

Summary

- 1 In May 1999, the UK government published *A better quality of life* – a strategy for sustainable development for the UK¹. Sustainable development is about ensuring a **better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come**. It means a more inclusive society in which the benefits of increased economic prosperity are widely shared, with less pollution and less wasteful use of natural resources.
- 2 To know whether we are meeting that goal, we need to be able to measure what is happening and monitor progress. The sustainable development strategy therefore included 14 ‘headline’ indicators, to give a broad overview of trends; and outlined a national set of about 150 indicators, to focus on specific issues and identify areas for action. This report provides a **baseline assessment**, looking in more detail at those indicators and the messages they send, and providing a benchmark against which future progress can be measured. Most of the indicators include data up to 1997 or 1998, prior to the publication of *A better quality of life*. In addition, many of the trends take time to change, so recent action will not yet show up in the indicators.
- 3 The government has extended the headline set to 15 indicators to include ‘poverty and social exclusion’. It has also set targets for some of the headline indicators – for example, reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and the proportion of new homes built on previously developed land. Where specific targets do not exist, the government’s aim is for the headline indicators to move in the right direction over time. Progress will be reported annually from 2000, and where a trend is unacceptable, the government will adjust its policies accordingly and will look to others to join it in taking action.
- 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 their country’s circumstances and needs.
- 5 Because sustainable development involves action by all sectors and at all geographical levels, work on indicators also needs to be taken forward across a broad front. The indicators set out here are the result of work in which many people, from a variety of backgrounds, have participated. And the government is working with others to produce sustainable development indicators for use internationally, and at regional and local levels. It is encouraging businesses and other organisations to compile and report on indicators relevant to them.

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)

- 6 This report follows the structure of the sustainable development strategy, looking at trends in the indicators and identifying the key challenges that lie ahead. While we need to be cautious in interpreting the indicators, some clear messages do emerge. There has been notable progress in some areas:
 - we have managed to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and improve air quality at the same time as achieving economic growth;
 - educational standards have been rising;
 - life expectancy has increased;
 - the standard of housing has improved;
 - there are fewer stretches of polluted rivers and estuaries.

- 7 But the indicators also illustrate where further progress is needed:
 - climate change remains a serious global threat and the UK, along with other countries, needs to continue both taking action to cut greenhouse gas emissions and to adapt to the possible impacts of climate change;
 - the UK's economic performance has not kept pace with many other countries; our levels of investment and skills still fall short of those achieved elsewhere, hampering our competitiveness;
 - within this country there are large regional differences in standards of living, and many areas contain pockets of severe deprivation;
 - 19% of children live in families with persistently low incomes;
 - over half of single persons over 60 living on their own experience fuel poverty;
 - healthy life expectancy has not increased as fast as total life expectancy;
 - on average people in unskilled jobs die 9 years sooner than those in professional occupations.

- 8 Some of the indicators are flashing even more obvious warning signals:
 - average journey lengths have increased, and more journeys are being made by car, adding to congestion, greenhouse gas emissions and making access to many services more difficult for those without a car;
 - the amount of household waste has increased faster than the rate of recycling;

- there has been a loss of species, habitats and landscape features, especially in farmland areas;
 - levels of violent crime have increased steadily over the last 30 years.
- 9 In the past, focus has centred mainly on improving labour productivity. In the future, greater emphasis will be needed on resource efficiency. We need to break the link between continued economic growth and increasing use of resources and environmental impacts.
 - 10 Unpacking the indicators can be revealing. For example, energy use per household has remained broadly unchanged while energy use per unit of output has fallen in the business sector. Despite improvements in vehicle design, road passenger travel has not overall become more energy-efficient over the last 30 years, and freight transport has actually become less fuel-efficient. Once we are aware of these trends, we can assess what lies behind them, and what might be done to change them.
 - 11 Although it is important to remain cautious in determining cause and effect, setting some of the indicators alongside each other helps to show where we have gone wrong in the past. For example, given the increase in out of town shopping centres since the mid-1980s, the rise in average length of shopping journeys is scarcely surprising. Changes in farming practice undoubtedly contributed to the reduction in the numbers of farmland birds.
 - 12 The government has said that it will publish every year, starting in 2000, the latest information about progress on sustainable development, including all the headline indicators. The challenge of sustainable development is a formidable one: reliable and comprehensive indicators are an important part of the toolkit needed to achieve it.