

The
Sustainable
Development Duty
and
Your District Council
A Strategic Overview

June 2007

Introduction

A Statutory Duty to ensure that public authorities act in a manner that best contributes to the objectives of sustainable development came into effect on 31 March 2007. On 9 May 2006 the Secretary of State Peter Hain launched the Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy¹. This document established a framework and focus for tackling the challenges that lie ahead if Northern Ireland is going to embrace sustainable development effectively. It sends a strong message to public bodies about the need to encourage sustainable development in order to tackle the six priority areas and to make the strategy's objectives a reality throughout Northern Ireland.

Six Priority Areas	1	Sustainable Consumption and Production
	2	Natural Resource Protection and Environmental Enhancement
	3	Sustainable Communities
	4	Climate Change and Energy
	5	Learning and Communication for Sustainable Development
	6	Governance for Sustainable Development

District Councils and Sustainable Communities

The primary tool to build sustainable communities is the implementation of the Sustainable Development Strategy. Sustainable development is based on balancing social, economic and environmental costs and benefits to ensure the best future. It is about looking at long term as well as short term costs and consequences, and about looking at global as well as local aspects of a decision.

The accepted definition of Sustainable Development is:

“Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” The Brundtland Report, 1987

District councils have a long history of promoting sustainable development and have a significant role to play in ensuring that the advantages of working sustainably so the targets in the Strategy are achieved and sustainable communities are created.

Compliance with the Sustainable Development Duty

Elected members and council officers have an obligation to ensure the new Duty for Sustainable Development is implemented and that it is a major consideration in all decisions made. Sustainable communities can be achieved by local and central government working in partnership to deliver the Strategy through mainstreaming social, economic and environmental matters.

In this time of change for district councils, with increasing powers and responsibilities, sustainable development offers a unifying and coordinated framework which will ensure effective and efficient delivery of council services to the benefits of all citizens.

This is one of a series of three manuals designed to help councils maximise the benefits of sustainable development. One informs council departments about their obligation to sustainable development and the other is a practical guide to help implement sustainable development on an operational level throughout the council.

¹ First Steps towards Sustainability: A Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, DOE 2006

1

Sustainable Consumption and Production

The objectives outlined in the Strategy are:

- To become more resource efficient.
- To make the Northern Ireland public sector a UK regional leader in sustainable procurement.
- To minimise the unsustainable impacts of consumption.

One of the key contributors to increasing resource efficiency is encouraging behavioural change. District councils should continue to promote material recovery, re-use, and the availability of recycling facilities, aiming toward landfill diversion and meeting stringent EU targets. Councils must review their procurement policies and procedures to ensure that they meet this sustainable development agenda which will require all suppliers to demonstrate that they have Environmental Management Systems in place and that their products are more sustainable.



Source: Microsoft

Recommended Actions

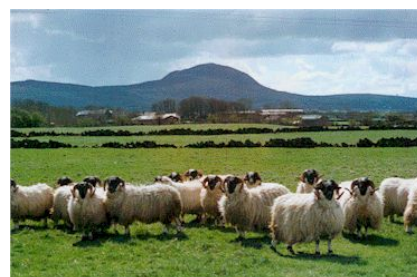
1. **Review, implement and communicate the council's sustainable procurement policy and practices.**
2. **Meet the requirement of The Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy and associated EU targets for waste reduction, recycling and reuse.**
3. **Implement a Plan for Public Education to achieve behaviour change with regard to waste management.**
4. **Monitor and manage the reduction of the council's ecological footprint.**

2

Natural Resource Protection and Environmental Enhancement

The objectives outlined in the Strategy are:

- To conserve our landscape and manage it in a more sustainable way.
- To protect and enhance the freshwater and marine environment.
- To improve our air quality.
- To conserve, protect, enhance and sustainably re-use our historic environment.
- To protect and enhance biodiversity.



Source: NIEL Archive

As civic leader district councils play a pivotal role in the conservation and promotion of the natural environment with many key partners and the public. Through a process of education, engagement and enforcement of environmental legislation councils can work to protect their natural resources and improve the local environment.

Recommended Actions

1. **Develop Biodiversity Action Plans for the council district and manage these in line with the SNIFFER report 'Preparing for Climate Change in Northern Ireland'.**
2. **Introduce training in decision making for relevant staff and elected members to deliver sustainable management of landscape, biodiversity and the built environment.**
3. **Develop and implement a policy for natural resource protection and environmental enhancement to ensure all council decisions and actions meet the requirements of the Sustainable Development Strategy.**
4. **Work with local businesses to provide information and encourage them to adopt Environmental Management Systems thereby complying with all EU legislation.**

3

Sustainable Communities

The objectives outlined in the Strategy are:

- To increase the economic well being of the people of Northern Ireland.
- To create an attractive, high quality environment where people feel safe and which provides the conditions for health and social well-being.
- To promote the development of community engagement, civic leadership and responsible citizenship.

Promoting the idea of community engagement, civic leadership and responsible citizenship is a crucial component in the creation of sustainable communities and a key aspect of Community Planning. Councils have a role to play in promoting a culture which supports education, enterprise and entrepreneurship. Initiatives such as the Community Empowerment Partnerships, Renewing Communities Action Plan, Investing Together, Investing for Health, Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and Capacity Building in Disadvantaged Communities Programme provide a framework to tackle weak community infrastructure and develop the capacity of local communities to engage and provide leadership in developing solutions to their specific problems. The community planning process should be developed as a vehicle for effective community consultation and involvement.



Source: Magilligan Field Centre

District councils are well placed to build sustainable communities due to local knowledge and community engagement. The Sustainable Development Strategy is an over arching strategy which encompasses all the key economic, environmental and social policies.

Strategies in Northern Ireland councils play a key and in some instances a lead role in the delivery of these initiatives which ultimately affect every aspect of people's lives.

Recommended Actions

1. Ensure that the sustainable development agenda is incorporated into council corporate plans and community plans.
2. Include the promotion of resource efficiency as an objective within local Economic Development Strategies.
3. Work in partnerships to achieve improvements in health and reductions in crime and anti-social behaviour by developing and implementing a 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener Communities' agenda in line with government policies.
4. Set up structures that allow engagement with local communities, as well as the community and voluntary sector, so they become involved in all aspects of planning and service delivery.
5. Create a forum of partners to integrate strategies and implementation plans into the sustainable development agenda.

4

Climate Change and Energy

The objectives outlined in the Strategy are:

- To reduce greenhouse gas emissions, principally by promoting energy efficiency and the use of renewables.
- To establish Northern Ireland as a world class exemplar in the development and use of renewable energy.
- To plan and prepare for climate change impacts in Northern Ireland.

District councils must make a determined effort to lead by example through promoting energy efficiency and reducing energy wastage within council buildings and facilities. The Department of Finance and Personnel will monitor and report on energy usage by all Northern Ireland public sector bodies. In addition, the DFP will administer the Central Energy Efficiency Fund supporting specific projects to improve energy performance or utilisation of renewable energy technologies that public sector bodies cannot finance from their existing budgets.



Source: Microsoft

District councils must maintain an efficient use of space and embed the principles of sustainable development into working practices. They should encourage and support the development of new industry in renewable and alternative sustainable energy technologies within the local community. In terms of adaptation to climate change impacts, district councils must keep up to date with the Department of the Environment's 13 indicators of climate change². It is important that within affected localities authorities take action to prevent and deal with problems such as flooding.

² http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/protect_the_environment/climate_change/climate_change_-_impacts_adaptation.htm

Recommended Actions

1. Promote energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy to communities and the business sector.
2. Calculate the carbon footprint for the council and prepare a plan for the council to become 'carbon neutral' with annual targets and a monitoring system.
3. Devise and implement a renewable energy strategy.

5

Learning and Communication for Sustainable Development

The objectives outlined in the Strategy are:

- To provide access for all citizens to gain sustainable development skills and knowledge.
- To bring about the behavioural changes necessary to progress towards a sustainable society.

District councils have a role to play in increasing awareness. Though councils do not have a direct role in the delivery of the education service, they should be actively involved in raising understanding of sustainable development. Councils can stimulate community action and support individual behavioural change by working with community groups, NGOs and the public to deliver sustainable development. Integrating community planning within the sustainable development framework will lessen confusion and maximise the likelihood of behavioural change.



Source: Magilligan Field Centre

Recommended Actions

1. Develop projects with local communities to reduce their ecological footprint.
2. Promote educational establishments as centres and exemplars for sustainable communities.
3. Promote Eco-schools within all schools.
4. Promote sustainable lifestyles to staff through information, publicity and setting specific targets.
5. Encourage staff to implement environmental management within their home communities.

6

Governance for Sustainable Development

The objectives outlined in the Strategy are:

- To mainstream sustainable development across government.
- To strengthen the network of accountability for governance for sustainable development.

District councils have a critical role to play in creating sustainable communities through effective leadership and community planning. “As key players in the local economy, district councils can make a significant contribution to the creation of sustainable communities through local services and council operations³”. The Review of Public Administration will expand the duties of local councils to include such areas as community, rural and economic development, housing related functions, and urban and rural regeneration. Community planning will not only aid in the development of a cohesive community strategy, but will be an integral component in the movement toward strengthening government accountability at the local level.

Recommended Actions

- 1. Identify a senior ‘champion’ with responsibility for ensuring effective implementation of the Statutory Duty.**
- 2. Devise and implement a Sustainable Development Action Plan that addresses the key priorities of the Sustainable Development Strategy, and integrate this plan within council corporate business planning.**
- 3. Provide ongoing training for elected members and senior council managers in delivering the Sustainable Development Duty and implications of non-compliance.**
- 4. Embed sustainable development principles within district council functions and activities and ‘sustainability proof’ all existing and emerging policies using available policy guidance from OFMDFM.**

What Next ...

The Chief Executives of each of the 26 district councils in Northern Ireland will be able to implement and take responsibility for compliance with the Sustainable Development Duty by following the actions recommended.

There is further support on how to implement each of the recommended actions in ‘**Sustainable Development - How Your District Council Can Play Its Part - An Implementation Manual**’. This is available for download from www.sustainable-ni.org. This implementation manual contains more detail on each priority area along with other organisations which, along with Sustainable Northern Ireland, may be able to offer further assistance.

Remember: Sustainable Northern Ireland is always here to help

³ Advice and Support for Local Government: Further information at <http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk>

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