

# Sustainable Northern Ireland District Council Survey Results June 2007



## Executive Summary

This short report provides a snapshot of how district councils in Northern Ireland are currently engaging with the important issue of sustainable development. It is based on a survey of district councils undertaken by Sustainable Northern Ireland in 2007. Comparisons are made to a similar survey undertaken by Queen's University in 2002<sup>1</sup> to assess progress in the intervening five years.

The findings of the survey suggest that:

- Despite an enhanced and urgent need for action on sustainability issues sustainable development has declined as a priority for district councils in the last five years.
- Sustainable development is now being addressed by a narrower range of council departments, with less effort to integrate this across the council. Typically, it is seen predominately as an environmental issue, thus neglecting its social and economic dimensions and the benefits of integrating all of these.
- While most district councils have made a start at implementing the Sustainable Development Duty, the majority are confused about their role and requirements.
- For sustainable development to have an impact it is commonly felt that there is a need for government support, specific knowledge and expertise.
- There is a range of good practice being undertaken in local sustainable development in Northern Ireland, although this mostly consists of environmental initiatives.
- The sustainable development initiatives regarded as having most success are those where a statutory obligation exists (e.g. waste management), implying that for the new Sustainable Development Duty to have any impact it needs to be enforced like other statutory duties.
- There is a lack of direction and sharing of best practice. Councils are not fully aware of what initiatives are taking place in neighbouring areas.

# Introduction

This report provides a snapshot of how district councils in Northern Ireland (NI) are currently engaging with the important issue of sustainable development (SD). It is based on a survey of the regions' 26 district councils undertaken by Sustainable Northern Ireland in 2007. The survey was issued to all Directors of Environmental Health or Technical Services who were asked to distribute it to the most relevant officer for completion. This may have created some degree of bias in the answers received for the question one, although asking the survey to be forwarded to the most relevant person for completion will have mitigated this to some degree. To further eliminate this bias the questionnaire was followed up with a letter to Chief Executives requesting they ensure it was completed and returned by the relevant officer.

A total of 16 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 62%. In addition to consulting with district councils via this survey, Sustainable Northern Ireland ran three focus groups attended by 12 councils to identify current thinking on sustainable development and what the new Duty means.

The findings of the survey are discussed in three main sections dealing with: how SD is integrated into the structure of district councils, a review of the current activities of councils that promote SD and the main constraints and opportunities for further promoting the sustainability agenda in local government. This report also lists some examples of good practice and suggests some implications of the overall findings.

The survey was designed to allow some direct comparison with a similar survey undertaken by Queen's University Belfast in 2002<sup>1</sup> and, where possible, the findings discussed below are compared to the situation five years ago. It is important to note that the previous survey was undertaken at a time when an attempt was made to reinvigorate local action on sustainable development around the Johannesburg SD Summit. Since that date, world events have continued to remind us all of the critical importance of tackling global resource management, climate change and social justice. There have been many initiatives launched over the last five years to tackle these issues (not least the Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy) that have met with varying success and the actions of Northern Ireland's district councils must be seen in the context of this global effort to implement sustainable development.

Sustainable Northern Ireland is very grateful to all those that participated in the survey and feels that this is an important way of monitoring how the critical issue of sustainable development is being addressed at the local level in Northern Ireland. Sustainable NI suggests that this brief look at district councils and sustainable development in Northern Ireland demonstrates that, while the region does have some examples of good practice, there is still an urgent need for SD to be seen as a greater priority by both district councils and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

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<sup>1</sup> This was published in Ellis, G. Motherway, B. Neill, W.J.V. and Hand, U. (2004) *Towards a Green Isle? Local Sustainable Development on the Island of Ireland*, Centre for Cross Border Studies, Armagh. It is available at <http://www.crossborder.ie/research/environment.php>

## Section TWO

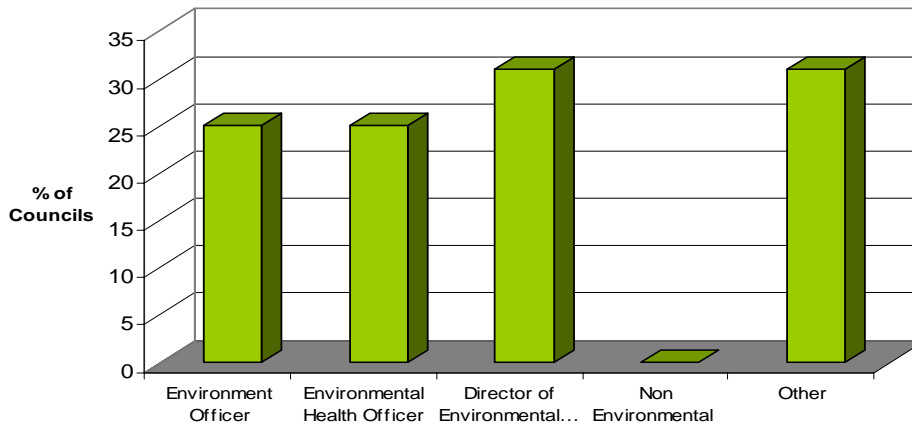
# Sustainable Development and District Council Structure

## 2.1 Job title of respondent

A key indicator of how councils perceive and organise their SD activities is the position of the officers who were deemed most appropriate to respond to the questionnaire. It is therefore highly significant that **100%** of respondents (all graphs are based on 16 respondents) were associated with the environmental departments of the councils. People from the 'environmental' section, but between director and officer level, were classed as 'Other'.

This suggests that all councils in Northern Ireland see SD predominantly as an environmental protection issue, rather than an issue that attempts to integrate environmental concerns with social and economic goals, and as such, missing many of the wider benefits that can accrue from a more holistic approach to SD.

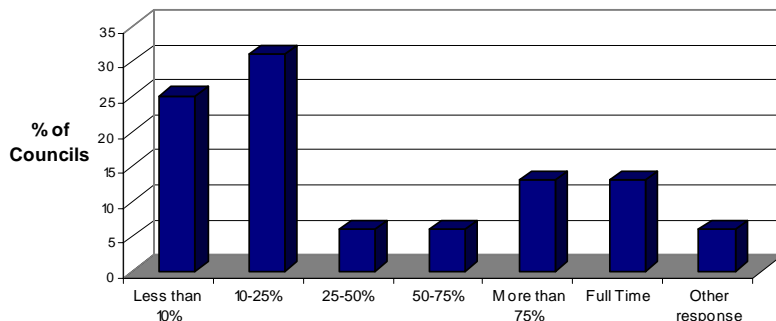
Figure 1: Location of respondents in councils



## 2.2 Time dedicated by the respondent to sustainable development issues

The questionnaire asked what percentage of their time respondents spent on SD in order to understand whether key officers were dedicated to this issue, or whether they had to juggle this with other responsibilities. The survey found that **56%** of respondents dedicate less than 25% of their time to dealing with SD, although practice across the region is highly variable.

Figure 2: Respondents' time taken up by SD issues

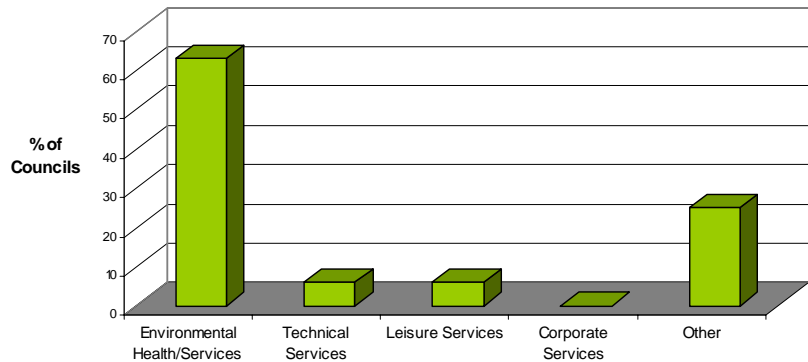


There has been a notable decrease in the time officers dedicate to SD when compared to the situation in 2002, when **34%** of respondents were engaged full time in sustainable development – this is now only **13%**. This suggests that either SD has become integrated into a wider number of officer roles in the last five years or that it is now seen as a less important council responsibility.

### 2.3 Department with main sustainable development responsibility

The responses to this question correspond to the response for question 1.3. **66%** of surveys show sustainable development responsibility lies with environmental or technical services. 'Other' departments include Policy or Borough Services.

Figure 3: Department with main SD responsibility

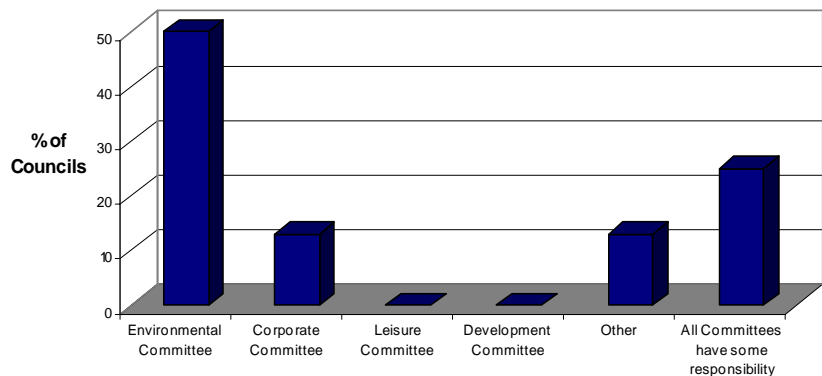


### 2.4 Committee with main responsibility

As well as the key department that deals with SD issues, the questionnaire asked which committee has the main responsibility for SD.

The environmental section of the council has primary responsibility for sustainable development, although relevant issues are also brought before a variety of other council committees. **25%** of respondents said that all committees have some responsibility.

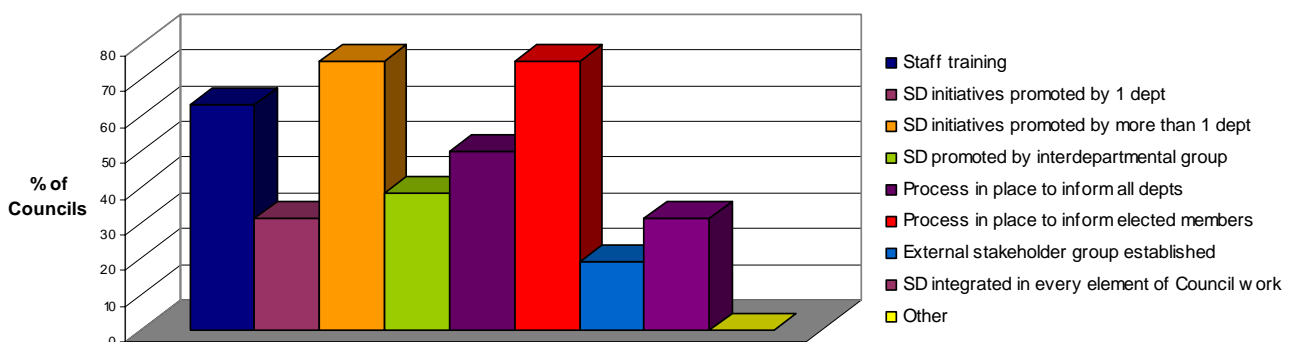
Figure 4: Committee with main SD responsibility



### 2.5 Approach to integrating sustainable development within council structures

The survey went on to examine the way in which SD was integrated within council structures and found that the most noted of these is that processes are in place to inform elected members and that sustainable development is promoted by more than one department. Also featuring highly is staff training. Few district councils use consultation with stakeholders as an integration tool.

Figure 5: Integration of SD into council structure



When this is compared to the situation in 2002, it suggests that the effort to integrate SD activities across councils has reduced over the last five years with less staff training, less cross-departmental initiatives and less effort to engage with external stakeholders. There is, however, more effort to inform councillors of SD initiatives. Indeed, this was reinforced in the focus groups which suggested that most district councils are now holding back undertaking any significant addition sustainable development work until they are given further guidance from central government on what is expected of them. Thus, despite the publication of the NI Sustainable Development Strategy in May 2006, there still appears to be a lack of direction to SD in Northern Ireland.

**Section  
THREE**

## Current Sustainable Development Activities of District Councils

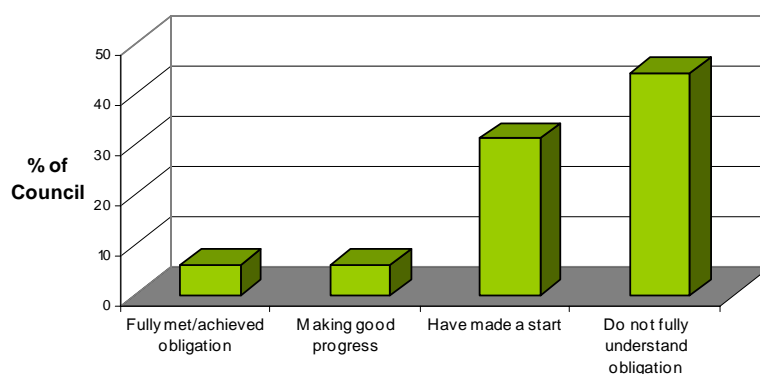
### 3.1 Progress towards meeting new sustainable development obligation

District councils in Northern Ireland were given a statutory Duty to promote Sustainable Development as part of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 which came into force on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2007.

When asked about the progress district councils have made in meeting this new obligation, the survey found that **44%** still do not understand what this entails and another **30%** believe they have only just made a start to address it. Only a small minority believe they have made more substantial progress. This suggests there is some confusion surrounding the obligation under the new

Sustainable Development Duty and, as such, district council are potentially left open to judicial challenge. This points to a failure by central government to fully engage with district councils about this issue and highlights the critical need for guidance on how government believes councils should fulfil their new obligation.

**Figure 6: Progress towards meeting new SD obligation**

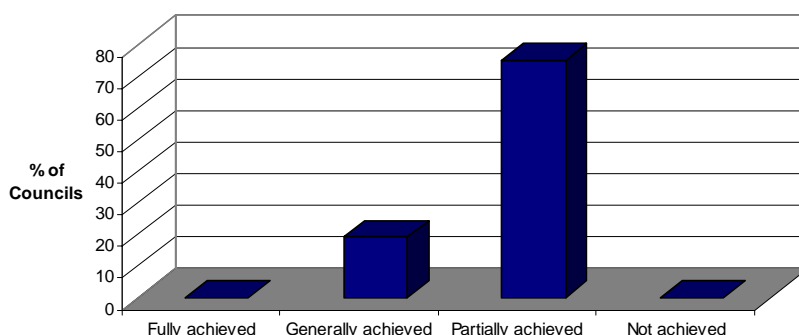


### 3.2 Progress towards aligning activities to the Sustainable Development Strategy

Councils were asked about how they believed they were progressing with the objectives set out in the Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy. Given that the Strategy was published only 12 months ago, it is not surprising that no council believes it has fully aligned its activities with the Strategy, although no authority believes either it

has not accomplished anything. All respondents have either generally or partially achieved alignment of their activities with the Sustainable Development Strategy.

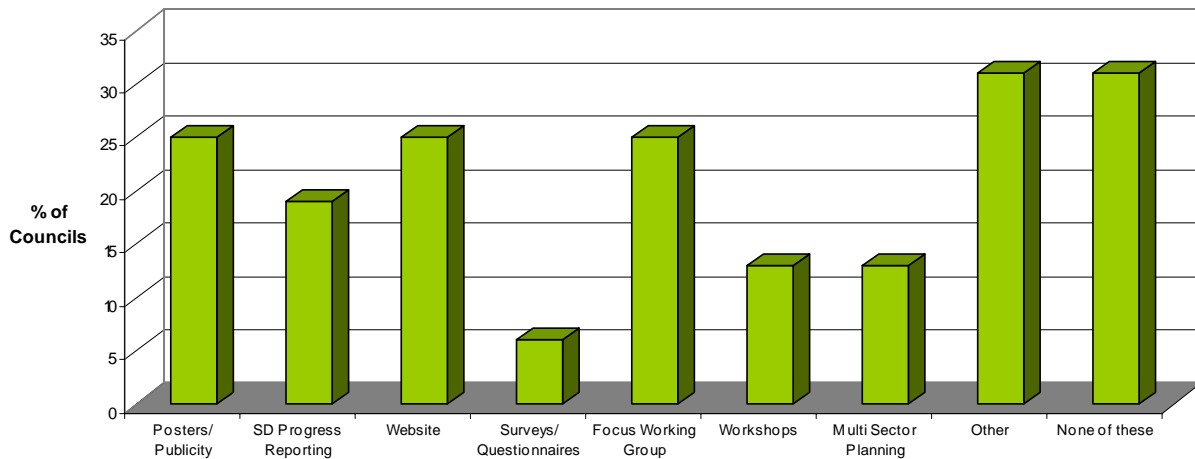
**Figure 7: Progress towards aligning activities with SDS**



### 3.3 Measures taken to implement sustainable development

In an attempt to better understand how councils are actually engaging with SD, respondents were asked to list the type of measures they were undertaking. The show that the most commonly used methods of promoting SD is via poster advertising, council websites and holding focus groups. There appears to be less emphasis on integrating SD with core council functions or promoting it in partnership with local stakeholders.

**Figure 8: Integration of SD into Council Structure**

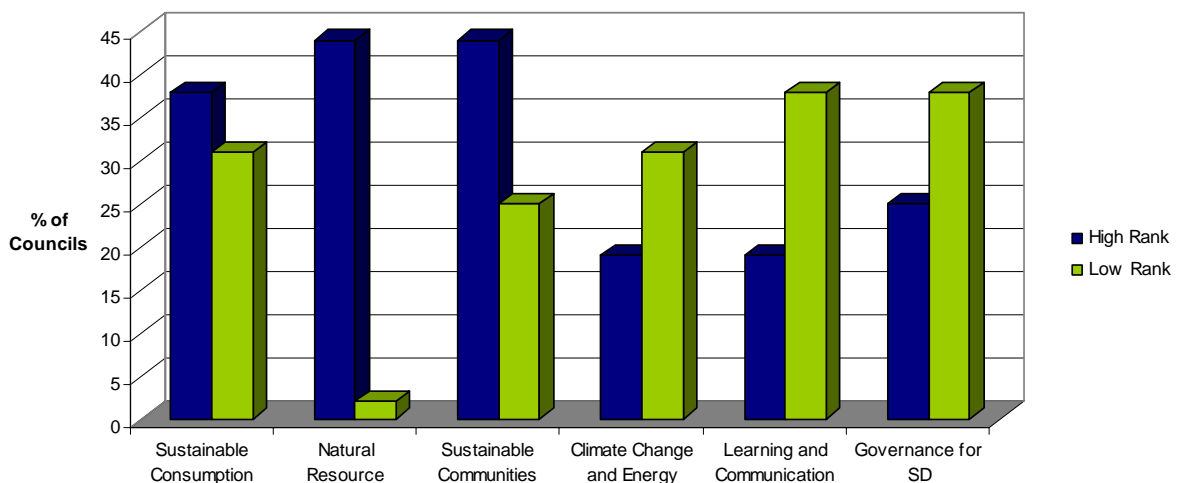


When compared to the results of the 2002 survey, this question further highlights a decline in the level and variety of SD activities being undertaken by district councils. In particular, this shows that fewer measures are now being undertaken to implement sustainable development, and that those that are taking place are more focussed on communication of such issues, rather than on integrating SD with core council responsibilities.

### 3.4 Priority areas of the Sustainable Development Strategy

In order to understand the value and relevance of the NI Sustainable Development Strategy, respondents were asked to rank each of the six priority areas of the Strategy in order of importance to their council. This indicates that district councils see nature conservation and sustainable communities as the most important elements. Learning and communication is ranked lowest, which appears to contradict the fact that the key SD activities of councils are actually focused on communication issues (see 3.3. above).

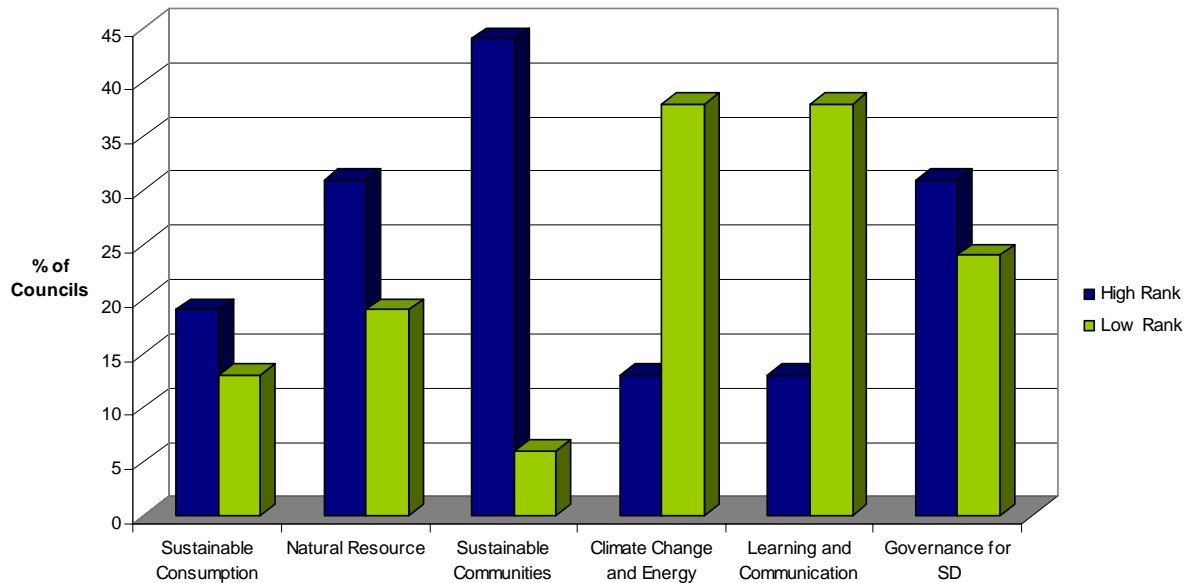
**Figure 9: Priority areas of the SD Strategy**



### 3.5 Post RPA priority areas of the Sustainable Development Strategy

Following the proposed Review of Public Administration, the new district councils are expected to be given a much wider range of statutory responsibilities. For this reason it was asked whether this new institutional framework is likely to alter the SD priorities for local government. Figure 10 lists the likely priority areas post RPA and should be compared to Figure 9. The only notable difference between the ranking before and after RPA is the emergence of Governance and Sustainable Communities as greater priorities, perhaps reflecting the proposed devolution of planning powers to councils. Climate change and energy, and learning and communication, again rank as less important elements.

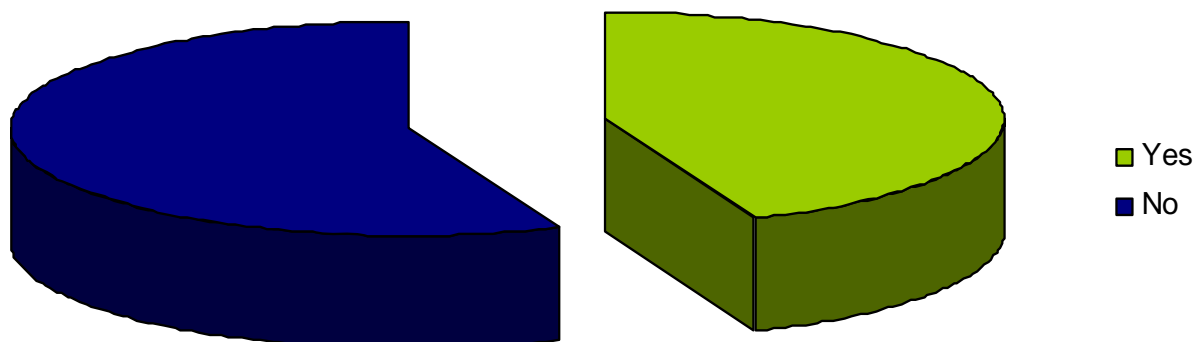
**Figure 10: Priority areas of SD Strategy after RPA**



### 3.6 Existence of a sustainable development plan

The survey asked whether district councils had formulated their own SD strategies, in line with the aspiration of the UK government established as long ago as 1993. The findings suggest that **44%** of district councils have a sustainable development plan while **56%** do not. Of the district councils with a plan, 57% are in the process of reviewing their plans to incorporate the

**Figure 11: Councils with a SD Implementation Plan**



requirements of the Sustainable Development Strategy. Reasons given for not updating plans include waiting for additional guidance regarding the new Duty. This highlights a small increase in councils with such plans over the last five years; 33% reported they had an LA21 Action plan in 2002.

## Section FOUR

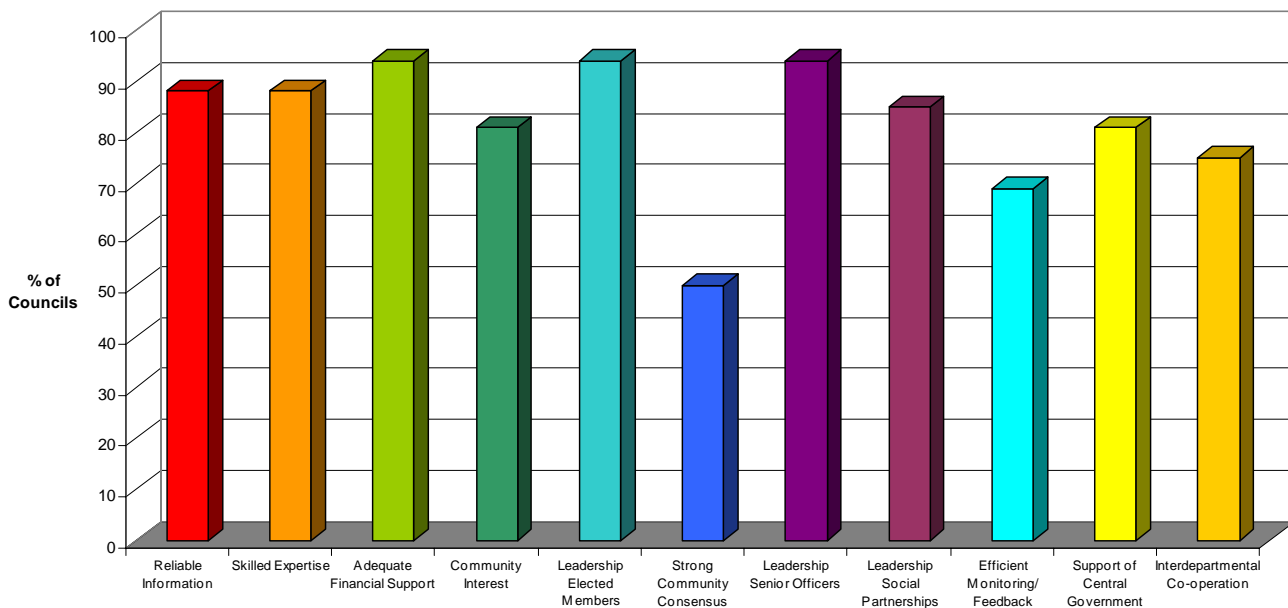
# Success and Constraints for Sustainable Development Activities in District Councils

In order to understand the dynamics of local authority action on SD, councils were asked to identify the factors that increased success in their SD activities and those that limited such activity, thus highlighting priority areas for action to increase activity in this field.

## 4.1 Factors for success

The most important factors for success highlighted by the councils were adequate financial support, leadership of elected members and leadership of senior council officers. Other factors that ranked highly include reliable and accurate information, skilled expertise, community interest and support from central government. This suggests that these areas are critical for the successful implementation of SD.

Figure 12: High ranking factors of success in SD activities



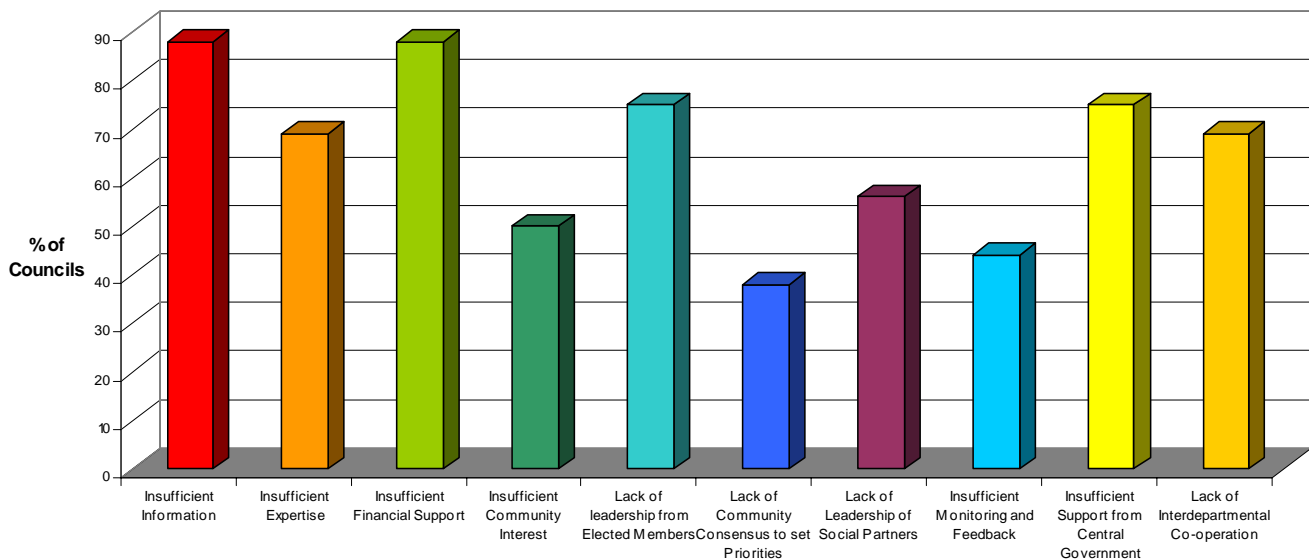
In 2002 councils highlighted support from central government, leadership from chief officers and interdepartmental cooperation as being the most important factors for success. This suggests that without these factors in place sustainable development will not make the impact that is needed. The survey results indicate that without being given strong incentives, via effective legislation and leadership, many councils will not feel obliged to do much additional work to integrate sustainable development thinking into their policy development and activities.

## 4.2 Factors limiting action

There is a similarity between factors for success and those limiting it. The limiting factors ranked highest include insufficient information, insufficient financial support and insufficient support from national government. This suggests that councils are unwilling to make any major changes to how they operate without the financial incentive to do so. This corresponds to the feedback Sustainable Northern Ireland received from the focus groups on sustainable development. Councils have received some financial incentives to ensure they implement Section 75 equality legislation, as well as funding for community safety initiatives. The results of the survey indicate lack of financial resources could be perceived as lack of importance placed on this issue by central government. It is possible that this attitude feeds back to lack of leadership from elected members who are less likely to maintain awareness of the issue without the 'carrot and stick' approach that has worked so well for other initiatives.

When compared to the situation in 2002, the main limiting factors were insufficient support from national government and insufficient financial support. This attitude has been consistent and has played a roll in why sustainable development activities have decreased over the last five years (section 3.3). Even with the new Duty, unless increased importance is placed on sustainable development it is likely not to have a measurable impact on the work being undertaken by district councils.

**Figure 13: Limiting factors for SD activities**



In the responses received, there is a correlation between factors for success and those that will impose limitations. The main consensus from district councils for sustainable development to be a success is that the skills and experience exists within the council and that adequate financial support is provided. Other areas of importance include leadership from the top and departmental co-operation. Community support is neither deemed a critical factor for success nor is the lack of it thought to be a limiting factor.

# Examples of Good Practice

The survey asked district councils to identify the types of issues they are implementing as part of their sustainable development activity. Some of these are statutory responsibilities while others are not. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, it is those falling under statutory banners that are classed as being most effective. Perhaps this relates to section four of the survey where the results show that respondents feel support from central governments is an essential prerequisite to any successful implementation of sustainable development at a local level.

**Examples given of good practice include:**

- ☺ Health and well-being
- ☺ Waste management
- ☺ Biodiversity and natural habitat enhancement and protection
- ☺ Leisure activities
- ☺ Air quality monitoring
- ☺ ISO 14001 accreditation
- ☺ Use of renewable energy
- ☺ Education
- ☺ Local Strategic Partnerships
- ☺ Implementation on local economic development action plan
- ☺ Alternative fuel for fleet vans
- ☺ Employment of officers
- ☺ Access to the countryside
- ☺ Community development initiatives including action plans
- ☺ Sustainability strategy
- ☺ Farmers market
- ☺ Fair trade status
- ☺ Fuel Poverty
- ☺ New builds incorporate energy efficiency

All respondents suggested that SD was predominantly concerned with environmental initiatives, reflecting responses to previous questions. This does not mean that within those council sustainable development initiatives are only being undertaken within environmental services, but it does highlight that sustainable development issues are still primarily viewed as environmental. For sustainable development to work this perception needs to change.

When compared to the initiatives noted in the 2002 survey, these data suggest that, in the intervening five years, SD activity has decreased. This may or may not be an accurate assessment. The survey results indicate that sustainable development is still perceived as an environmental initiative. There is a great deal of work being undertaken in different sections of the district councils that firmly falls under the social or economic sections of sustainable development. In addition, these initiatives (such as the Community Empowerment Partnerships, Renewing Community Action Plan, Investing Together, Investing for Health, Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and Capacity Building in Disadvantaged Communities Programme) all integrate sustainable development principles. This does not mean there is not additional work to be done. Sustainable development principles need to be integrated at the heart of council policies and operations as well as into their activities.

The findings of this survey suggest that:

- The last five years has seen a decline, rather than an increase, in the way in which Northern Ireland's district councils are promoting Sustainable Development.
- Local authorities now see this as a lower priority, placing a greater emphasis on awareness raising around SD, rather than integrating SD with core council functions.
- There is still a range of good practice in SD being undertaken by Northern Ireland's district councils, mostly focussed on environmental initiatives rather than the economic or social dimensions of SD.
- Since 2002 there have been a number of global, international and regional initiatives for promoting Sustainable Development – for Northern Ireland's councils the most critical have been the Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy and the establishment of the Statutory Duty to promote SD. While these are positive developments, they have not yet been supported by guidance on how Councils are expected to promote SD.
- There is a need for dedicated expertise and guidance in local sustainable development issues in Northern Ireland.
- The findings suggest that for district councils to further promote sustainable development, the following will be required:
  - Government should immediately issue good quality guidance on how district councils are expected to fulfil their new Statutory Duty to promote sustainable development.
  - Councils should review the skills they require to more effectively promote SD and invest in qualified staff if required. The Northern Ireland Assembly should consider providing additional financial resources for this.
  - Government should establish more formal and regular mechanisms for engaging with district councils on local sustainable development issues.
  - Councils would benefit from the transfer of practical experience and good practice in local sustainable development and should therefore establish a Northern Ireland Council Sustainable Development Forum through which this can be undertaken.

Sustainable Northern Ireland has been unable to promote sustainable development fully in the last few years. It is only since the launch of the Sustainable Development Strategy that we have been able to see a viable future for the organisation. Sustainable Northern Ireland hopes that it will be able to provide information and help for councils to assist integrate sustainable development into councils' policies and practices.

# Northern Ireland District Council Sustainable Development Survey Results

Produced by



With support from



And funding by



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June 2007

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