HM Government, *Securing the future: delivering UK sustainable development strategy*, March 2005, pp156-157.

¹⁴ SDC, *The Next Steps: an independent review of sustainable development in the English regions*, November 2005.

8 Future work

As a member of the working group that contributed to the development of the LSP consultation paper, the SDC looks forward to continuing and developing its advisory role to ODPM on LSPs, SCSs and LAAs.

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