

## **Alice Owen speech at the launch of 'Securing the Regions' Future' (DEFRA)**

**East Midlands Centerparcs, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2006**

Good Afternoon everyone,

It's a privilege to be able to address a few words to you in advance of the minister's announcements, particularly in this venue, since Centerparcs as a business are well known for their efforts to translate sustainable development into successful business practice, and since the staff at this particular Centerparcs have been so involved in and supportive of regional action in the East Midlands.

### **1. What is the SDC?**

- Auditor and advisor to government on sustainable development – a critical friend.
- Since “securing our future” have also been developing a watchdog role.
- We work closely with Defra's sustainable development unit but are a separate organisation, pursuing an independent work programme.

### **2. What is the importance of regions to SD, and the importance of sustainable development to regions?**

For me – my belief in the power and potential of the regions lies in their scale. Each of the English regions is larger than many of the EU25 countries. Each of the regions has multi billion pound economies and is home to millions of people. Each of the regions has

tremendous environmental assets, and each has a distinct resource base and cultural heritage.

And yet, while being big, big enough to make a real difference, a real impact, they are also small enough to reflect that distinctiveness – in people, in place, in resources and in culture. Sustainable development will look and feel different here, in the east midlands to how it looks and feels in the north east or the south west – it must do.

Central government will always struggle to recognise and flex with those distinct regional opportunities – and yet SD does not work with a one size fits all set of measures at anything below the scale of strategic direction.

So the partnerships that are formed, the investment that is made, and the actions that are carried out at regional level are where we will really see global pressures crossing over with local opportunities.

I'm glad to see that Securing the Regions Future reinforces that government sees the opportunities to join up government policies at regional level – and perhaps it's inevitable that it's more possible to join up thinking in policy areas at the regional level, linking health with prosperity with well-being under the umbrella of sustainable development.

### 3. Why is the SDC interested in regional governance?

With this in mind, early in 2005, the SDC started its review of regional governance structures and their capacity to deliver SD – the review that led to the publication of “the Next Steps” last November.

This wasn't just a collation of good practice. There is a need to recognise the large amount of excellent work happening at a regional level, such as the projects being showcased during the minister's visit today, but that wasn't the task of our review.

The review team were fortunate enough to have the support and input from a number of regional practitioners and, since she is here today, I would like to make specific mention of Yvette Dearden's contribution to the steering group for the review. Yvette did an invaluable job, bringing the practical expertise of working within a successful and effective regional assembly.

In the SDC's view, good governance is essential to inclusive, appropriate and effective sustainable development action. And this too is clear from the guiding Sustainable Development principals in *Securing our Future*.

4. The Review, and the final report published in November last year as "The next steps" found much to praise, and a great deal of evidence of activity. However, we also found missed opportunities from a lack of cohesion in some of those activities. There can still be a tendency to treat SD as an additional strand of work, rather than as the integrating theme that glues all regional work together. There can still be a tendency for measures of sustainable development to be measures that are easily gathered, rather than ones that inform or drive change.

The SDC believes that, in addition to the "big three" of the regional jungle, the RDA, the Assembly, and Government office, there **is** a need for a "champion body" for SD in the regions. In some ways, this champion body's role is analogous to SDC's own role with the UK government and devolved administrations – it should be a body of people, bringing expertise

in the region and in different aspects of sustainable development, but independent of the existing institutions, so that it that can praise, and it can also critique from the basis of understanding distinct regional context.

The SDC recognises our own role in helping those emerging regional champions develop their competence, and their confidence, and in the next few months we intend to start twice yearly gatherings, convening all the regional champion bodies to share experience, to gain from best practice, and to ensure that champion bodies develop a distinct, relevant and valuable role in the regions.

We are, of course, delighted that government recognises the role that these champion bodies can play, and that “Securing the region’s futures” encourages government offices to work with champion bodies in developing two-year work programmes.

This is just one of the ways in which Government has responded positively to our review and we are delighted with the close attention that has been paid to our research and recommendations. I continue to be excited about what can be achieved at the regional level, and the SDC continues to see the opportunity for regional governance to make sustainable development a reality here and in other regions. We hope to be able to continue to work with you, and with national government, on these vital tasks.

Thank you.