

CHAPTER 1

Indicators and the sustainable development strategy

INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE OF THE PUBLICATION

1.1 On 17 May 1999, the UK government published *A better quality of life: a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom*¹. The document sets out:

- the principles of sustainable development;
- some of the priorities for action in the UK;
- key actions the government is taking; and
- commitments which the government has so far made.

The strategy says that at the heart of sustainable development is the simple idea of **ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come**. It means meeting four objectives at the same time:

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone;
- effective protection of the environment;
- prudent use of natural resources;
- maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment;

and considering the long term implications of decisions.

1.2 In the strategy document, the government identified a core set of about 150 indicators of sustainable development, which will be central to monitoring and reporting on progress². These cover the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. This report sets out the indicators in more detail illustrating past and current trends.

1 Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, (May 1999). *A better quality of life: a strategy for sustainable development in the United Kingdom*. TSO, London (Command number 4345)

2 The complete list of indicators is given in Annex A. The indicators are set within a framework of 18 families of issues together with the associated objectives from the strategy.

- 1.3 We intend that the report should act as a **benchmark against which we can measure future progress**. Most of the indicators include data up to 1997 or 1998, prior to the publication of *A better quality of life*. The government will publish an annual report in which it will account for action it has taken and proposes to take in priority areas. Those actions and priorities the government has already identified are set out in *A better quality of life* and in related strategies on, for example, health, education, transport, poverty and social exclusion.
- 1.4 The new devolved administrations in the UK for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have the opportunity to deliver policies for sustainable development, and their own indicators, which reflect individual country's circumstances and the needs and wishes of their people, their institutions, their landscapes, their culture and their way of life. Reflecting this, many references in this publication to policy areas which are devolved focus on initiatives and action in England. In illustrating the indicators themselves, UK information is used where it is available to give as broad a picture as possible. However, the use of UK data does not imply that an indicator has been adopted by the devolved administrations, who have not yet had time to consider and develop their own initiatives.
- 1.5 In 1996, the previous government published a set of preliminary indicators³ covering largely environmental issues. They have been reviewed and revised, in particular to cover more thoroughly the social, economic and international dimensions of sustainable development. Around 60 per cent of the 118 indicators published in 1996 remain in the same or a similar form in this revised set⁴.
- 1.6 To produce the indicators and this publication the government has taken account of the substantial amount of work already done in other countries and by international organisations (see chapter 6), and has consulted widely within the UK (chapter 7).

WHY DO WE NEED INDICATORS?

- 1.7 Sustainable development objectives are broad and to deliver them we must focus on specific issues. One way to do this is through indicators, which quantify and illustrate the important issues. The unemployment rate, the overall growth in the economy and the rate of inflation are widely recognised key economic indicators. The government, businesses and the public use them to judge how well the economy is performing. They are broad brush, highly aggregated statistics which summarise the overall picture. The government uses them to determine economic policy. The public uses them to judge how well the government is managing the economy.
- 1.8 We intend that the indicators in this report should be used in the same way, to inform policy decisions within government and to help people assess whether, when judged against the benchmarks presented in this report, we are achieving the broader objectives of sustainable development. But sustainable development cannot be achieved by government alone, although government needs to take a lead and set a framework within which others can take the appropriate action. Businesses and individuals also have a part to play. So the

3 Department of the Environment, (March 1996). *Indicators of Sustainable Development for the United Kingdom*. HMSO, London (ISBN 0 11 753174 X)

4 A technical annex, giving details of sources of data for each indicator and setting out changes since the 1996 report, will be published on the Internet.

indicators are also intended to highlight the key issues and objectives, and thus help people to understand how they can contribute to achieving more sustainable development, through their work and in their personal lives.

THE HEADLINE INDICATORS

- 1.9 The government consulted widely in developing the strategy. During the consultation it proposed that, alongside the more detailed indicators needed to measure progress at a national scale, a much more limited set of 'headline' indicators should be developed. These would help the government to provide a high level overview of progress, and be a powerful tool for simplifying and communicating the main messages for the public.
- 1.10 In November 1998, the government set out some proposals for a set of 13 'headline' indicators, covering social, environmental and economic issues⁵. The idea of a very limited set of indicators received widespread support, as generally did the individual indicators proposed. However, the consultation identified some additional issues which respondents felt should be included. Two indicators have now been added to the original proposals – one on levels of crime and a second on tackling poverty and social exclusion, following the publication of the government's anti-poverty strategy in September 1999⁶. The indicator initially proposed on social investment has been extended to include investment in all assets. Full details and an analysis of the headline indicators are in chapter 3.

HOW WILL THE INDICATORS BE USED?

- 1.11 The primary purpose of the indicators is to monitor and report on progress towards sustainable development, both within the UK and to international organisations. The government is proposing to bring together and publish once a year the latest information about progress against each of the headline indicators, starting in 2000. In line with the government statistical service code of practice, data underlying each indicator (both headline indicators and the wider set) will be published by the source department or organisation as soon as it is available. The full set of 150 or so indicators will be brought together again when the strategy is reviewed in five years time. In addition, the government expects that the indicators will be a valuable source of information for the Sustainable Development Commission, which it will establish to help take the strategy forward.
- 1.12 Businesses, local authorities and government departments and public bodies are increasingly reporting on sustainable development issues. We hope this publication will contribute towards the debate about sustainable development indicators in the UK, in the devolved administrations and internationally.
- 1.13 This publication also uses the indicators to present some analyses illustrating the extent to which economic growth has been uncoupled from environmental impacts in key areas (see chapter 5). The analyses also help to illustrate some of the balances between the achievement of economic, social and environmental objectives.

5 Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, (November 1998). *Sustainability counts*. DETR, London (98EP0492)

6 Department of Social Security, (September 1999). *Opportunities for all. Tackling poverty and social exclusion*. TSO, London (Command number 4445)

WILL THE INDICATORS DEVELOP OVER TIME?

- 1.14 While the indicators should reflect key issues and policy needs, they must stand the test of time. So they should not be too closely tied to specific policies, which may evolve. Generally, the government's intention is that the headline indicators should not change for a number of years, and that a majority of the more detailed indicators would also remain unchanged. At the same time, there needs to be some flexibility to alter them in response to important new issues (such as the discovery of the ozone hole in the mid 1980s), or where we can improve the indicators. We expect the new Sustainable Development Commission, in particular, to offer advice on how we can improve the indicators. Data still needs to be collected, or methodology developed, to illustrate about twenty indicators. We describe the work to develop each of these indicators in chapter 4 and further work is also described in chapter 8.

SCOPE OF THIS REPORT

- 1.15 The remainder of the report is organised as follows:
- chapter 2 covers the criteria, models and framework used to develop the indicators;
 - chapter 3 presents the individual headline indicators, together with an analysis of whether each has moved in the right direction, and whether the current level is satisfactory;
 - chapter 4 presents each of the remaining indicators, in families of linked issues;
 - chapter 5 presents some cross-cutting analysis, focusing on the uncoupling of economic growth from environmental impacts;
 - chapter 6 discusses other related local, regional, national and international initiatives;
 - chapter 7 describes the consultation process behind the development of the indicators;
 - chapter 8 discusses future work.