

# Sustainable Development Action Plan



**Sustainable**  
Development Commission

## Department for Communities and Local Government

Sustainable Development Minister:  
Angela Smith MP

**SDC Assessment**



# Checklist

## Sustainable Development Action Plan

1	Does the plan specify the period of time it will cover?	✓	
2	Does the plan specify which organisations it covers?	✗	Executive agencies mentioned but plan does not explain if they are covered by the departmental plan
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?	✗	Plan implies that working to DCLG's own sustainable development principles will help achieve DCLG's agenda, but does not make clear what sustainable development adds to Sustainable Community policies
5	Does the plan acknowledge the Government's sustainable development goal?	✓	
6	Does the plan acknowledge the priorities of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✗	Climate change and sustainable communities mentioned without acknowledging that these are the <i>Securing the Future</i> priorities
	Does the plan mention one or more of the priorities of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✓	
7	Does the plan identify links to the priorities of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✓	
8	Does the plan acknowledge the principles of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✗	The plan only refers to DCLG's sustainable development principles at the local level
	Does the plan mention one or more of the principles of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✗	
9	Does the plan identify links to the principles of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✗	The plan does not mention the five guiding principles
10	Have the organisation's relevant executive agencies produced their own plan?	✗	DCLG explained that agencies are covered by DCLG's plan
11	Does the action plan contain a work programme?	✓	
12	Does the plan include actions relating to commitments from the SD strategy?	✓	
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?	✗	

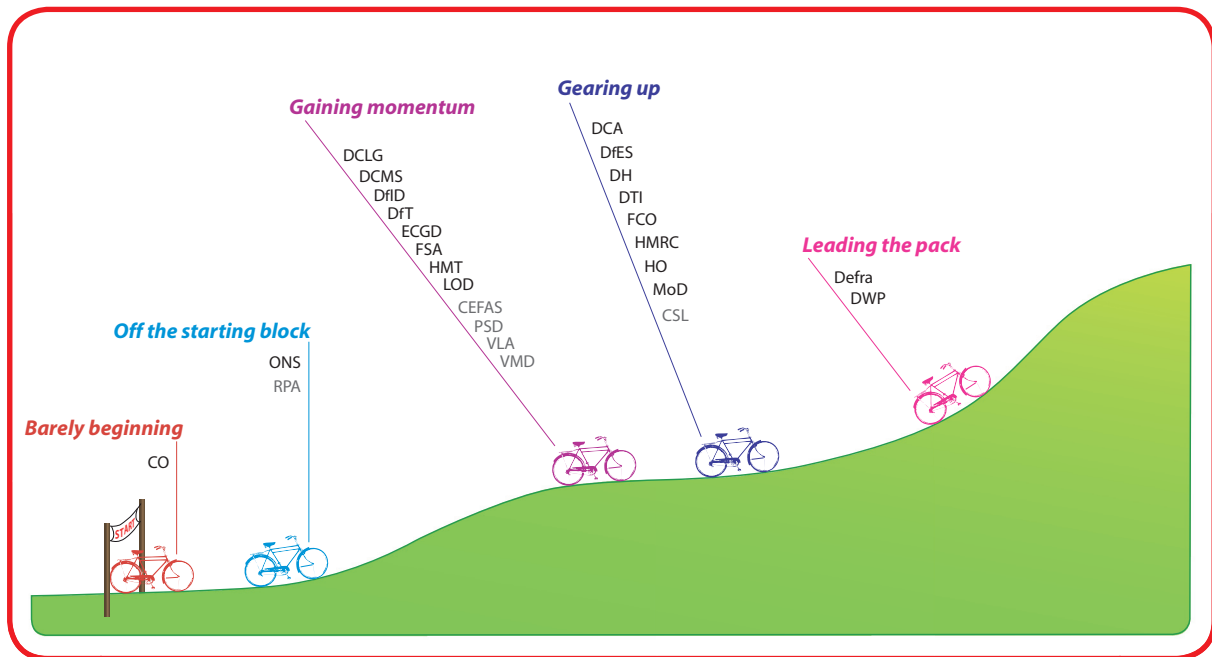
16	Does the plan outline any arrangements for strengthening SD capacity in the organisation?	✓	
17	Does the plan describe the infrastructure in place to deliver the plan?	✓	Only cross-governmental sustainable development infrastructure mentioned
18	Does the plan make it clear who signed it off?	✗	
19	Does the plan designate who is accountable for the delivery of the overall plan?	✓	It was explained in the bilateral that the sustainable development champion will be responsible for delivery of plan.
20	Does the plan explain how the organisation will monitor progress against the plan?	✗	The plan does not outline any monitoring mechanisms
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	✓	
23	Does the plan commit to reporting against the plan on a defined regular basis?	✗	Only commits to reporting on progress in the Autumn Performance Report

**Senior Accountable Officer:** Peter Unwin, *Director General of Corporate Delivery and Sustainable Development Champion*

Status of Plan: Published 17.03.06

**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 DCLG doing?



### Background

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) was created on 5 May 2006 with a remit to promote community cohesion and equality, as well as responsibility for housing, urban regeneration, planning and local government.

### Context

The Sustainable Development Action Plan which the SDC has assessed was prepared under the auspices of ODPM. A new Climate Change & Sustainable Development team has been created in DCLG with responsibility for sustainable development. The Department for Communities and Local Government has produced a plan which articulates the department's contribution to sustainable development through repackaging its existing activities and work programme under a sustainable development framework. DCLG have taken this "co-ordination" approach to their plan because they feel their work programme is already well aligned with *Securing the Future*.

### Coverage

The SDAP mentions the executive agencies but does not explain if they are covered by the departmental plan. Bilateral discussions revealed that DCLG's agencies, the Fire Service College, Planning Inspectorate and the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre are all covered by the plan and are unlikely to produce individual SDAPs in future years.

## Departmental view of Sustainable Development

The department's stated aim in the plan is to create prosperous, inclusive and sustainable communities for the 21st century, that promote opportunity and a better quality of life for all. The plan clearly explains how DCLG views the fit between sustainable communities and sustainable development. It explains that "sustainable communities embody the principles of sustainable development at the local level by:

- Balancing and integrating the social, economic and environmental components of their community
- Meeting the needs of existing and future generations
- Respecting the needs of other communities in the wider region or internationally also to make their communities sustainable." (DCLG plan p3)

The department does not view sustainable development and sustainable communities as interchangeable. Both promote the idea that too narrow a focus in policy making or local decision-making will deliver outcomes that are not sustainable. DCLG views the delivery of sustainable communities as a more specific goal relating to practical decision making at the level of individual communities with regard to the wider and longer-term impacts.

The plan mentions the department has challenging PSAs and refers to its PSA 8 on liveability through DCLG's "Cleaner, Safer, Greener Communities" programme. The plan does not highlight the links to its PSA 6 on planning which is about the planning system delivering sustainable development outcomes at the national, regional and local level. DCLG acknowledged the need to highlight this link in the bilateral.

### Benefits of a sustainable development approach

The plan does not set out the benefits to DCLG of taking a sustainable development approach. However, in the bilateral the department acknowledged that a sustainable development

approach helped the department to develop sustainable communities as a more integrated concept with the social and environmental dimensions increasingly taken into account.

## Link to *Securing the Future*

### Guiding Principles

The plan does not mention or acknowledge that the five guiding principles set out in *Securing the Future* are now to underpin all UK policy or indicate how it intends to use these principles. DCLG explained that the department had sought to avoid duplicating *Securing the Future*. As mentioned above, DCLG's plan refers to its principles of sustainable development at the local level. However, the relationship between these principles and the guiding principles in *Securing the Future* is not made clear. The SDC would have liked to see the relationship between the above principles and the *Securing the Future* guiding principles explicitly explored.

### Shared priorities for UK action

Much of DCLG's plan is centred around sustainable communities and climate change. However, it does not acknowledge that these are two of the priorities for immediate action set out in *Securing the Future*. DCLG explained that this was an oversight.

DCLG explained that its contribution to the *Securing the Future* priority 'Climate Change and Energy' will be made through its review of the sustainability of existing buildings and its contribution to the Government's review of the UK Climate Change Programme. The plan indicates that the department will review its position on climate change across the whole Sustainable Communities agenda, with a

view to developing new initiatives and long-term programmes that will contribute to the achievement of a 60% cut in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050. The SDC would like to see future plans set out a clear programme of activities aimed at meeting this target.

The SDAP does not explore the impacts the department has on 'Natural Resource Use and Environmental Enhancement' through its responsibility for the planning system nor the

impact it can have on 'Sustainable Consumption and Production' through the department's responsibility for local government. Local government is currently responsible for £39.8bn of public procurement and over 26% of public sector procurement spending. The SDC would like to see future plans explore the contribution which the department can make to these priorities.

## Policy priorities

The plan focuses on planning policy, housing (including the need to reduce carbon emissions from housing) and the department's initiatives to get people involved at the local level requiring the active involvement of individuals, communities and local government.

The plan sets planning policy as the starting point for creating sustainable communities and explains that the department's aim is to ensure that sustainable development is at the heart of the planning system. The department is committed to publishing a range of new Planning Policy Statements (PPS), as explained in their plan. Each PPS will aim to address aspects of what makes sustainable communities.

The SDAP includes a commitment to review which small renewable energy developments householders should be able to install more easily without the need for planning permission, in an attempt to remove the barriers and promote the wider use of these technologies.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the department believes it will make a contribution to sustainable development.

The plan notes that the Sustainable Communities Plan (SCP) and the five year plan that followed it, Homes for All, and the Government's response to the Barker Review of housing supply are the basis for the department's approach to meeting predicted housing needs. The need for high environmental standards is recognised and a number of recent ODPM/DCLG responses to environmental challenges are listed. However, the plan would benefit from a clearer statement of the scale of the risks and opportunities for sustainable development presented by the significant proposals put

forward under the SCP and associated policies, and whether or not the current measures to tackle the considerable environmental issues are sufficient. The SDC is currently undertaking a review of the SCP exploring the extent to which it is contributing to sustainable development. It will result in a number of recommendations to the DCLG about how the SCP's contribution to sustainable development can be maximised.

It should be noted that the action plan was written and published before the wider structural changes made to the department as a result of the government reshuffle in May 2006. The department has yet to assess how the new responsibilities and restructuring of the department will re-orientate the SDAP priorities. The department's next plan is likely to also focus on gender issues to reflect the department's new equality focus. The department has also inherited the *Home Office's Together we Can* initiative which seeks to empower communities with a sustainable development strand. However, again, it is not clear how this will influence the future work programme.

DCLG's plan mentions Government Offices and explains that they have to report regularly to the department on how they are meeting departmental priorities on sustainable development. The plan does not refer to DCLG's work with, and funding of, Regional Assemblies. Neither does it recognise the Regional Assemblies' role in producing regional sustainable development frameworks, and their work in preparing regional spatial strategies<sup>2</sup> covering land use planning, including transport and housing.

As it is at the regional scale that national policy on sustainable development turns into practical action, the SDC would expect Regional Assemblies, acting in their capacity as the Regional Planning Body, and regional spatial strategies to be addressed in future plans, taking on board the commitments made in *Securing the Regions' Futures*<sup>3</sup> – the Government's response to recommendations made by the SDC in November 2005 as part of the SDC review of regional infrastructure for sustainable development.<sup>4</sup>

The SDAP recognises the role that Sustainable Communities Strategies and Local Area Agreements should play in taking forward sustainable development at the local level. Future plans will need to assess whether there may be additional mechanisms which can be used to achieve the potential for local government to be leaders in the field of sustainable development, such as the 2008 performance assessment framework. We would look to the Local Government White Paper, expected to be published in late 2006, to address sustainable development issues.

## Leading by example

The plan acknowledges that the "Government is committed to lead by example, and ODPM's operations, no less than its policies, must contribute to this objective."

The department has included actions largely based on the Framework for Sustainable Development on the Government Estate (SDiG) and the department's priorities on climate change and energy. Discussions with DCLG revealed that the priorities were selected according to the department's own priorities e.g. energy and climate change.

The plan does not acknowledge departmental SDiG weaknesses. The SDC would expect these to be addressed in future plans.

The department has developed an Energy Efficiency Action Plan in conjunction with the Carbon Trust and the plan indicates that it will carry out works to increase the efficiency of its two existing Combined Heat and Power (CHP)

Units. However, it does not specify SMART targets for this.

The department acknowledged sustainable procurement as an area which needs attention. DCLG has been preparing a Sustainable Procurement Strategy. However, the department explained that this process had been a little disjointed and sustainability had yet to become fully integrated into the procurement process. DCLG acknowledged that there had been resource and capacity issues in this area and the department had not been involved in the work of the Sustainable Procurement Task Force (SPTF). The department has committed to addressing this over the coming year and looks to use the recommendations of the SPTF to provide a driving force for change. The SDC expect the department to encourage local government to do the same.

## Securing the Future commitments

### Departmental commitments

DCLG's plan acknowledges that the department has lead responsibility in Government for a range of *Securing the Future* commitments and the department has made a good attempt at setting out actions relating to its high-level, key

contributions as set out in *Securing the Future*. However, the plan does not clearly signal how it has prioritised its *Securing the Future* commitments, some of which are longer-term.

Bilateral discussion with the department revealed that it had decided not to include or acknowledge all *Securing the Future*

commitments in the plan as the department reports regularly on progress to the cross-departmental Sustainable Development Programme Board. The department therefore chose only to select and explore the high level commitments in their action plan. In order to ensure an effective audit trail, the plan should have made this reasoning clear. In addition, future plans should not be limited to high level commitments, but should include specific actions aimed at delivering those commitments.

### **Cross-government commitments**

DCLG's plan 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 to produce 'Best Practice Procurement' guidance to take account of sustainability, and the narrative of

the plan attempts to address capacity and skills, but does not set out specific actions on this. The SDC would expect future plans to set out clearly how far the department is able to contribute to these cross-cutting commitments.

### **Target setting**

DCLG's plan does not specify SMART targets and as a result many policy and operations commitments are vague. In the bilateral discussion, the department acknowledged that it should have used the action plan to specify outcome-focused actions, which related to the delivery of the *Securing the Future* commitments. The department undertook to ensure that future iterations of the plan will address this.

## **Policy making**

### **Sustainable Development "proofing"**

The plan does not address how sustainable development is integrated into policy-making. However, the bilateral revealed that the new Sustainable Development and Climate Change team plans to meet with the Better Regulation Team to discuss whether there is a need to increase and develop the skills of staff in the sustainable development elements of policy assessment.

The plan does not address how the department will ensure that the five principles of sustainable development will be integrated into the policy making process. However, DCLG have undertaken to explore ways by which they can meet this commitment in the future.

### **Sustainable Development Skills**

The SDAP commits to incorporating sustainable development into the induction training for new staff members and refers to DCLG's commitment to implementing Professional Skills for Government. The bilateral revealed that the department is considering running its own internal seminar for staff along the lines of the National School for Government course on sustainable development. This would help the department tailor the training for various groups of staff as well as reduce costs.

The department currently recognises capacity building as a weakness, and has requested assistance from the SDC in this area. The SDC will be working with DCLG to improve understanding of sustainable development, and its relevance to DCLG's policy priorities, across the department.



## Achieving Sustainable Development outcomes

### Infrastructure

The plan does not specify the internal mechanisms underpinning the delivery of the plan.

The department clarified that its Sustainable Development Champion, Peter Unwin (Director General of Corporate Delivery) will be responsible for the delivery of the plan in practice. The plan was cleared through ODPM's main Board and signed off by the Sustainable Development Minister. In future, the new Environment & Sustainable Buildings Programme Executive (chaired by the Board level Sustainable Development Champion, Peter Unwin) will be the key senior body overseeing subsequent SDAPs.

The Permanent Secretary and the DCLG Board issued a discussion document on 6 June 2006 setting out their vision for the new Department. The proposed new structure builds on and extends the reach of the Programme Executives to cover the key areas of business in their new remit, which will include sustainable development and climate change.

### Engagement

While the DCLG SDAP states that the communication of its action plan is vital to implementing the commitments in *Securing the Future*, it does not, however, clearly explain how it intends to promote engagement in this area. The department has placed a copy of the SDAP on its website and intends to

distribute copies of the plan to LAs and other key stakeholders. However, engagement with these bodies on sustainable development as such, is not articulated.

A key challenge for DCLG will be to ensure that the vision and commitments set out in the Local Government White Paper, due out later this year, are compatible with sustainable development.

As well as ensuring that the Action Plan is widely read, DCLG acknowledged that the department needs to do more to communicate what sustainable development is and what it means to DCLG, to its wider stakeholders and to its own staff. The department is introducing several new corporate initiatives to 'help embed sustainable development in officials' thinking' such as:

- Using a stand at the next DCLG Open Day to explore and explain the relationship between sustainable communities and sustainable development
- Introducing a new internal award specifically for contribution to sustainable development and climate change.

It was revealed in the bilateral that some of the communication actions outlined in the SDAP have been overtaken by the wider departmental restructuring. However, the department is planning a series of workshops on specific issues such as climate change.

## Monitoring and reporting

The plan does not set out how DCLG will monitor progress against the plan. Discussions in the bilateral revealed that there is currently no mechanism in place to monitor the plan but the department continues to report to the Sustainable Development Programme Board against the commitments for which the department has lead responsibility. This reporting does not cover all the actions in the SDAP but

DCLG explained in the bilateral discussions that they will examine whether current monitoring mechanisms in the department will suffice.











The plan commits the department to reporting on progress in their Autumn Annual Report. However, the department is now likely to report on progress in their end of year Annual Report to signal the mainstreaming of sustainable development.

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- 1 This was a commitment made under the Climate Change and Sustainable Energy Act, the outcome of which will be a Statutory Instrument in 2007
  - 2 Acting in their capacity as the Regional Planning Body
  - 3 *Securing the Regions' Futures*: Strengthening delivery of sustainable development in the English regions; DCLG, 2006
  - 4 *The next steps: An independent review of sustainable development in the English regions*, SDC November 2005

## Strengths to build upon

✓	Devise a forward plan for sustainable development capacity building in the department.
✓	Work to ensure staff are aware of how sustainable development impacts on their work building on the action to “use a stand at the next ODPM open day to explore and explain the relationship between sustainable communities and sustainable development.”

## Challenges for 2007

	Indicate how the department will be using the five guiding principles and include actions aimed at integrating sustainable development into departmental decision making.
	Identify skills needs in conjunction with the Better Regulation Team in the sustainable development elements of policy assessment.
	Take an active approach to producing the next plan and engage with internal and external stakeholders in doing so.
	Ensure all targets are SMART, specifying outcome-focused actions.
	Specify priority SDiG areas which the department is seeking to improve.
	Work to integrate sustainability into the procurement process.
	Ensure the department’s work with Regional Assemblies is covered in future plans.
	Work to ensure that the commitments set out in the Local Government White Paper, due out later this year, are compatible with sustainable development.
	Take forward the Securing the Regions’ Future recommendations.
	Explore the contribution DCLG can make to the shared priority on Natural Resource Use and Environmental Enhancement through the department’s responsibility for the planning system.



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