

Sustainable Development in Wales: From Pioneer to Delivery

INTRODUCTION

The Welsh Assembly Government is to be roundly congratulated on taking a high profile and in many ways a pioneering role in promoting awareness of Sustainable Development, driven by the Duty, the Scheme and the Action Plan, along with many other initiatives.

However, being a pioneer brings challenges as well as opportunities, and it is clear that in Wales, politicians and public servants are now having to wrestle with many of the difficulties and barriers which will inevitably confront any Government, anywhere in the World, as it tries to translate the principle of SD into real changes in the lifestyles and choices of its citizens.

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) is the Government's independent advisor on sustainable development, reporting to the First Ministers in Wales and Scotland, and to the Prime Minister. Our role falls into 3 broad categories: to provide advice, advocacy and scrutiny.

In order to develop a baseline for our future work in Wales, we commissioned Cardiff University to conduct an independent assessment of the Assembly's progress on Sustainable Development in relation to the five guiding principles and four priorities for immediate action set out in the 2005 UK-wide Framework *One Future: Different Paths* (See Annex A). The research was undertaken in the second half of 2005, using a combination of interviews with senior stakeholders and desk-based analysis. We are very grateful to Terry Marsden and Andrew Flynn at Cardiff University for their work, and to all of the interviewees who freely gave their time and thoughts.

This set of recommendations from the Sustainable Development Commission is based both on the Cardiff University report to the SDC (the full report "Aiming Higher" is available via www.sd-commission.org.uk, or direct from Cardiff University), and on our direct experience as a Government advisory body both in Wales and across the UK.

Our recommendations are intended to support the Assembly as it strives to maintain its leading role in sustainable development, and reflect our increased awareness of the urgency of the task in the face of rapidly increasing scientific evidence of the damage that unsustainable living is doing to the climate, to the planet and to our own wellbeing. These recommendations are supported by the analysis which follows, much of which is drawn from material within "Aiming Higher" and reflects the opinions of those interviewed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Welsh Assembly Government needs to become an unequivocal champion for the 5 principles and 4 priorities for sustainable development which are at the heart of the groundbreaking *One Future: Different Paths* that it helped to create. These principles and priorities should be used by all four UK Administrations as a lens through which to assess the sustainability of all policies and programmes.
2. The SD principles need to be embedded within both the WAG and the public sector at the highest level, both horizontally across departments, and vertically through public bodies and local government.
3. Now the pioneering phase is over, it is essential that effective machinery is put in place to mainstream SD within all departments and hold them more clearly accountable for its delivery through mainstream policies and programmes. This should include a requirement to produce Sustainable Development Action Plans, and to report in a consistent and comparable manner on the impact of the management of the Assembly estate.
4. An acid test of the extent to which SD is being embedded across the WAG policies and programmes will be the extent to which its principles have a discernible impact on mainstream policy areas such as “Wales- A Vibrant Economy”, the Wales Transport Strategy, Health and Education.
5. Sustainable Development Action Plans must be clearly and explicitly outcome-driven, with more challenging targets as well as stronger and more coherent links between priorities, principles, targets, actions and indicators.
6. Amongst officials, the level of understanding of SD, and their capacity to use it as a central organising principle for smarter policy making and delivery, will be crucial factors in making further progress. Existing initiatives (such as the toolkit under development with Forum for the Future) should be given more support, and should become part of a more coherent capacity-building programme.
7. The WAG should strengthen its voice in UK-wide SD debates, helping to establish “devolution compliant” mechanisms to facilitate more rapid shared learning between policy-makers in all Administrations, and to monitor collective progress against “*One Future: Different Paths*”.
8. Welsh strategies and action plans for SD need to be more explicit in distinguishing those areas over which the Assembly has direct authority from those which are UK-reserved or determined by EU legislation, where the WAG will aim to play an influencing role.

KEY POINTS OF ANALYSIS

1. The Assembly's Sustainable Development Action Plan

1.1 Relationship to *One Future: Different Paths*

The Wales SD Action Plan was produced well before the UK framework for SD *One Future: Different Paths* was completed. It was therefore extremely encouraging to find a great deal of retrospective compatibility between the two - reflecting the Assembly's engagement in the development of the UK document and the quality of thinking that went into the Welsh process. The next logical step will be to see the 5 principles of sustainable development and the four priorities for immediate action, which together form the cornerstone of *One Future: Different Paths*, being more overtly used, owned and indeed championed by the WAG, incorporated as part of a strong, ongoing "Welsh brand" for SD, the need for which the SDC understands and recognises.

1.2 The Process of Development – Corporate to Bilateral?

The SD Action Plan was drafted as a thematic document, based in the principle of crosscutting corporate working on sustainable development policy-making and delivery. However, the SDC perception, based on "Aiming Higher" is that whilst the Action Plan was indeed developed corporately in the early stages, this approach was later replaced with bilateral discussions between the Strategic Policy Unit and individual divisions. In turn, Divisions now largely have unilateral responsibility for implementation, with some support from the small team in the Strategic Policy Unit.

This drift from a corporate approach to policy development into unilateral delivery has already had major consequences. For example, the SD Action Plan is at its most exciting in its clear statement that the goal is to develop a low carbon sustainable economy for Wales, but it does not expand on how this might be brought about. By contrast, the recent economic Strategy *Wales: A Vibrant Economy* runs counter to this goal, being based on a model of regional competitiveness underpinned by continuing but unsustainable growth in use of energy and material resources. Similarly, it is unclear what role the principles and priorities of SD will yet play in shaping the Transport Strategy and in helping to define and characterise the nationally distinctive way in which the WAG approaches health and education, though there are many positive signals in both these areas crucial to SD.

1.3 Striving for More Ambition?

Interviewees reported that in retrospect there should have been more challenge to Divisions to be ambitious in their SD commitments during the process of developing the SD Action Plan. It was felt that Divisions had tended to constrain their proposals within the timeframe of the current Administration, and to set targets only where progress could clearly be shown within that timeframe.

Feedback from interviewees suggested that a more challenging development and monitoring process around the Action Plan could have created a driver for more ambitious long-term goals. This approach could also have encouraged Divisions to evaluate their performance and identify the implications for future policy and emerging targets.

Though understandable at the time, for the SDC the result of these constraints is that the ambition of the document has been too limited, and the commitments too ad hoc.

Increasing the scale of ambition is a central challenge as the Action Plan is refreshed.

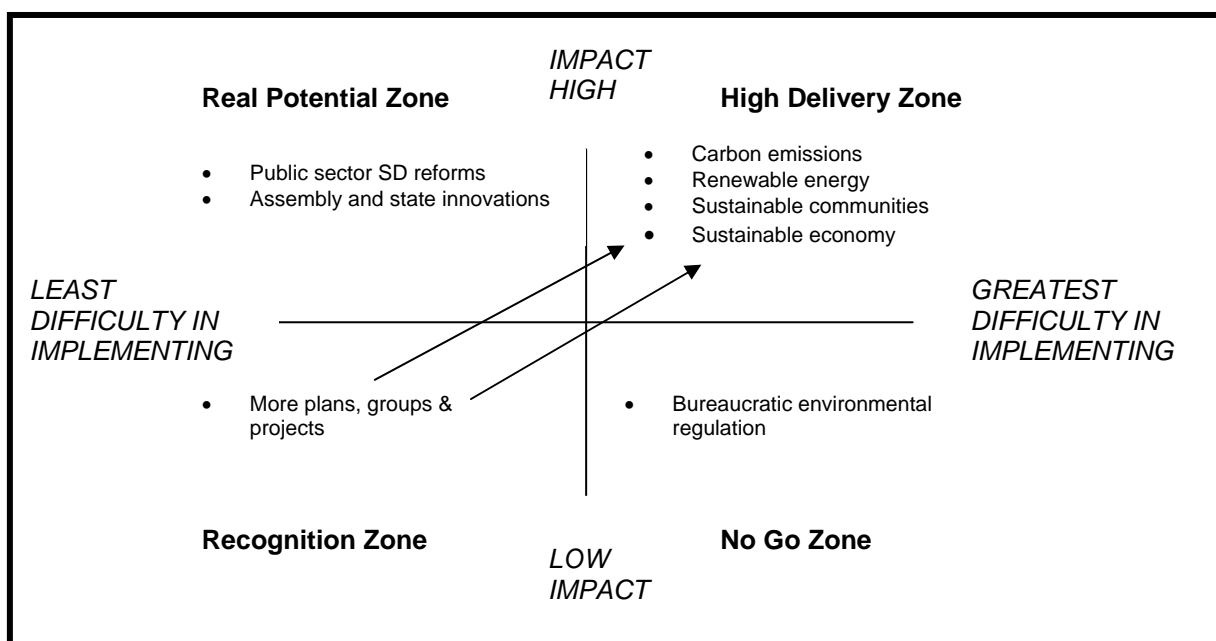
1.4 Competing Priorities?

The researchers also found that whilst interviewees would in theory welcome more structured integrated working on SD both within the Assembly and across the UK, they felt that most policy leads would not be able to participate effectively due to time constraints and conflicting priorities. The growth in the number of departmental strategies and plans, and other crosscutting themes, results in intense competition for the attention of busy policy staff. Many do not at present perceive sustainable development to be of sufficient political priority to take precedence.

The SDC recognises that Assembly policy staff generally cover very broad portfolios in comparison to their counterparts elsewhere in the UK, and that there is much informal and unsung collegiate working taking place between committed individuals. We recommend that this work is recognised as a legitimate part of all policy makers' roles, and that appropriate resources and priority are accorded to it. We also urge Ministers and senior civil servants to communicate more strongly that SD is a framework through which better delivery of other things can be achieved.

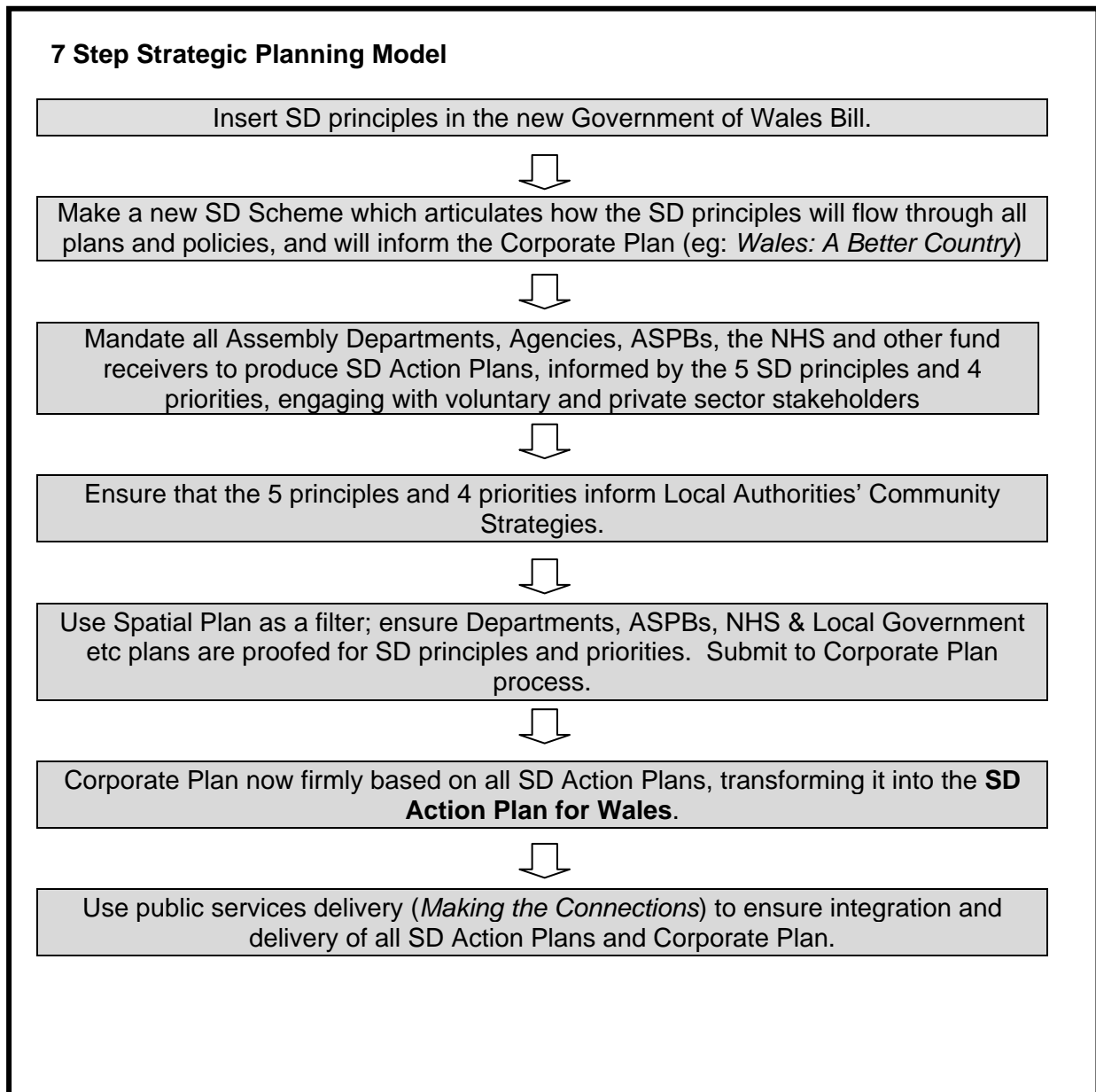
1.5 Moving from Awareness to Delivery

The current SD Action Plan focuses on the awareness raising stage of change management. This was understandable at the time of its production, but its successor needs to signal a clear shift to delivery, demonstrating a clear link from principles, through more challenging, outcome-driven targets, to appropriate actions and indicators. Cardiff University presented the following diagram to demonstrate the challenges that decision makers face in seeking to move from the awareness raising level of the "Recognition Zone" to tackling the crunch issues in the "High Delivery Zone".



1.6 Embedding SD at all levels.

At the SDC Celtic Conference in Cardiff this year, Professor Rod Aspinwall, Chair of Cynnal Cymru and recently retired Vice Chair (Wales) of the SDC proposed the following 7 step process to embed sustainable development horizontally across Assembly departments, and vertically throughout the Welsh public sector. We recommend that the Assembly adopt this planning mechanism albeit as just one part of a much wider approach to governance which includes mechanisms for participation and feedback at all levels of society.



2. The Relationship between Wales & the UK

2.1 *One Future Different Paths* is Devolution Compliant

The UK Framework for Sustainable Development – *One Future: Different Paths*, marked a new and very positive way of working between Whitehall and the Devolved

Administrations. Since devolution, the ability of the different UK countries to set their own priorities and find their own answers to the challenge of sustainable development has proved a great source of innovation and progress. Recognising that common challenges and goals remained, the 4 administrations agreed the need for an umbrella framework, and worked together with the SDC to clearly commit to common sustainable development goals, principles and priorities, without compromising the strengths inherent in their diversity. A UK-wide group was brought together by DEFRA to complete this task, and the resulting Framework was jointly signed by the Prime Minister, First Ministers of Wales and Scotland and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

2.2 Working Together?

Despite this promising start, it then appears that both the Cardiff and Whitehall administrations quickly retreated back to their respective comfort zones. Our researchers found very little awareness of or sense of ownership about the existence of *One Future: Different Paths* amongst Assembly interviewees. In part this is explained by the timing mismatch with the Assembly's sustainable development Scheme and Action Plan. However, there was also a belief that it did not require any action not already in hand, and, despite Assembly engagement in the development process, it was perceived as a Whitehall document.

The UK Government Strategy covering all non-devolved policy and England (*Securing the Future*) was not seen as relevant in Cardiff, even though it might have provided an opportunity to influence key non-devolved policies that impact significantly on the Assembly's ability to deliver sustainable development. Consequently its profile was too low for Assembly officials to prioritise and engage with it in any meaningful way. In a similar way, it is not clear to what extent the process of *Securing the Future* actively engaged devolved counterparts.

2.3 The Need for UK-wide Mechanisms

Despite the genuinely UK-wide development of *One Future: Different Paths*, there are few UK-wide mechanisms at official or ministerial level to support its implementation or monitoring. In Whitehall, accountability is through the Cabinet Committees, but that structure only covers UK Government Departments. This reinforces the inaccurate and damaging view that *One Future: Different Paths* is a UK Government Strategy, as opposed to a strategy jointly owned by all the administrations in the UK. Devolution compliant UK-wide mechanisms at official and ministerial levels will be crucial if *One Future: Different Paths* is to succeed.

The improved networking needs to be within as well as between administrations. There is little evidence in Cardiff of a crosscutting, joined up message on sustainable development emerging from the UK Government. The general experience of Assembly civil servants is that sustainable development is not discussed in either formal or informal settings with their Whitehall colleagues. The notable exception to this is that DEFRA liaises closely with the Assembly's Environment Division, and stands alone as the only UK Government Department attempting to promote the agreed sustainable development principles and priorities.

2.4 Clarity about Levels of Authority

The Assembly has a legal duty for sustainable development, and this remains a great source of pride. However, as discussed, many aspects of sustainable development are not within the scope of the Assembly's powers. There is considerable lack of

clarity in strategies relating to sustainable development about where the Assembly has the responsibilities and levers to deliver change, and where those powers rest with other parts of government, for example EU, UK or Local Authority. This lack of clarity is reflected in its strategies, and impacts on the quality of its commitments.

3. Conclusion

This brief document can in no way do justice to the entire content of the Cardiff University Report "Aiming Higher", which should be read in conjunction with it . However, we hope that it does offer some useful insights into the process by which the current SD Action Plan in Wales was developed and that it will help to ensure that when the plan is refreshed later this year its influence upon the operations of the Welsh Assembly Government are both strengthened and deepened. The SDC wishes to give every encouragement to the WAG in this venture and stands ready to help and assist as it embarks on the next phase.

The UK Framework's: 5 Guiding Principles of Sustainable Development

