

# Sustainable Development Action Plan



**Sustainable**  
Development Commission

## Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Sustainable Development Minister:  
Ben Bradshaw MP

**SDC Assessment**



# Checklist

## Sustainable Development Action Plan

1	Does the plan specify the period of time it will cover?	✓	Plan contains actions Defra will take forward in 2006.
2	Does the plan specify which organisations it covers?	✓	Plan explains that Executive Agencies were encouraged to produce their own plans.
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?	✓	
5	Does the plan acknowledge the Government's sustainable development goal?	✗	The plan does not explain what the sustainable development goal is (i.e. what Government is working towards).
6	Does the plan acknowledge the priorities of <i>Securing the Future</i> ? 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> ?	✓	The entire plan is based around the shared priorities.
8	Does the plan acknowledge the principles of <i>Securing the Future</i> ? Does the plan mention one or more of the principles of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✓ ✓	Acknowledges that <i>Securing the Future</i> sets out five guiding principles. Explains important role of <i>Using Sound Science Responsibly</i> .
9	Does the plan identify links to the principles of <i>Securing the Future</i> ?	✓	Explains how <i>Using Sound Science Responsibly</i> contributes to Defra's work.
10	Have the organisation's relevant executive agencies produced their own 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?	✓	

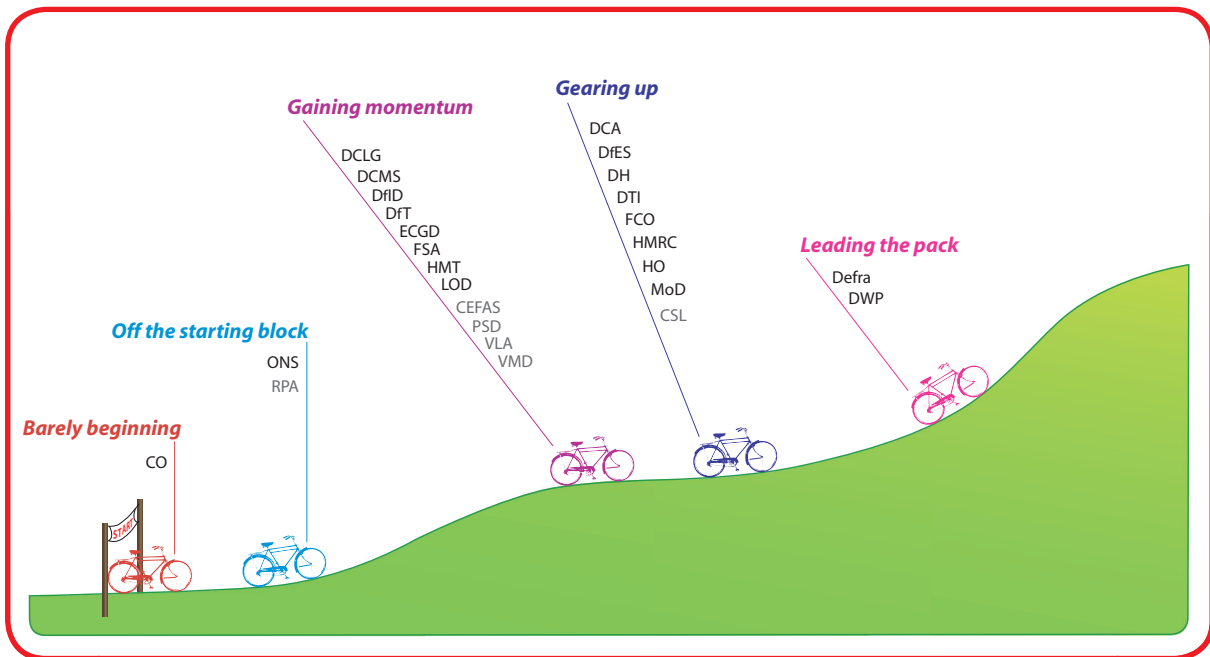
17	Does the plan describe the infrastructure in place to deliver the plan?	✓	
18	Does the plan make it clear who signed it off?	✓	
19	Does the plan designate who is accountable for the delivery of the overall plan?	✓	
20	Does the plan explain how the organisation will monitor progress against the plan?	✓	
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?	✗	Defra has indicated in bilateral discussions it intends to report on new plan in 2007 and annually thereafter. However, this is not made clear in the SDAP.

**Senior Accountable Officer:** Andrew Burchel, *Sustainable Development Champion*

Status of Plan: Published 15.12.05

**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 Defra doing?



### Background

Defra's core purpose, as declared in its Sustainable Development Action Plan (SDAP) is to improve the current and future quality of life by integrating environmental, social and economic objectives – putting sustainable development into practice every day, and by championing sustainable development as the way forward for Government.

### Context

Defra has produced one of the most comprehensive action plans in this first year. The SDAP has clear objectives and timescales for delivery and Defra's Management Board were involved in deciding departmental priorities for the plan. The plan articulates Defra's role in contributing to sustainable development, both as a Government department and as the Sustainable Development Champion across Government and contains actions covering this dual role.

### Coverage

The SDAP covers the core department only. Central Science Laboratory, Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, Pesticides Safety Directorate, Rural Payments Agency, Veterinary Medicines Directorate and Veterinary Laboratories Agency have all produced their own SDAPs. The Government Decontamination Service, State Veterinary Service, Marine Fisheries Agency are all new agencies and will be producing their own SDAPs in future years.

## Departmental view of Sustainable Development

Defra's SDAP recognises the department's dual role in delivering sustainable development, both as a government department and as a cross-government champion.

Defra's plan illustrates the links between sustainable development and the department's core business by highlighting the similarity between the *Securing the Future* priority areas for action, and Defra's strategic priorities, as set out in its Five Year Strategy. These strategic outcomes are used to drive departmental business plans.

Defra's role as a cross-government champion is mandated through the department's Public Service Agreement (PSA)<sup>1</sup> which relates to promoting sustainable development across

government and in the UK, as well as internationally.

Promoting sustainable development across Government requires strong leadership, as many of the levers for embedding sustainable development often lie outside Defra's immediate sphere of influence. This in particular, requires the department to identify, communicate and promote the high-level value of sustainable development across Whitehall.

Future SDAPs would benefit from providing more focus on Defra's role in promoting the value of sustainable development across government, including specific actions aimed at engaging departments in the sustainable development agenda at the working level.

### Benefits of taking a Sustainable Development approach

Defra's plan explains that taking a sustainable development approach provides a more robust policy making process and provides a unifying vision for the department through the active involvement of the department's Management Board. Defra's focus is to ensure

that other government departments (OGDs) address environmental issues from the start of the policy-making process to reduce the need for subsequent mitigation, particularly as the responsibility for, and costs of this, might fall on Defra.

## Link to *Securing the Future*

### Guiding Principles

Defra's plan explains the need for good evidence to deliver the department's strategic outcomes and the important role of "using sound science responsibly" (one of the UK's five sustainable development principles) in helping to determine the evidence and innovation needs of the department.

The plan however does not explicitly highlight Defra's work on defining environmental limits, and this is essential for underpinning "living within environmental limits", one of the sustainable development principles. *Securing the Future* commits the Government to working to collate existing research and identify shortfalls in understanding about where environmental limits exist, and where they are being exceeded. It would be helpful if Defra's

plan indicated its part in this work which is necessary to ensure that the "environmental limits" principle is effectively applied across government. The SDAP does refer to the department's commitment to "publish an agreed vision for the natural environment and a policy document outlining our next steps towards delivery" (Defra's action plan p5). However, it is not clear if this will add to the evidence base for the work on environmental limits.

### Shared priorities for UK action

Defra's policy commitments are outlined to demonstrate clearly their contributions to the four shared priorities for UK action. Their plan includes actions around areas such as sustainable consumption and production and the Climate Change Programme Review (now published)

as well as working with the voluntary sector to mainstream sustainable development into its everyday work.

## Policy priorities

The policy priorities set out in Defra's SDAP are based around the *Securing the Future* commitments for which the department has a lead across government. Defra made an active decision to focus effort on the 2006 commitments. The bilateral meeting following

production of the SDAP, clarified that the intention was to ensure the plan was more than a strategic document and would deliver quantifiable outcomes. The department has identified the following as key actions to take forward in 2006:

- 1. Sustainable consumption and production:** Defra will work with DTI to develop a coherent policy framework for sustainable products;
- 2. Climate Change and Energy:** implement the actions arising from the Climate Change Review Programme;
- 3. Natural Resource Protection and Environmental Enhancement:** publish an agreed vision for the natural environment and a policy document outlining next steps for delivery;
- 4. Sustainable Communities:** as part of Community action 2020, Defra will agree an action plan with the voluntary and community sector organisations to mainstream sustainable development into their policies and everyday work.

Thus, the department's priorities clearly demonstrate the links to the four priorities for immediate action set out in *Securing the Future*.

## Leading by example

Defra performed consistently well in 2004/5 against the Government's operational targets as set out in the Framework for Sustainable Development on the Government Estate (SDiG) and was awarded four stars in the SDC's assessment of cross-government performance. The department is keen to continue to improve upon this performance and its SDAP sets the department the goal of being 'best in class' on key elements of the Framework. The department has identified five priority areas to focus on. These include: travel, water, waste, energy and procurement. Defra explained that these were key areas for improvement that had been identified by the department's high-level

operations group.

The SDAP commits the department to taking steps to reduce business road miles and expanding its existing carbon offsetting scheme to rail and road travel. Defra will also be developing water saving projects to reuse rain water for non-potable purposes and working to develop best practice clauses for procurement contracts to promote the reduction of supplier packaging.

The department is undertaking a full review of energy management on its estate in partnership with The Carbon Trust and will institute a range of Invest to Save measures to realise carbon savings. However, the plan does

not specify by how much the department is aiming to reduce its carbon emissions. Defra clarified that the plan does not specify such targets at this stage as the Carbon Trust has yet

to produce its recommendations. The SDC looks forward to seeing specific targets in future plans.

## Securing the Future commitments

### Departmental commitments

The department's plan (p.5) acknowledges the large number of specific strategy commitments (201 in total) which fall to Defra. In order to keep the plan short and focussed, as per the SDC's guidance, the department decided to tackle those which had a target date for 2006 in its SDAP.

Defra confirmed in the bilateral discussions that future plans would address the longer-term commitments specified in *Securing the Future*. The department was also keen to avoid duplicating the commitments which are monitored by the cross-government Sustainable Development Programme Board.

Defra's prioritisation is sensible. However, the SDC would expect future plans to explain how priorities have been chosen and how longer term commitments have been addressed. The SDC is aware that the Programme Board is monitoring implementation. However, this is an internal process and progress is not publicised. This process should not preclude certain commitments from being featured in the action plan. If commitments are omitted on this basis then it should be made clear which commitments are being monitored by an alternative process with appropriate cross-references to other documents.

Defra's plan provides a list of over 40 of Defra's specific sustainable development related policy actions for 2006 (Annex 1). It highlights four of these as "key actions" corresponding to each of the priority areas in *Securing the Future*. It would be helpful if future SDAPs also gave some indication of relative priorities in the wider list. For example, successfully embedding sustainable development in Defra's non-departmental public body, Natural England, from the outset will be crucial for achieving a rich and diverse natural environment and

thriving rural communities. The SDC would therefore assume that any related actions would be a high priority for next year. Equally, it would be helpful to explore Defra's work on 'active promotion of the Environmental Stewardship scheme through... workshops... engagement of key stakeholders... and a promotional strategy'<sup>1</sup> as part of its overall focus on achieving a sustainable future for the use of UK land.

### Cross-government commitments

Defra, in its role of Sustainable Development Champion, is taking a lead in addressing some of the cross-government commitments in *Securing the Future* and has therefore acknowledged the cross-cutting commitments more than most departments. For example, the commitment to "strengthening leadership capacity within departments" is being taken with the National School for Government (NSG). A programme to ensure that the civil service can gain comprehensive skills in sustainable development is being developed. Defra is also taking action to tackle the commitment on procurement in the public sector by ensuring that the sustainable development principles are embedded in pan-Government contracts and ensuring that the National Action Plan for Sustainable Procurement was produced. However the strength of that leadership needs to be enhanced to provide adequate support for departments who lack the expertise to deliver this agenda effectively in the short term.

The SDC believes there is room for greater leadership in this area by Defra, to strengthen the embedding of sustainable development principles and practice across government, that is lacking in many Departments.

## Target setting

Defra's plan clearly states overall responsibility for the delivery of specific actions and the timescales for their delivery. However, it is not

always made clear what key actions need to be taken to achieve the targets. The SDC would expect to see a list of key actions that need to be taken included under the main outcomes included in the plan.

## Policy making

### Sustainable Development "proofing"

Defra's SDAP contains a comprehensive range of actions intended to help the department ensure that its policies are consistently "Sustainable Development proofed." The plan explains that currently all Defra policies should be subject to sustainability assessments using Defra's internally mandated sustainable development checklist in Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs), supplemented by Defra's 'Stretching the Web' appraisal tool.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this, the department acknowledges that these are not applied consistently. The plan contains an aim to tackle the "patchy" application of RIAs, and endeavours to ensure that they will be used consistently across the department. However, the plan does not specify how this will be achieved. Defra explained that the department's Better Regulation Unit was currently looking to develop an 'end-to-end policy gateway process' to develop better regulation which will feature sustainable development.<sup>3</sup> Since publication of this SDAP, the Better Regulation Executive has published a draft new RIA which is out for consultation.

As part of Defra's role to promote sustainable development across government, it is important to develop sustainable development policy proofing methods which are applicable to the rest of government. Some sustainable development impacts can be monetarised from evaluation of social or economic impacts (e.g. reducing the costs of water treatment as a result of reduced pollution) but others cannot be monetarised (e.g. the value of landscape) and dealing with these complexities in policy development is difficult for departments. Defra's role in influencing how Departments incorporate non-monetarised benefits into the policy development process is crucially

important if sustainable development is to be embedded effectively across Government. This will require continuing efforts to improve the evidence base.

To ensure that Defra's existing policies are sustainable, the plan commits to carrying out sustainability audits in 2006. The department was still developing its thinking on how to approach this action at the time of the bilateral.<sup>4</sup>

The plan does not specify which actions the department will take to integrate the five principles into policy making, either in Defra or across government. However, the bilateral revealed that Defra is exploring this commitment with the NSG to embed it into the school's training and capacity-building function across the Civil Service.

### Sustainable Development Skills

Defra's plan acknowledges the need to ensure that staff have the skills needed to deliver its sustainable development commitments. The department is therefore planning to take action over 2006 to identify the skills that are needed and ensure staff in Defra can develop accordingly. The department will produce a new Skills and Capability Framework reflecting the skills staff will need to deliver sustainable development, conduct a cross-organisational skills audit to identify gaps and introduce a new skills database to facilitate the greater use of flexible teams.

All new staff will receive general sustainable development training as part of the new e-induction package and half day workshops which will be rolled out throughout the year. Defra has also committed to making these tools available to other government departments, once trialled. The departmental skills audit



is likely to yield valuable information. It will therefore be crucial that these packages are updated and revised as necessary to reflect any

skills gaps highlighted by the department's skills audit.

## Achieving Sustainable Development outcomes

### Infrastructure

It is evident that Defra's plan has "buy in " and clear accountability at senior level. The plan has been approved and is "owned" by Defra's Management Board. Each action has been allocated a responsible owner at Director level who is accountable for the delivery. Senior managers have been allocated responsibility for delivery of the plan and all Management Board members have been specifically charged with promoting sustainable development internally and externally. The plan does not, however, detail how this will be achieved.

### Engagement

Defra's SDAP recognises the role of awareness raising and behaviour change in helping the department meet its sustainable development objectives. The plan contains many interesting actions relating to sustainable development communications and awareness directed towards both the Department and outside stakeholders. These build upon the department's "ThinkSustainable" initiative which is designed to help Defra staff integrate sustainable development into their work.

It is important that the impact of this activity is assessed. Defra uses its annual staff survey to monitor and assess the level of understanding of sustainable development across the department, and is aiming for an improvement in general understanding of sustainable development. The department also aims to improve the score relating to the number of teams who involve external stakeholders, whether within or outside Defra, in their policy design process.

However, despite this clear commitment to engagement, it is not clear from the plan how the department engaged with staff or other government departments in the development of its plan. Defra explained that it had taken part in a peer review process with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Marks and Spencer and the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA). However, Defra acknowledged that it would like to involve more stakeholders in the development of future plans through wider membership of its SDAP Project Board, and perhaps some form of panel to inform the debate.







## Monitoring and reporting

Defra's Management Board will be tracking progress against the action plan. The department's SDAP commits the department to hosting an open meeting at the end of the year where any members of staff can question the Board on Defra's progress against the plan.

This is an excellent idea which promotes both accountability of, and engagement with the plan. Defra's SDAP will be integrated with existing delivery and reporting mechanisms (e.g. PSA1) and Defra is seeking to time/integrate the SDAP report with the departmental Annual Report.

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- 1 Sustainable Development Action Plan – *Just jump straight in*, Defra, December 2005, p.19
  - 2 The web is a simple graphic, based on the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA), to help Defra policymakers integrate sustainable development considerations into policymaking.
  - 3 Since the bilateral, Defra has informed the SDC that this process is not being taken forward.
  - 4 Defra is currently conducting sustainability audits of several key policies in Defra, running team sessions as workshops to i) help embed sustainable development into policy making and further develop the policy; and ii) help develop staff thinking about economic, social, environmental and long-term impacts, and develop their understanding of what good sustainable development looks like.

## Strengths to build upon

	Build on initial work with the National School for Government to ensure that civil servants can gain comprehensive skills in sustainable development.
	Share communications tools with OGDs.
	Work to integrate the five principles into Defra's policy making.
	Ensure that Defra's SDAP report summarises the outcomes of the "open meeting" with Directors and key audits and indicates how Defra intends to act on the findings.
	Ensure that the next plan specifies the key actions which need to be taken to achieve the overall targets, and include indicators of success.
	Indicate relative priorities of any actions listed and explain the overall basis of prioritisation.

## Challenges for 2007

	Include more emphasis on actions aimed at mainstreaming sustainable development across government (in particular through promoting the value of sustainable development across government) and engaging departments in the sustainable development agenda at the working level.
	Set out actions in the context of the longer term contribution those actions can make to sustainable development, such as the relevance of environmental limits in policy making.
	Ensure ownership of the plan across the organisation.
	Involve a wider range of external stakeholders in the production of future plans.



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