

1 Executive summary

Government has made it clear that it wants the public sector to be a leading exponent of sustainable development (SD)¹. Thus the whole of the public sector should excel in promoting and delivering sustainable development in all its policies as well as the running of its operations.

The 2006 *Sustainable Development in Government Report* (SDiG) assesses the performance of central Government operations for 2005-2006 against the targets of the *Framework for Sustainable Development on*

the Government Estate (hereafter referred to as “the Framework”).

The report is the fifth annual SDiG assessment and is produced by the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) – Government’s independent advisory body and watchdog for sustainable development. The report is intended to be impartial, open, honest and constructive, and is based on the findings of the consultancy firm Entec UK Limited, as reported and clarified by Departments. The SDC hopes it will inspire further improvements across Government.

1.1 Headline findings

- **Departments have only partially met the Government’s sustainable operations targets for its own estate**
- **Government is not on track to meet the target to reduce carbon emissions from energy use by 2010**
- **Departments, on average, generated more waste in 2005/06 when compared to previous years**
- **Most departments are using energy less efficiently compared to previous years**
- **Only 18% of the total sites within the Government estate have implemented Environmental Management Systems (1823 sites) and**
- **The varying levels of data quality presented a major challenge in creating an accurate assessment.**

Some positive news

The 2006 report includes evidence that:

- Government is buying 3% more of its energy from renewable energy suppliers compared to last year
- The overall recycling rate has risen by 8% since 2004/05
- There has been a significant drop in emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) from road transport activities since 2002/03 as reported by departments and
- Most departments are incorporating sustainable design features into new builds and major refurbishment projects.

1.2 Headline commentary

Given that Government wants the public sector to be a leading exponent of sustainable development and this is the fifth such assessment of Government operations, overall performance is hugely disappointing. The SDC understands it can take time for improvements in operational practices to show results, and that significant progress has been made in some areas. However, overall performance is simply not good enough and the sentiment behind SDC's 2005 report *Leading by example? Not exactly* still applies. Indeed, Government hardly seems to be following the example of others.

No department can make a reasonable claim to have met the requirements of all the targets assessed. And the majority of departments need to raise their game significantly to cope with the challenges of the new targets for *Sustainable Operations on the Government Estate (SOGE)*, launched in June 2006. In particular, much more progress is needed on EMS coverage and waste management.

As for energy and carbon emissions, a drastic change in approach is essential for Government to have any hope of meeting its targets. And all this against a background of endless Government messages indicating strong support for climate change initiatives. Unless Government can quickly take charge of its own operations, it risks breeding deep cynicism amongst the general public and will lag behind the private sector.

In considering what now needs to be done, the SDC concludes that current measures are not sufficiently powerful 'organising principles', and that key aspects of the Government's approach need strengthening to better align working practices with sustainable development aims and objectives. The SDC is therefore recommending specific measures for engendering a greater sense of urgency and better control of the sustainable development agenda.

1.3 Key recommendations

The main body of the report contains recommendations by theme. In addition to these, the SDC has devised a number of high level recommendations which can be found in full at the back of the commentary on page 11.

The new framework cannot afford further failure and the following recommendations to Government are seen as key to improving the situation:

- Embed measures of performance within the objectives of all Permanent Secretaries and senior officials
- Introduce a carbon allocation and trading system to drive departmental operations to deliver on energy targets
- Focus on the big impact areas – the departments and areas with the biggest sustainable development impacts are identified in Table 2.7 on page 11. SDC would welcome feedback on how Government plans to prioritise these for improvement
- Extend the Framework's scope to all Government operations, not just those on the Government estate. This should include outsourced operations and all publicly funded bodies
- Provide departments and agencies with stronger support. For example: a better resourced and co-ordinated SD Forum; a single, comprehensive and up-to-date Government SD operations website; hands-on support with operational action planning and
- Provide closer scrutiny of Management Information Systems and verify departmental data externally.

1 HM Government, *Securing the Future – delivering UK sustainable development strategy*, March 2005. Page 156.