

Sustainable Development Action Plans

Getting Started!

An SDC guide for Government Departments and Executive Agencies

August 2005



Sustainable
Development Commission

Sustainable Development Action Plans

Getting Started!

An SDC guide for Government Departments and Executive Agencies

"I want every government department to produce its own [sustainable development] action plan by the end of the year so we can ensure delivery"

The Rt Hon Tony Blair MP

Foreword to the UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy - *Securing the Future* (March 2005).

What is a Sustainable Development Action Plan (SDAP)?

A focused action plan **based on** the UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy - *Securing the Future* (March 2005).

Who needs to prepare an SDAP?

Securing the Future commits all Government departments and their executive agencies (EAs) to produce SDAPs.

When are SDAPs required?

SDAPs should be produced by December 2005. Organisations are then expected to report on their actions by December 2006, for example in their annual reports, and regularly thereafter.

What is the purpose of an SDAP?

These plans will form a key part of the overall monitoring and review mechanism for ensuring that the Strategy's commitments are delivered across government.

What is the SDC's role?

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) will monitor SDAPs. The SDC is the Government's independent, advisory body on sustainable development. We are a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) and report to the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of the Devolved Administrations, who also appoint Commissioners. An active board of 20 Commissioners plays a central role, developing

and steering the SDC work programme. For more information about our work please visit our website at www.sd-commission.org.uk.

The Government has committed to strengthening the SDC. From April 2006, we will act as a new sustainable development (SD) "watchdog" which will assess the Government's progress against the Strategy. The SDAPs will be a key input for the SDC's assessments of Government progress against the Strategy as well as our assessment of a department/agency's particular contribution.

About this guidance

To assist you in preparing your SDAP, or updating an existing one, the SDC has set out below what it considers to be the key elements of a good SDAP. You may also find it helpful to use the discussion prompt provided on **page 7** in face-to-face discussions with other colleagues in your department. It can act as a helpful spark to thinking about how far you have embedded an SD approach across all your organisation's activities.

What does your SDAP need to address?

An SDAP is no different to any other kind of action plan that you might have prepared. Your first SDAP will need to set out what you are going to do to ensure that you have the necessary processes and systems in place to deliver, monitor and report on your commitments. It is expected that successive iterations will be more ambitious, long term and will build on learning from earlier versions - but don't let that stop you from framing an

ambitious first SDAP! Successive SDAPs should also reflect the establishment of coherent systems to embed SD activity and thinking into your organisation.

SDAPs should be stand-alone documents, based on the UK Sustainable Development Strategy, so that they form a comparable reporting basis across government.

The SDC will not accept five-year strategies, SD strategies or other similar corporate documents as substitutes for an SDAP although they should be interlinked. However, if SD has already been considered in the framing of these documents then the preparation of your SDAP will be more straightforward.

Your SDAP should set out...

- **what SD means for *your* organisation**
be clear how SD fits with your organisation's core business, activities and objectives. Show how these are consistent with the Government's sustainable development goal, principles and priorities as set out in the UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy (see pp. 8-10).
- **the rationale / business case for your involvement**
explain the benefits of SD to your core business as well as the risks of not taking action.
- **how you will action SD in practice in *both* your operations *and* policy-making and manage the interface between these areas**
show how you will incorporate SD in your business planning processes and lead by example.
- **your key commitments**
relate these back to the UK SD Strategy (and UK Shared Framework if relevant), its goal, principles and priorities. If this section forms a major proportion of your plan you may like to group the commitments into particular themes or approaches.

You do not have to list every commitment from the Strategy which is relevant to your organisation - highlight your priority areas and outline why you have chosen to concentrate your activities here. You should also set out how you intend to monitor activity on the totality of your commitments.

- **how you will engage staff and stakeholders in the production, revision and delivery of the plan**
demonstrate how the action plan will be "owned" throughout the organisation.
- **how you will encourage continuing engagement and constructive stakeholder dialogue**
ensure that your plan is a "living" and evolving document.
- **your arrangements for checking progress**
what measurable targets and outputs, monitoring and review mechanisms have you established? How are they linked to Public Service Agreements (PSAs) and the sustainable development indicators?
- **how you will report progress**
what accountability and reporting mechanisms do you have in place?
- **how you will ensure that your staff have the skills to deliver the plan**
explain how you will maintain capacity for SD. Do you need new training partners, induction processes? If so when will they be in place?



Delivering your SDAP

A successful SDAP should be more than a document. Its preparation and implementation should be a catalyst for on-going change within your organisation.

A successful action plan will:

- be supported by the right organisational structures and processes**
consider what processes you have in place to ensure that SD is embedded in your policy making (at the earliest stage) and day-to-day management of your estate. How are you managing the delivery of relevant, joint PSAs?
- be integral to your work and complement that of others**
the delivery of your SDAP should be fully integrated into your department's work - its priorities, strategies, other corporate plans, initiatives and white papers. You will also need to consider how you will effectively co-ordinate your delivery plans with other departments/delivery agents/sectors.
- be supported by robust data/evidence**
consider whether you are collecting sufficient data/evidence to monitor your progress and whether you have established sufficient benchmarks. Can this data can be managed so that it also feeds into processes such as PSA reporting and your Operating and Financial Review (OFR) Statement to avoid duplication of effort?
- be owned by the Management Board (or equivalent) and the Sustainable Development Minister/CEO**
- have senior level responsibility for delivery**
but don't forget that buy-in at all levels of the delivery chain is important
- be short, clear, and focussed**
the SDAP should not be a lengthy narrative detailing past actions and successes. You can signpost the reader to other documents/web pages which provide more detail, case-studies, or additional context to help bring the work of your organisation alive.
- be communicated effectively and be accessible to staff, stakeholders and the general public.**
the SDAP should be easily understood by those unfamiliar with sustainable development. You can avoid lengthy explanations for those unfamiliar with your work with effective cross-references/web links to other sources of information.

Your SDAP should be available on your website (and intranet), be clearly signposted, and be available in hard copy. Consider which key people you should actively provide with a copy of your plan e.g. all Director Generals and Directors. Can you create some interest through an office notice or bulletin, or run a workshop/lunchtime seminar about your organisation's engagement with, and delivery, of sustainable development?

Suggested Format

For each SDAP action point there should be an associated and measurable objective, target/milestone, and indication of who is responsible for delivery.

A format you may like to follow uses the following headings:

- Our vision for sustainable development in our organisation
- The business case/benefits
- Our Commitments
 - Policies
 - Operations
 - People
- Monitoring, evaluation, accountability.

Monitoring and Reporting

You should ensure that you have a mechanism for notifying the SDC when your SDAP is available.

You can opt to report progress on your SDAP separately, as part of your departmental annual report or current sustainable development strategy (the SDAP is not a substitute for an SD Strategy). If you choose to produce a separate progress report of any kind it should be cross-referenced in your organisation's annual report.

Consider an approach that best fits your own, corporate approach to reporting whilst effectively integrating the SDAP into your reporting processes. It should not be part of an isolated process which has no feedback mechanisms into core business systems. If you can't align reporting processes immediately then outline your proposed approach for the future.

Meanwhile, the Government as a whole will be monitoring its own progress on sustainable development by means of the cross-

departmental Sustainable Development Board, and the Sustainable Operations Board. These are supported by working groups of officials, and they report to the Energy and Environment Cabinet Committee and Energy and Environment (Sustainable Development) Cabinet Sub-Committee.

How can the SDC help you?

At each of the above stages, the SDC can offer advice and highlight existing tools, guidance, case studies, and organisations that can support your department/agency.

We are particularly well-placed to offer top-level guidance in key strategic areas such as: internal organisational structures, accountability frameworks, feedback mechanisms and policy appraisal, as well as highlighting where the alignment of human resources systems and processes can contribute to the delivery of SD in your organisation.

The SDC has an active policy development work programme, some of which is funded by individual government departments to provide specific expert advice. Currently, the SDC is not planning to offer expert advice on facilities/estates management issues or the implementation of environmental management systems since professional consultancy advice is readily available in these areas.

Overall, our approach is flexible to suit your organisational style – it can range from commenting on early drafts of the SDAP or your proposed approach, to delivering commissioned reports, and seconding full-time support staff. However, these latter support mechanisms take time to deliver and you should not depend on us being able to offer this level of assistance immediately.

Resources

The following pages provide a set of resources which you may find helpful in your action planning process:

- **Links to useful websites.** These are offered for guidance and ideas only -they do not imply any particular endorsement by the SDC (p.6)
- An **SD discussion prompt** to help you think about how far you have embedded a sustainable development approach across all your organisation's activities (p.7)
- **Extracts** from the UK Sustainable Development Strategy, *Securing the Future*, including the goal, principles priorities, and behavioural change model (pp.8-10).

Key contacts

Your contacts at the SDC relating to SDAPs are:

Emma Downing
Team Leader: Whitehall
Tel: 0207 238 4989
emma.downing@sd-commission.org.uk

Denny Gray
Policy Analyst: Whitehall
Tel: 0207 238 4993
denny.gray@sd-commission.org.uk

Web resources

General

www.sd-commission.org.uk

The SDC website.

www.sustainable-development.gov.uk

The Government's sustainable development website. Here you can access the UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy and Shared Framework as well as the Framework for Sustainable Development on the Government Estate.

SD reporting guidance

Association of Certified and Chartered Accountants (ACCA)

<http://www.accaglobal.com/sustainability>

The Association of Certified and Chartered Accountants has developed criteria for its established UK Sustainability Awards which focus on the characteristics which excellent environmental, social and/or sustainability reports would have. The criteria are grouped around three elements: completeness, credibility and communication and are intended to assist those using them with improving the quality of their disclosed information. The criteria may be a helpful guide when considering how appropriate your existing processes and systems are in relation to the delivery of sustainable development commitments and subsequent reporting against these.

Accounting Standards Board (ASB)

<http://www.asb.org.uk/asb/>

The HM Treasury Resource Accounting Manual 2004-5 advises that departments should include an operating and financial review (OFR) in their annual reports. ASB's 'Reporting Standard 1' on the OFR includes a basic framework to apply in order to meet OFR regulations.

OFR's may cover environmental and social issues relevant to your department. It will be worth considering how any information

gathered for your OFR statement may relate to your SDAP and associated reporting process.

Global Reporting Initiative

www.globalreporting.org

The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is a multi-stakeholder process and independent institution whose mission is to develop and disseminate globally applicable Sustainability Reporting Guidelines.

These Guidelines are designed to enable organisations to report on the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of their activities, products, and services. Although they are used mainly by business at the moment, they are intended for all types of organisations including public sector bodies. The NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency (PASA) already uses them. The Guidelines may be useful when considering reporting and monitoring processes for your SDAP.

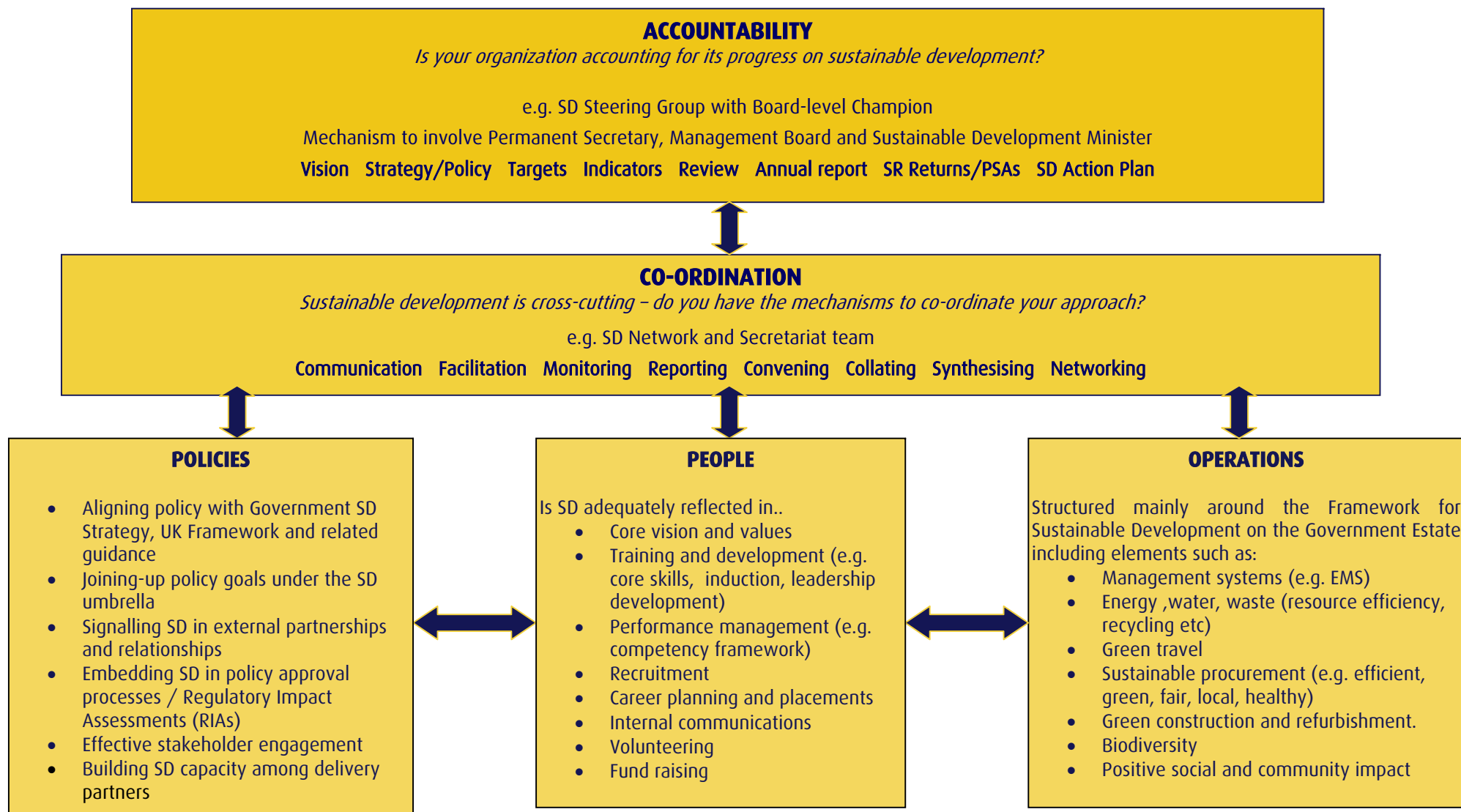
House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (EAC)

http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/environmental_audit_committee.cfm

The EAC is a cross-department Parliamentary Select Committee. It considers how far the policies and programmes of government departments and Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) contribute to sustainable development. It has produced reports on a variety of issues relating to Government performance on SD relating to both policy and operation

**How far are you embedding sustainable development across your organization?
Have you thought about the following challenges?**

This diagram is a prompt for face-to-face discussion not a suggested structure.



Securing the Future: The UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy [Extracts]

The New Framework Goal for Sustainable Development (p.16)

The goal of sustainable development is to enable all people throughout the world to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life, without compromising the quality of life of future generations.

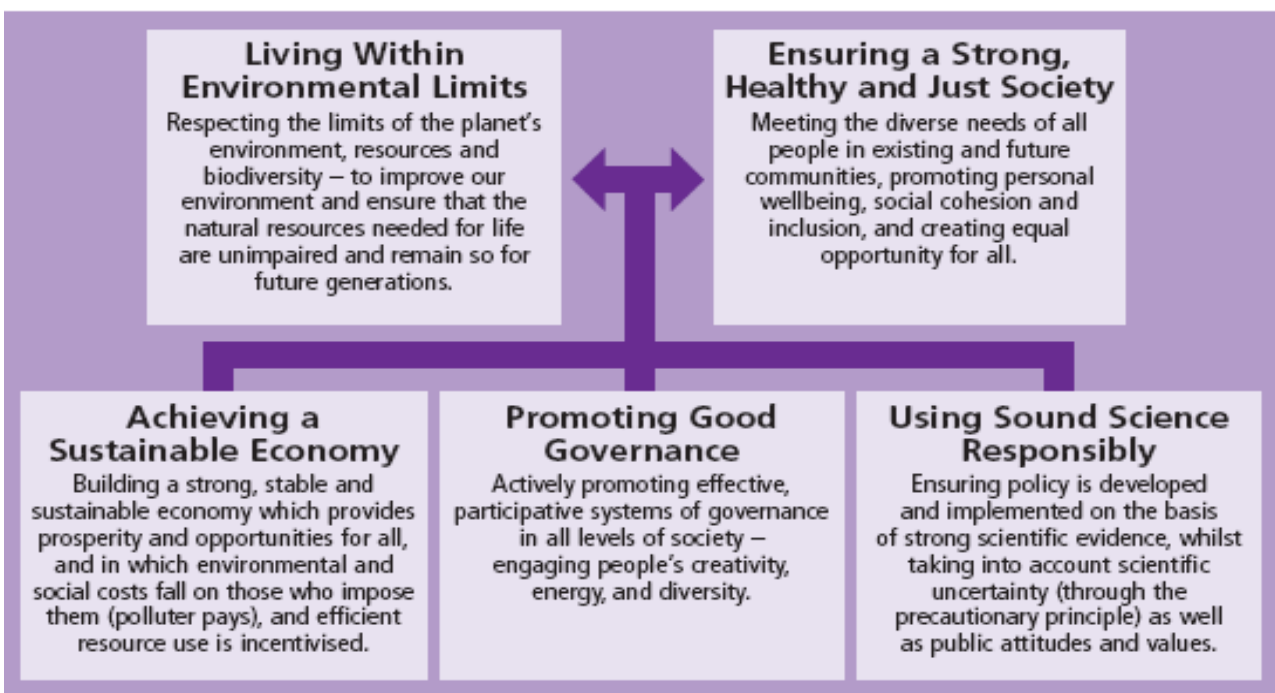
For the UK Government and the Devolved Administrations, that goal will be pursued in an integrated way through a sustainable, innovative and productive economy that delivers high levels of employment; and a just society that promotes social inclusion, sustainable communities and personal wellbeing. This will be done in ways that protect and enhance the physical and natural environment, and use resources and energy as efficiently as possible.

Government must promote a clear understanding of, and commitment to, sustainable development so that all people can contribute to the overall goal through their individual decisions. Similar objectives will inform all our international endeavors, with the UK actively promoting multilateral and sustainable solutions to today's most pressing environmental, economic and social problems. There is a clear obligation on more prosperous nations both to put their own house in order, and to support other countries in the transition towards a more equitable and sustainable world.

Shared UK Principles for Sustainable Development

The principles below are to be used to achieve the sustainable development purpose. They have been agreed across the UK. The UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy states that these principles:

“will form the basis for policy in the UK. For a policy to be sustainable it must respect all five of these principles, though we recognise that some policies, while underpinned by all five, will place more emphasis on certain principles than others. Any trade-offs should be made in an explicit and transparent way. We want to achieve our goals of living within environmental limits and a just society, and we will do it by means of a sustainable economy, good governance, and sound science.”



Shared priorities for UK action (p.17)

The UK Government Strategy sets out the following priority areas for immediate action, shared across the UK:

Sustainable Consumption and Production

Sustainable consumption and production is about achieving more with less. This means not only looking at how goods and services are produced, but also the impacts of products and materials across their whole lifecycle and building on people's awareness of social and environmental concerns. This includes reducing the inefficient use of resources which are a drag on the economy, so helping boost business competitiveness and to break the link between economic growth and environmental degradation.

Climate Change and Energy

The effects of a changing climate can already be seen. Temperatures and sea levels are rising, ice and snow cover are declining, and the consequences could be catastrophic for the natural world and society. Scientific evidence points to the release of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, into the atmosphere by human activity as the primary cause of climatic change. We will seek to secure a profound change in the way we generate and use energy, and in other activities that release these gases. At the same time we must prepare for the climate change that cannot now be avoided. We must set a good example and will encourage others to follow it.

Natural Resource Protection and Environmental Enhancement

Natural resources are vital to our existence and that of communities throughout the world. We need a better understanding of environmental limits, environmental enhancement and recovery where the environment is most degraded to ensure a decent environment for everyone, and a more integrated policy framework.

Sustainable Communities

Our aim is to create sustainable communities that embody the principles of sustainable development at the local level. This will involve working to give communities more power and say in the decisions that affect them; and working in partnership at the right level to get things done. The UK uses the same principles of engagement, partnership, and programmes of aid in order to tackle poverty and environmental degradation and to ensure good governance in overseas communities. These priorities for action within the UK will also help to shape the way the UK works internationally, in ensuring that our objectives and activities are aligned with international goals.

Changing Behaviour Model (p.26)

...While there will continue to be a very important role for regulation and enforcement, regulation alone will not be able to deliver the changes that we want to see. We need to make sure that we are all using the levers available in a consistent way.

The new strategy therefore focuses on the need to **enable, encourage and engage** people and communities in the move toward sustainability; recognising that Government needs **to lead by example**. The diagram [below] sets out what the elements under each of these headings could comprise.

