

CHAPTER 7

Consultation to develop the indicators

INTRODUCTION

- 7.1 A first set of about 120 national indicators of sustainable development for the United Kingdom was published in March 1996¹. This was intended as a preliminary set, to generate debate in this country and contribute to the international debate on indicators.
- 7.2 Since the publication there has been extensive consultation both inside and outside government on the indicators. This has involved many presentations and workshop sessions at national and international meetings and conferences, as well as more formal consultation through two national seminars, a series of advisory groups and two formal consultation documents.
- 7.3 Many people and organisations from both inside and outside government, and within and outside the UK, have made significant contributions to the development of the indicators and this publication. Many have participated in advisory groups, workshops, and seminars or have given us comments, suggestions or shared their ideas. Others have carried out research projects to develop individual indicators. It is not possible to give the names of everyone who has contributed but we are nevertheless indebted to all those who have helped us over the last three years. We thank everyone for their efforts. We believe the content and value of this publication has been considerably enhanced by the wide range of views and experiences that have helped to produce it.

NATIONAL SEMINAR (NOVEMBER 1996)

- 7.4. This first seminar was held to review the 1996 indicators and try to identify any gaps or weaknesses. It was attended by around 120 people representing central and local government, environment agencies, academic and research organisations, Eurostat and OECD. Some of the main conclusions were:
 - the scope should be extended to include broader welfare issues and equity;
 - more explicit links need to be made between the objectives in the strategy and the indicators;
 - the need to flag up whether indicators are at levels believed to be unsustainable;

¹ Department of the Environment, (March 1996). *Indicators of Sustainable Development for the United Kingdom*. HMSO, London (ISBN 0 11 753174 X)

- the need to find a broader definition of welfare other than GDP alone;
- the need for greater focus on resource use and resource efficiency;
- the need to include human and social capital as well as economic and natural capital;
- the need for certain “visionary” indicators to which people can relate, as well as more detailed indicators for decision-makers in specific areas;
- it would be useful to publish subsets of indicators aimed at particular groups/audiences;
- that public perceptions and values should be recognised in developing the indicators.

7.5 A report on the conclusions of the seminar is available from EPSIM Division, DETR, Floor 5/C13, Ashdown House, 123 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6DE.

ADVISORY GROUPS (MAY 1997–APRIL 1998)

7.6 Seven relatively small advisory groups of experts from both within and outside government were set up to review the first set of indicators and produce recommendations for the next set of national indicators. The groups were also consulted about the selection of UNCSD indicators for the UK pilot (see chapter 6) and initial ideas for a small set of ‘headline’ indicators. The advisory groups focused mainly on the environment and economic indicators and covered the following areas:

- the overall framework;
- global atmosphere, air quality, energy, transport and tourism indicators;
- economic, health and overseas trade indicators;
- water quality and resources indicators;
- land use, landscape and soil indicators;
- waste indicators; and
- wildlife and habitat indicators.

7.7 The groups produced a wide range of useful recommendations and suggestions. These included, for example, proposals for new indicators covering air pollution and an index of UK bird populations. Both of these have been incorporated into the final headline set of indicators following research projects to develop the indicators (see chapter 3). The groups also recommended that the framework for the indicators should follow the emerging ideas for the new sustainable development strategy.

UK ROUND TABLE REPORT ON INDICATORS (DECEMBER 1997)

- 7.8 The UK Round Table on Sustainable Development published a report *Getting the best out of indicators*² in December 1997. The report recommended that:

'the government should further develop its 1996 package of indicators of sustainable development to fully incorporate economic and social as well as environmental indicators', and 'to reflect the international impacts of domestic practices'.

It also fully supported the idea of a limited set of headline indicators and suggested these should cover consumption, pollution, social issues, biodiversity, landscape and cultural resources. It further recommended that the indicators should, wherever possible, have targets or alert zones attached, and that the government should publish a regular report on indicators highlighting progress, problems and future actions.

- 7.9. The government welcomed the UK Round Table's report³ and fed the recommendations immediately into its consultation process on the indicators. Many of the ideas and suggestions in the report are incorporated in the new core set of indicators. The government is also committed to bringing together and publishing once a year the latest information about the progress against each of the headline indicators. This review will also account for the action that the government has taken, and proposes to take, in priority areas. Copies of the government's response are available from the DETR Free Literature, PO Box No 236, Wetherby, LS23 7NB.

CONSULTATION ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (FEBRUARY–MAY 1998)

- 7.10 Indicators were featured prominently in the consultation paper on the new sustainable development strategy '*Opportunities for change*'⁴. Respondents were asked for their input to the review of the 1996 indicators and also on the idea of a small set of 'headline' indicators. There were over 1,300 written responses to the consultation and many gave useful ideas and suggestions for national indicators (copies of the responses are available in the DETR library). These ideas were fed into the production of a draft core set of indicators in May 1998.

NATIONAL SEMINAR (MAY 1998)

- 7.11 A second national seminar of about 120 national and some international experts was convened to discuss the emerging proposals for the national core set of indicators. These were set within a framework based on the proposed themes in the consultation paper '*Opportunities for change*'. There was general support for the integrated approach of the new framework and the wide range of issues and indicators covered. Participants gave suggestions for a large number of new indicators, together with some useful views on priority areas and indicators, and criteria for future selection.

2 UK Round Table on Sustainable Development, (December 1997) *Getting the best out of indicators*.

3 Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, (October 1999). *Government response to the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development Report*. DETR, London (Product code 98 EP0413)

4 Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, (February 1998). *Opportunities for change*. DETR, London (97EP0277)

- 7.12 Participants were also canvassed for their views on a wide range of candidates for a set of 'headline' indicators of sustainable development. A voting exercise revealed some consensus of views on a number of the environmental issues, which might be covered by the 'headline' set, but less agreement on the social and economic issues. The results of the seminar informed both the development of the strategy and the core set of indicators.

CONSULTATION ON THE 'HEADLINE' INDICATORS (NOVEMBER 1998–JANUARY 1999)

- 7.13 In November 1998, a consultation paper *Sustainability counts*⁵ was published to consult on proposals for a set of 13 headline indicators. The launch of the consultation received widespread coverage in the national newspapers and on television and radio. About 12,000 copies of the consultation document were distributed directly to a wide range of organisations across the UK and abroad. In addition a further 10,000 or so copies were distributed upon request to the public and various organisations and groups. The document was also made available on the DETR website.
- 7.14 Just over 650 written responses were received. Over a third of the responses were from local authorities or Local Agenda 21 groups, nearly a third from professional bodies, trade associations, businesses, academics, etc, one sixth from non-government organisations, and the remaining sixth from individual members of the public. Copies of individual responses are available for viewing in the DETR library.
- 7.15 There was considerable support for the concept and coverage of the package of indicators. Nearly 80 per cent of all respondents said they supported the initiative and only 2 per cent were against. A number of respondents (including the UK Round Table and many local groups) pressed for the addition of headline indicators covering crime and poverty. Both these ideas have now been incorporated in the headline set (see chapter 3). A number of respondents also felt that resource consumption should be better covered. This is recognised by the government, but data are not currently available except for some resources (eg fuels and water) and there are difficulties in aggregating different resources together. A project to consider better measures of resource use is to be started in 2000.
- 7.16 Several respondents – mainly non-governmental organisations – felt that it was not appropriate to have GDP as a headline indicator. They argued that increased economic growth is not compatible with sustainable development. However, the government's view is that maintaining economic growth is one of the central objectives of sustainable development. Economic growth is essential for opportunities to improve quality of life through better healthcare, education, and housing; to combat social exclusion; to revitalise our cities, towns and rural areas; and to protect and enhance our environment. The key is for government to set a framework to channel economic activity into more sustainable patterns, to make sure that the price of growth is not environmental decline or social injustice. We must achieve economic growth alongside improvements in the other indicators.
- 7.17 A number of other suggestions were made for specific indicators, but in general these were too detailed to be included in the headline set of indicators. Some have, however, been included in the wider set of indicators.

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

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH (JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1999)

- 7.18 During the consultation on *Sustainability counts* the government also commissioned some research on the headline indicators with focus groups consisting of representative members of the general public. Despite widespread newspaper, radio and TV coverage of the launch there was little awareness or memory of the initiative two months later. Upon presentation of the package of proposals there was some general support for the idea of headline indicators, although participants expressed a degree of cynicism about whether official figures could be trusted. They felt that some endorsement of the indicators by an independent body or figurehead would improve the credibility of the information. The package would also be more acceptable if the presentation included key actions taken by government and others to tackle the various issues. The government's annual report on sustainable development will present progress against each of the headline indicators and action it has taken or proposes to take in priority areas. The UK Round Table is also convening a national seminar in January 2000 to give an independent review of the core set of indicators presented in this report. The Sustainable Development Commission will also be monitoring progress and reviewing the state of sustainable development in the UK as revealed by the indicators.
- 7.19 The focus groups had some difficulty dealing with the wide scope of the indicators, but the presentation in the three broad themes (ie economic, social and environmental) helped understanding and communication. There was some general agreement about the issues covered by the indicators, although there was some debate about the individual indicators chosen. There was also some concern about the balance between the economic, social and environmental indicators. Some respondents considered there were too many environmental indicators, although they recognised the importance of the individual issues. The groups suggested there was a need for simple and visual presentations (but not graphs) which could be used by the news media. There was also a call for local or regional versions as well as the national overview. A report on the focus group research is available from EPSIM Division, DETR, Floor 5/C13, Ashdown House, 123 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6DE.

OTHER EVENTS

- 7.20 There were many other related events, such as seminars and workshops, which produced useful suggestions and input to the core set of indicators and this report. These included an away-day organised by the DETR of a small group of experts (April 1999), who gave valuable advice and ideas for summarising the headline indicators (see chapter 3) and for further integration and uncoupling analyses (see chapter 5)