

Sustainability Assessment Tool

This tool for assessing sustainability
has been developed through the
Northern Ireland Local Government
Sustainable Development Forum



The Sustainability Assessment Toolkit can help with decisions that can demonstrate your commitment to the principles of sustainable development and statutory compliance.

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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This guidance document sets out a methodology that can be used to help organisations to incorporate the principles of sustainable development when making decisions on activities. The Sustainability Assessment Toolkit (SAT) complements Sustainable Northern Ireland's Sustainability Audit Matrix (SAM). These initiatives (SAM and the SAT) may be used together or independently of each other.

The methodology outlined in this document can be adapted so that it integrates with any existing Impact Assessments used by the authority, such as those concerned with equality or expenditure.

The guidance issued on the 2007 Statutory Duty for Sustainable Development requires public authorities to demonstrate their approach to sustainability decision making. The methodology outlined in this document can be used to help public authorities comply with that Duty.

Written by the SD Forum's Sustainability Assessment Toolkit Working Group
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Sustainability Assessment Toolkit : An Introduction



The purpose of the **Sustainability Assessment Toolkit (SAT)** is to ensure that decisions taken by your organisation have been assessed against recognised sustainability criteria. The SAT can be used to screen the combined economic, environmental and social impacts of a range of proposed activities, such as policies, programmes, strategies, action plans, events and projects.

Sustainable Northern Ireland's SAT methodology is compatible with Sustainable Northern Ireland's Sustainability Audit Matrix (SAM) and the two processes can either be used together as one initiative or independently of each other.

What does screening for sustainability mean?

The SAT is not about deciding whether an activity can take place or not. Rather, it is about making sure that all planned activities incorporate as many elements of sustainable development as is practicable.

The SAT is more than a policy screening instrument. It is a decision making tool that can be used to analyse your organisation's activities. It is important when using the SAT that this action is proportionate to the proposed activity. Clear lines of accountability need to be established with the SAT; for example, identifying who is responsible for taking decisions and implementing recommendations.

Integrating sustainable development into your activities means considering both the long-term and short-term effects of an action. What may seem to be beneficial now can be devastating over time. Immediate priorities should not be accorded precedence over potential lasting consequences; activities should be assessed to consider their potential impacts on future generations.

The SAT should be used to help you make decisions about the level of sustainability inherent in your activity and to justify its implementation, incorporating appropriate mitigation measures, if necessary.

The Structure of the SAT

The SAT checklist consists of a series of questions about your proposed activity. They are separated into the three principal elements of sustainable development, captured in the diagram below.

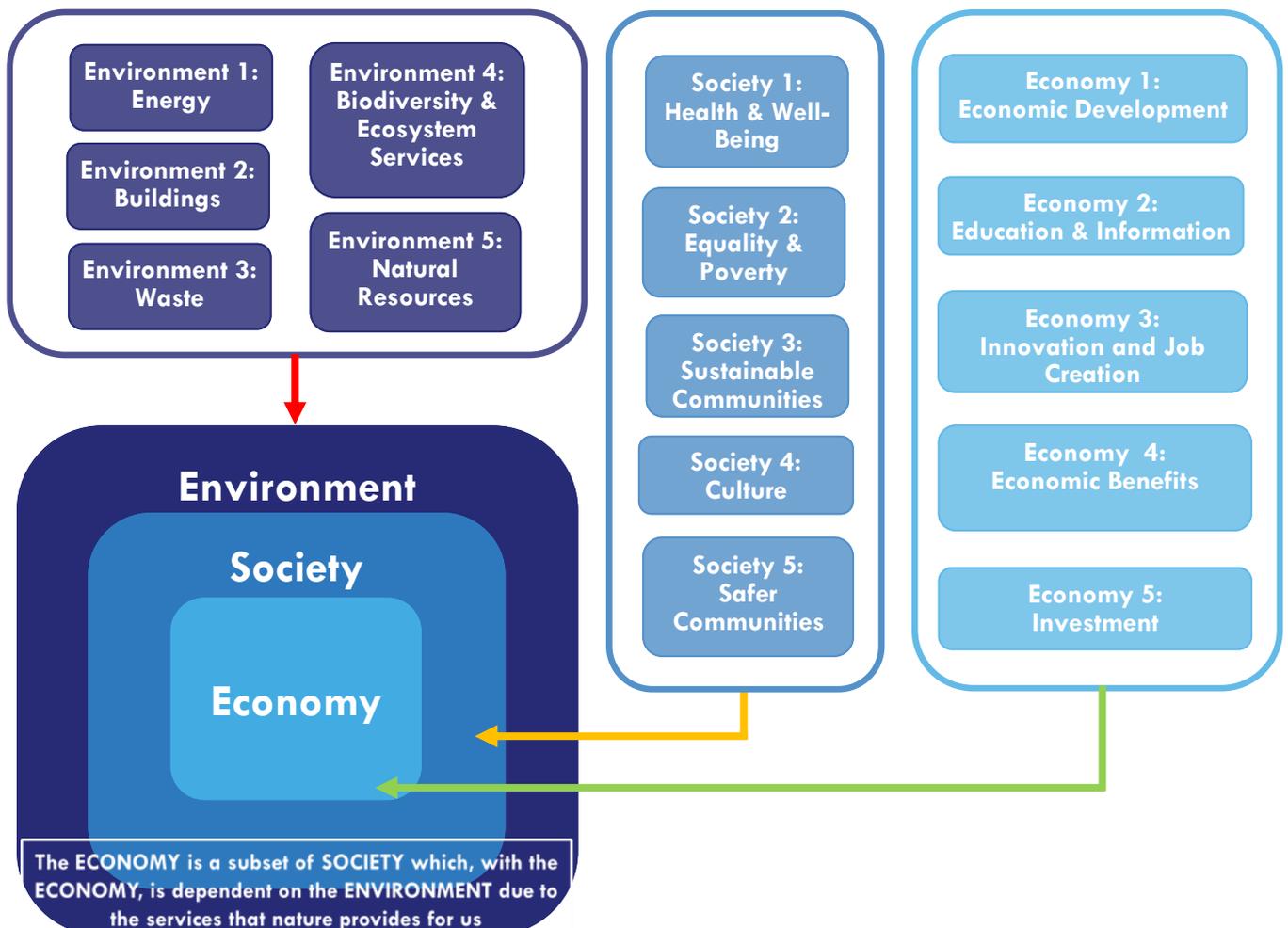
This information guide has been developed to make it easy for anyone in your organisation to use the SAT methodology. It contains important information on how to apply the suggested questions to specific activities as well as providing additional links to further sources of advice. These links contain more information on how to embed sustainability within your various activities.

The SAT methodology has been designed to provide a guide to the level of sustainability within your activity. You should use the toolkit to justify how an activity may be seen as contributing to sustainable development.

It is impossible to anticipate the content of every possible organisational pursuit so, on occasions, the existing questions may not be adequate to assess the sustainability of your endeavour. In such instances, you are encouraged to write your own questions, shaping the tool to meet the circumstances of your activity.

“The natural world is the envelope that contains, sustains and provisions the economy, not the other way round.”

Herman Daly, Professor of Economics, University of Maryland (2008)



How to Use the SAT

For each element of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) a series of questions has been written to help you determine the 'sustainability quotient' of your proposed activity.

The assessment form is structured in five tables (see Appendix 1). Table 1 focuses on assessing the economic impacts of your activity, Table 2 deals with the social impacts, Table 3 considers the environmental implications. Table 4 provides a summary; Table 5 is a record of possible mitigations.

The questions should be used as prompts to make you think about how sustainability considerations could be integrated into the design and implementation of your activity.

Instructions for using the SAT

1. Read the questions on the assessment form and decide which ones are relevant to your activity.
2. Are there other questions that should be included within the assessment form to ascertain the sustainability of your activity? Add these to the form (if there is not enough space you can replace the questions that you have decided are not relevant to your activity with ones that are more appropriate; otherwise, insert questions onto a new row under the most appropriate heading).
3. For the questions that are relevant to your activity, tick if you have considered this aspect of sustainability within your activity, in either its design or implementation.
4. Enter a justification on how your project contributes positively to sustainable development. In this section, you should consider the overarching theme of the questions to make an assessment on whether your activity will impact positively, negatively or have no impact on sustainability.
5. ***If your activity will have a negative impact, you should consider various mitigation measures that will improve its contribution to sustainability or make a justification regarding the overall need for the activity and the benefits it will create.*** See page 8 for further advice.
6. Repeat for all questions and elements (Tables 1-3)
7. Copy your findings onto the summary page of the assessment form (Table 4) and use these to make a determination on the sustainability of your activity. See page 7 for information on how to use the summary findings to determine if your activity is sustainable.
8. Use your findings to justify the contribution of your activity to sustainable development. In some cases your activity may only be sustainable after making adaptations or through mitigation. Any mitigation measures should be recorded in Table 5.

When to use the SAT

Organisations make decisions on their activities every day; it is up to you to decide when it is appropriate to use the SAT. It is important to consider the scale of the activity when deciding if you should apply the SAT methodology.

The SAT could be used to inform a range of organisational decisions and activities; these might include:

1. Developing a new policy
2. Writing a new strategy
3. Organising an event
4. Undertaking a new capital build project
5. Designing and implementing a public realm project
6. Undertaking a stakeholder consultation exercise
7. Creating a community plan
8. Applying for funding to help demonstrate the sustainability of a project
9. Implementing a new project
10. Choosing the location of community infrastructure

The SAT has been designed to help you assess an activity for its 'sustainability quotient' but you must make a final decision on how—and to what degree—any activity makes a contribution to your organisation's sustainable development commitments.

Determining Sustainability

As part of the SAT process, you need to be able to examine the assessment of your activity across all three elements of sustainable development. For example, what happens if your assessment shows the proposed activity to be very economically sustainable but very unsustainable from a social and environmental perspective? Or equally, what if the proposed activity is very environmentally sustainable but not economically or socially viable? How do you weigh up the different elements and make a decision that you can justify?



Within the SAT, there are no minimum standards of acceptability. Ideally, you should be able to justify the activity across all three elements. However, this may not always be the case.

Additional issues to consider when you are trying to determine the sustainability of your project include:

- ⇒ **Minimum acceptable standards**
- ⇒ **Trends demonstrated by existing data sets**
- ⇒ **Permanence of any impacts**
- ⇒ **Impacts on future generations**
- ⇒ **Available mitigation measures**

Minimum Standards

You should consider the impacts of the activity and make a determination regarding the potential effects of the activity on achieving 'minimum standards'. These refer to obligations that may already exist for certain elements within the SAT assessment. For example, there may be required standards for air quality, waste reduction, social inclusion, equality or job creation. An activity's impact may be considered positive, negative or neutral (i.e. no impact).

Trends

You should consider how the activity will affect an existing trend. An activity may have no impact on the trend or it may negatively exacerbate it. Alternatively, the activity may have a positive impact and help to reverse a negative trend.

Permanence of Impacts

You should consider the permanence of any potential impacts, for good or ill. By definition, sustainable development necessitates long-term thinking and you should consider the implications of your activity for future generations as part of your overall assessment.

Mitigation measures to offset any negative impacts

You should consider how you can integrate a range of mitigation measures into the design, implementation and operation of your activity to reverse any negative sustainability impacts. These may be needed to help you justify the contribution of your activity to sustainable development.

How to make your activity more sustainable

The purpose of the SAT is to consider the questions asked within the assessment form and to use your answers to make a decision regarding the sustainability of your activity. Below, you will find links to several resources that may help you to plan your activity.

Type of activity	Online Support	Useful Websites
Running a Sustainable Event	A Sustainable Venue Benchmarking Tool A Sustainable Events Checklist Performance Indicators for a sustainable Event	www.lsx.org.uk
Sustainable Infrastructure	Building to BREEAM Excellence Guide to Sustainable Homes	www.breeam.org
Integrating sustainability into your organisation (policy, strategy, structure etc.)	Achieving Sustainable Communities: An Implementation Manual for Local Government	www.sustainableni.org
Sustainable Tourism	Tourism 2023: Forum for the Future Sustainable Tourism for Dummies	www.discovernorthernireland.com/ecotourism/ www.visit Britain.org
Sustainable Procurement	Sustainable Procurement Guide Buying Standards	www.wrap.org Www.dfpni.gov.uk/cpd

General information on sustainable development can be accessed via Sustainable Northern Ireland's website—
www.sustainableni.org

Other relevant information

[Assessing Projects Under the EU Habitats Directive](#)

Table 1: Assessment of Economic Sustainability

Screening Questions Use these questions as a guide to help you assess the sustainability of your proposal. (Consider if these are the only questions you should ask)	Is the question relevant? Have you considered it?		Justification Specify how your proposal will have a positive, negative or neutral sustainability impact. What mitigation measures should you undertake?
	Relevant	Considered	
Economic Element 1: Economic Development			
Have you considered how your proposal can support the use of local business services or products?			
Have you considered how your proposal might enhance the area's infrastructure or facilities to support sustainable development?			
Have you considered how your proposal can support a low-carbon approach to enterprise and economic development?			
Economic Element 2: Education and Information			
Have you considered how your proposal can offer opportunities for education, training and the development of new skills among your stakeholders?			
Have you considered how your proposal can provide practical examples of good practice from which others may learn?			
Have you considered how your proposal might encourage others to adopt sustainable practices or learn about sustainability?			
Economic Element 3: Innovation and Job Creation			
Have you considered how your proposal can provide any local employment opportunities?			
Have you considered how your proposal can foster innovation or research and the development of the area's strengths or its skills base?			
Have you considered how your proposal can support and encourage the development of social enterprises?			
Economic Element 4: Economic Benefits			
Have you considered how your proposal can link local production and local consumption?			
Have you considered how your proposal will be of benefit to local businesses, voluntary and community organisations and residents of your area?			
Have you considered how the implementation of your proposal will demonstrate best value for money?			
Economic Element 5: Investment for Sustainability			
Have you been able to secure supplementary or matched investment to fund your proposal?			
Have you considered how your proposal will help to attract long term economic investment for your area?			
Have you considered how to meet the costs of your proposal after the initial expenditure i.e. year on year costs?			

Table 2: Assessment of Social Sustainability

Screening Questions Use these questions as a guide to help you assess the sustainability of your activity. (Consider if these are the only questions you should ask)	Is the question relevant? Have you considered it? (✓ or X)		Justification Specify how your activity will have a positive, negative or neutral sustainability impact. What mitigation measure should you undertake?
	Relevant	Considered	
Social Element 1: Health and Well-being			
Have you considered ways of integrating public health responsibility and healthy lifestyle choices into your			
Have you considered how to use the activity to increase people's level of physical activity?			
Have you considered the impact of your activity on social well-being?			
Social Element 2: Equality and Poverty			
Have you considered how your activity could help tackle deprivation?			
Have you considered ways your activity can be used to help tackle food and fuel poverty?			
Have you considered ways to ensure that all of your residents have access to the activity?			
Social Element 3: Sustainable Communities			
Have you considered how your activity can help communities to make more sustainable choices?			
Have you included in your activity opportunities to increase volunteering?			
Have you developed an activity that will help to increase community resilience?			
Social Element 4: Culture			
Have you considered integrating opportunities within your activity that will increase community cohesion?			
Have you considered how your activity can be used to engage with disengaged communities and individuals			
Have you undertaken consultation about your activity with the local community?			
Social Element 5: Cleaner, Safer, Greener			
Have you considered how your activity will impact			
Have you liaised with community policing partnerships to see how your activity impact on			

Table 3: Assessment of Environmental Sustainability

Screening Questions Use these questions as a guide to help you assess the sustainability of your activity. (Consider if these are the only questions you should ask)	Is the question relevant? Have you considered it? (✓ or X)		Justification Specify how your activity will have a positive, negative or neutral sustainability impact. What mitigation measure should you undertake?
	Relevant	Considered	
Environmental Element 1: Energy			
Have you considered how the activity will impact on the amount of energy used by the Council?			
Have you considered ways to reduce the reliance on fossil and imported fuels by this activity?			
Have you considered how this activity will impact on any energy reduction targets adopted by the Council?			
Environmental Element 2: Climate Change			
Have you considered how this activity will impact on greenhouse gas emissions arising?			
Have you considered the impacts of climate change over the next 5, 10 and 15 years?			
Have you integrated climate change adaptation principles into the design of this activity?			
Environmental Element 3: Waste			
Have you considered how this activity will impact on the amount of municipal waste sent to landfill?			
Have you considered the impact this activity will have on the Council's waste management targets?			
Have you considered how to increase recycling and reuse of waste materials within the activity?			
Environmental Element 4: Biodiversity			
Have you considered the impact this activity will have on local biodiversity (species and habitats)?			
Have you considered the impact this activity may have on designated sites e.g. ASSIs, SPAs etc..?			
Have you consulted with other biodiversity stakeholders regarding the impact of this activity on biodiversity?			
Environmental Element 5: Resource Efficiency			
Have you considered the amount and types of natural resources that will be used in this activity?			
Have you considered how to reduce the amount of resources used in this activity?			

Table 4: Summary of Economic, Social and Environmental Assessment

Checklist Questions Use this checklist to make a final decision regarding the sustainability of your activity. Consider if additional mitigation measures are required before justifying each statement.	Please tick where appropriate (✓ or X)			
	Relevant	Considered	Additional Mitigation Required	Justified
Section ONE: Economic Sustainability				
1. Does the activity ensure effective and efficient use of public funds?				
2. Does the activity help to increase the competitiveness of local businesses?				
3. Does the activity help to create permanent jobs, build capacity and skills and create opportunity of innovation?				
4. Does the activity promote maximum use of resources with minimum negative impact on the environment?				
5. Does the activity help to attract investment in local enterprises?				
Section TWO: Social Sustainability				
1. Does the activity seek to enhance the health and well-being of all citizens?				
2. Does the activity support an open and tolerant society with equal rights and opportunities for all citizens?				
3. Does the activity involve communities in decision making and promote more sustainable lifestyles?				
4. Does the activity enhance local culture and heritage and/or increase citizens understanding of their area?				
5. Does the activity contribute to a cleaner and safer society, help to reduce anti-social behaviour and/or create green spaces?				
Section THREE: Environmental Sustainability				
1. Does the activity promote energy efficiency and consider the use of renewable energy resources?				
2. Does the activity seek to minimise greenhouse gas emissions and prepare for the impacts of a changing climate where relevant?				
3. Does the activity seek to minimise waste, particularly waste going to landfill and promote recycling				
4. Does the activity protect and enhance local biodiversity, value the services that nature provides and demonstrate compliance with the Duty for Biodiversity?				
5. Does the activity seek to minimise the use of natural resources and toxic materials and control pollution?				

Details of activity being assessed			
Does the activity meet with sustainable development criteria**?	YES / NO	Date of Assessment	
Can you justify the sustainability and need (economic, social and environmental) of your activity?	YES / NO	Name of person(s) undertaking the assessment	

** Refer to accompanying information guide for more information on determining the sustainability of your activity

Anti-social Behaviour: is behaviour that lacks consideration for others and may cause damage to the society, whether intentionally or through negligence. This is the opposite of pro-social behaviour, which helps or benefits the society

Biodiversity: is the sum of all life on earth including species, habitats and ecosystems

Community Resilience: is the ability of the community to adapt itself to the consequence of a specific event or its ability to cope with change that happens over time

Community Cohesion: is about people from different background, ethnicity, religious affiliation and political opinions being able to get on with one and other

Community Safety: is about cutting crime and the fear of crime, as well as reducing the effects of things that harm people or affect their quality of life

Climate Change: is a significant and lasting change in the statistical distribution of weather patterns over periods ranging from decades to millions of years.

Climate Change Adaptation: is about planning for the impacts of climate change by putting in place measures to protect communities, ecosystems and vulnerable infrastructure.

Deprivation: is about individuals or communities who struggle to have their basic human rights (food, water, energy and shelter) met

Disengaged Communities/Individuals: are ones who do not participate in community activities or with the political process

Designated Sites: are ones that have been legally classified as being of particular importance for biodiversity

Equality: is about creating a fairer society where everyone can participate and have the opportunity to fulfil their potential

Economic Sustainability: is about growing an economy that is economically viable, environmentally sound and socially responsible

Economic Efficiency: is the use of resources so as to maximize the production of goods and service

Energy Reduction Targets: are goals that have set to reduce the amount of energy (heating, light, transport) that are used

Future Proofing: is the process of anticipating the future and developing methods of minimizing the effects of shocks and stresses of future events

Food Poverty: is the inability to access a nutritionally adequate diet

Fuel Poverty: is when the cost of a household heating their house is more than 10% of their total income

Greenhouse Gas Emissions: are gases that can absorb or emit infra-red radiation such as water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and ozone

Low Carbon Sector: is businesses that help contribute to the

low carbon economy by developing technology that helps reduce greenhouse gas emission

Low Carbon Economy: is an economy with a minimal output of greenhouse gases associated with its income generating activities

Local Economy: is the economy that is made up of locally produced goods and services over those produced farther away

Mitigation: is action that reduces the magnitude, severity or seriousness of something

Municipal Waste: is the everyday waste that is thrown away

Natural Resources: are materials or substances occurring in nature which can be exploited for economic gain

Public Health: is the prevention of disease and promotion of health through the organised efforts and informed choices of society, organizations, public and private, communities and individuals

Public Funds: are the monies generated by government to provide the public with goods and services

Resource Efficiency: is maximising the supply of money, materials, staff, and other assets that can be drawn on by a person or organisation in order to function effectively, with minimum wasted effort or expense

Sustainability Audit Matrix (SAM): is Sustainable Northern Ireland's tool that helps organisations measure how and where they have integrated sustainable development throughout their organisation

Sustainable Development: is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs

Sustainable Communities: are communities which are economically, socially and environmentally healthy and resilient

Social Enterprise: is an organisation that applies commercial strategies to maximize improvements in human and environmental well-being, rather than maximising profits for external shareholders

Social Well-being: is our ability to successfully interact within a community, to communicate and to socialise

Sense of Place: is the perception and connectivity that people feel to the community in which they live, work or socialise

Trends: are the general direction in which something is developing or changing

Well-being: is the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy

Waste Management Targets: are goals that have been set to reduce the amount of waste being produced or recycling that is occurring

Sustainability Assessment Toolkit



Sustainable Northern Ireland works towards an 'integrated and equal society based on the principles of sustainable development'. Our work promotes the exchange of good practice and provides practical assistance to help organisations, such as district councils, realise and understand the importance of embedding sustainability principles at the core of their business. Sustainable development is an important mechanism to improve how decisions are made and to increase efficiency across government, business and communities.

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