

NSDS: Progress in UK

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The UK NSDS ('*A better quality of life*') was published in 1999. It is currently being reviewed. It set out aims and indicators and established the three pillared concept of sustainable development. It also established the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) (independent appointed advisers and a secretariat).

The strategy contains a set of 150 SD indicators a smaller set of 15 Headline Indicators. These are reported on every year.

This year, as part of the context setting for the strategy review, the annual report looked back more than one year and reviewed progress since strategy published. The SDC also published a review of progress (*Shows Promise. Must Try Harder*). This title indicates the overall view of the SDC that there has been progress in the UK. The Government broadly agrees: progress has been good in some areas but patchy. There is a need for more consistency and greater effort in areas where the most difficult challenges lie. There has been good progress on air quality, river water quality, some social issues especially education and poor housing. There has also been some decoupling between GDP and road traffic. Bird populations (used in the UK as an indicator of wider biodiversity) are stabilising after significant falls, and in some aspects are improving.

The position is less good on traffic volumes, robbery (particularly street crime, vehicle theft, etc.) and household waste. These continue to be 'red' on our traffic light assessment.

Review Process

This began in mid 2003 with a process to gather initial stakeholder views and workshops to identify key themes and establish a set of aims for the review. It was felt important to be clear what was wanted from the review, not just to do it because there was a commitment.

The aims of the review were set out in a consultation document:

- improve delivery of SD outcomes;
- increase awareness of and engagement with SD;
- build a sense of common purpose while supporting devolved, regional and local diversity;
- embed SD more effectively in Govt action and policy making;
- build on what has been achieved but challenge the government and others to do more;
- be inclusive, involve stakeholders and those responsible for delivery at all levels;
- provide leadership through a clear vision and priorities.

Four (deliberately broad) key themes were identified from initial soundings:

- climate change and energy;
- sustainable consumption and production;
- environment and social justice;
- helping communities to help themselves.

The consultation was launched in April 2004. It included a web site, events on specific issues, regional and local events, and training of facilitators for discussions in community groups.

Responses have been evaluated and policy proposals are being prepared. The aim is to provide a draft new strategy to Ministers by early December, and to launch the new strategy in March 2005. It is important that the launch is seen as a beginning, not as an end. The emphasis is on delivery and the continuing involvement of those who deliver SD on the ground.

Two successes of the 1999 strategy

- It has effectively established the three-pillar approach to SD, and that it is not a solely environmental concern. This has spread consciousness and enabled DEFRA the influence to reach right across Government beyond Departments that have an obvious environmental interest. Departments such as the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office are now evolving their own SD strategies. It has enabled SD to become a key theme in successive spending rounds (budget allocation discussions) (2002 and 2004) and is now a statutory duty for some (though not all) public bodies.
- The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC), established in 2000, has grown to be a mature and useful body which is active in many areas. Its members are able to speak more freely than the staff of DEFRA's Sustainable Development Unit (SDU). The SDC is able to be more flexible and responsive than central Government – this can be used to good effect to complement the SDU. For the new strategy, consideration is being given to giving the SDC a stronger remit and asking it to report on progress on SD in the UK, rather than have Government holding itself to account as at present.

Two areas where more needs to be done

- There was no systematic follow up or management of the delivery of the 1999 strategy. As a result, some actions were not pursued and delivery has been patchy rather than consistent, and difficult areas remain a challenge. There is no evidence, therefore, that what has been delivered would not have happened but for the strategy.
- Public awareness raising has been less effective than was hoped. Research indicates that only about 30% of people in the UK think they understand the term 'sustainable development'. Of these, it is likely that only a small number fully understand what it means. A review of research has been commissioned to determine how to be more effective in bringing about not just awareness but behaviour change – this is likely to be a major theme in the new strategy. The research provides a more sophisticated model of behaviour change for policy makers.

The UK's use of 'traffic lights'

In the UK, traffic lights are used in a SD context to show how the Headline Indicators are changing. This is not appropriate for evaluating a strategy because:

- The traffic lights only show the direction of travel, not necessarily whether progress is fast enough;
- They show progress on individual issues, not across the board;
- There are time lags between action and movement of the indicator, so traffic light judgements are not a good gauge of a strategy's effectiveness

Outside the SD context, traffic lights are also used to assess the progress on major Government targets, and the likelihood of successful delivery of major projects and programmes. In this context, the traffic light assessment is used not to make a judgement about the value of the project or target, but simply to assess whether it is likely to be successful. The emphasis is on improvement and avoidance of failed projects, and it focuses on aspects such as the quality of planning, capacity and resources, skills, governance, monitoring, etc.

The traffic lights are

RED	Highly problematic. Urgent and decisive action is needed if the programme is to deliver.
AMBER/RED	Problematic. Substantial attention with some aspects needing urgent action to deliver.
AMBER/GREEN	Mixed. Aspects will require substantial attention, and some aspects are good.
GREEN	Good. The programme requires refinement and systematic implementation to deliver.

This is more appropriate to a review of the effectiveness, or likely effectiveness, of a Sustainable Development Strategy.