



Submission to the Environmental Audit Committee's consultation on *The Government's Approach to Sustainable Development*

1st September 2015

Summary of Recommendations

1. The EAC use the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be formally adopted in September 2015, as the basis from which to review the Government's approach to, and specific policies towards, sustainable development.
2. Responsibility for sustainable development coordination and oversight should lie with the Cabinet Office. However, this is not enough to ensure effective and considered implementation. The EAC should consider an inquiry into the architecture within Government needed for promoting sustainable development and ensuring policy coherence and coordination across departments and agencies. This kind of inquiry could include consideration of the desirability and feasibility of, for example, establishing a Minister and/or Cabinet Committee with specific responsibility for sustainable development, as well as horizontal policy procedures to underpin policy coherence.
3. The Wellbeing and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 established an independent Commissioner for Future Generations as a way to ensure that sustainable development policy and practice was not unduly influenced by short-term political priorities. The Committee could consider reviewing the potential for establishing a similar independent office with responsibility for oversight and scrutiny of government and broader public sector action on sustainable development.
4. The EAC should consider the potential for increasing public and stakeholder participation in policy development and scrutiny, to embed a more effective and accountable response to sustainable development. This review could also be an opportunity for the Committee to become much bolder and more imaginative in its own approach to public engagement.

Introduction

The Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development (FDSD) www.fdsd.org is delighted to offer recommendations on the themes that the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) could adopt during the next Parliament, as well as measures against which the Government's success can be judged.

FDSD explores the way in which our current democracies and political systems could adapt in order to better achieve sustainable development.

We would very much welcome the opportunity to further discuss with the EAC any of the issues raised in this paper.

Background

Current Government policy towards sustainable development seems to lack clarity and substance. There was no reference to sustainable development in the Conservative Manifesto in the 2015 General Election, and little of substance available on Government websites.

There is a danger that the Government's fiscal and policy agenda prioritising spending cuts has crowded out the space to both consider how current policies, as well as longer-term government responses, reflect sustainable development.

SDGs as an opportunity to re-articulate commitment and policy

The EAC is considering the Government's approach to sustainable development at the same time that the United Nations is in the process of adopting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹ that will replace the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While the Prime Minister David Cameron co-chaired the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, there has been concern that the same level of commitment has not been shown to considering the domestic application of the SDGs.²

The SDGs will be a useful metric for the EAC against which to assess government commitment and action.

***Recommendation:* The EAC use the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be formally adopted in September 2015, as the basis from which to review the Government's approach to, and specific policies towards, sustainable development.**

Policy coherence

Defra has been the department charged with developing government strategy towards sustainable development and promoting policy coherence and coordination across other departments and

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

² See for example the Environmental Audit Committee's [Connected World: Agreeing ambitious Sustainable Development Goals in 2015](#) 2014

agencies. But Defra's capacity in this regard has long been questioned, especially its ability to bring departments together where policies clearly contradict sustainable development principles. Defra's capacity has been further eroded as it has borne a significant proportion of government cuts over the last Parliament.

Areas of cross-cutting policy that have significant Government commitment have typically been the responsibility of the Cabinet Office. This is readily apparent in the lead taken by the Cabinet Office in coordinating the post-2015 SDG agenda both internationally and across Whitehall. Locating responsibility for policy development, coherence and coordination in the Cabinet Office would be a clear and unambiguous political signal that sustainable development is a priority issue for the current Government.

However, Cabinet Office co-ordination cannot be the only mechanism for enabling sustainable development across Government. Governments internationally have developed a range of approaches to institutionally embedding sustainable development. The EAC could usefully hold an inquiry into the requirements for Government to truly commit to and embed sustainable development principles, including, for example, consideration of a Minister at Cabinet level whose primary responsibility is for sustainable development, the reintroduction of a Cabinet Committee for Sustainable Development, or the enhancement of policy procedures to promote policy coherence across departments.

Recommendation: Responsibility for sustainable development coordination and oversight should lie with the Cabinet Office. However, this is not enough to ensure effective and considered implementation. The EAC should consider an inquiry into the architecture within Government needed for promoting sustainable development and ensuring policy coherence and coordination across departments and agencies. This kind of inquiry could include consideration of the desirability and feasibility of, for example, establishing a Minister and/or Cabinet Committee with specific responsibility for sustainable development, as well as horizontal policy procedures to underpin policy coherence

Independent oversight

There is a tendency for long-term considerations such as sustainable development to slip off the policy agenda with the urgency of short-term imperatives. This lack of a consistent approach to sustainable development is part of the reason for public scepticism towards Government commitment.

To ensure a consistent approach from Government and other public bodies on long-term issues such as sustainable development, it is necessary to consider how better to institutionalise the long-term into our democratic system through, for example, dedicated independent scrutiny, monitoring and oversight. A number of countries have institutionalised independent Commissioners or Ombudsmen for Sustainable Development and/or Future Generations in order to achieve this purpose.³ The Welsh Government is a leader in this area having recently established a Future Generations Commissioner as part of the policy package introduced in the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.⁴

Recommendation: The Wellbeing and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 established an independent Commissioner for Future Generations as a way to ensure that sustainable

³ <http://www.fdsd.org/publications/the-democratic-case-for-an-office-for-future-generations-in-progress/>

⁴ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/2/section/1/enacted>

development policy and practice is not unduly influenced by short-term political priorities. The Committee should consider reviewing the potential for establishing a similar independent office with responsibility for oversight and scrutiny of government and broader public sector action on sustainable development.

Public engagement

A complementary approach to rebuilding confidence in, as well as enabling, government commitment to sustainable development is to develop more effective and meaningful modes of public and stakeholder engagement. Much more is required than simple one-way communication from government or standard consultations that fail to attract attention or interest.

The transparency and participation agenda is a government priority: it is an active participant in the international Open Government Partnership⁵ and the Cabinet Office is leading on Open Policy Making⁶. The proposed SDG16 includes the aim to '*ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels*'.⁷

Innovative ways of engaging the public in the policy process are being adopted around the world. There is increasing evidence that where participatory institutions are carefully designed to ensure considered reflection rather than knee-jerk reactions and raw preferences, citizens and other stakeholders are willing and able to deal with complex policy issues. Participation can generate commitment amongst participants, increase knowledge, generate new ideas, legitimise tough political choices, and challenge the power and influence of vested interests.⁸

There has been some experimentation by Select Committees and other parts of Parliament in the use of more innovative engagement methods. The EAC is well placed to raise the political and public profile of sustainable development (and its own activities) through more systematic and innovative public engagement. And the oversight and scrutiny functions of any independent Office for Sustainable Development/Future Generations would be enhanced by embedding more systematic public engagement strategies.⁹

***Recommendation:* The EAC should consider the potential for increasing public and stakeholder participation in policy development and scrutiny, to embed a more effective and accountable response to sustainable development. This review could also be an opportunity for the Committee to become much bolder and more imaginative in its own approach to public engagement.**

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⁵ <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/open-policy-making-toolkit>

⁷ <http://www.fdsd.org/ideas/sustainable-development-goal-sdg-16-democratic-institutions/>

⁸ <http://www.fdsd.org/ways-forward/participation-in-decision-making/>

⁹ <http://www.fdsd.org/publications/the-democratic-case-for-an-office-for-future-generations-in-progress/>