
Select Committee on the Environment - 31 October 2005

Report of the Director of the Urban Environment

Sustainable Development in Decision Making

Purpose of Report

1. To report back to the Committee on the findings of initial research on sustainability and decision making and to make recommendations for further detailed analysis.

To provide the Committee with practical examples of sustainability initiatives.

Background

2. At its meeting on 30 June 2005, the Committee agreed to oversee a programme of research into sustainability in terms of Council decision making. The first stage of this work, undertaken by the Council's Corporate Sustainability Group has involved researching best practice by other local authorities. Initial research has focused on methods, or, tools that meet the following criteria;

- have a practical focus, and are straightforward to use
- raise awareness of sustainable development
- provide clear outcomes against limited resource input
- link into other systems e.g. Local Strategic Partnership reporting, project management template etc.

3. Having applied these criteria, this report details further research that has been undertaken for the following 3 tools that can be used to take account of sustainability in decision making;

Sustainability appraisals
ECO Management Audit systems
State of the Environment Reporting

Research Findings

4. A brief description is given of how each of the 3 tools can be used to incorporate sustainability into decision making including the advantages and implications for the Council.

Sustainability Appraisals

5. The purpose of a sustainability appraisal is to evaluate the extent to which various areas of work meet the priorities of sustainable development (i.e. economic, environmental and social issues) and to make recommendations that will ultimately improve the outcomes of a project in terms of sustainability and also meet organisational aims. To have the greatest benefit, sustainability appraisals need to be flexible tools that can be used as a self-evaluation tool by project developers or more formally by adopting a scoring system.
6. There is an increasing use in local government of sustainability appraisals to meet sustainable development aims, particularly in relation to land use planning.
7. The following table summarises the advantages and implications of sustainability appraisals:

Advantages	Implications
<p>A flexible tool that is easy to use for various levels of projects and policies.</p> <p>Can be used at any stage of a project's development or review. Particularly useful at the project or policy development stage where gaps and issues that need to be addressed can be identified.</p> <p>Encourages joined up thinking and therefore maximises economic, social and environmental benefits.</p> <p>Tool can help to raise awareness of sustainability issues. It can also stimulate dialogue, generate new ideas, and involves stakeholders and partners in the decision making process.</p> <p>It's use may help to support bid applications for projects.</p> <p>The Dudley Community Partnership is currently piloting a sustainability appraisal tool on different projects. It has the potential to be adapted for wider Council use.</p> <p>A scoring system may be used to compare different projects.</p>	<p>An element of awareness raising will be required, although any appraisal tool is expected to be straightforward enough to be used by people unfamiliar with the concepts of sustainable development - the toolkit will guide them through the process.</p> <p>Need to consider the level of project/initiatives that will be subject to a sustainability appraisal.</p> <p>Consideration about how the 'suggested improvements' can be formally built into the decision making process – e.g. issues around who has responsibility for carrying out the appraisal and acting on suggested improvements and also links to Committee reports if relevant.</p>

8. It is felt that a sustainability appraisal toolkit is a practical way of considering sustainability in decision making. Further consideration would need to be given to the level of projects that should be subject to appraisals and how the sustainability appraisal would be built into formal decision making within the council.

State of the Environment Reports (SoE)

9. State of the Environment Reporting is a way of assessing environmental performance indicators, which monitor the impacts and changes that (local) activity has on the environment as a whole. A variety of indicators can be covered by this approach for example from air pollution levels and water quality to population levels of flora and fauna or the environmental quality of local neighbourhoods. The outcomes of such reporting can be used to show progress towards actions in the Council Plan and Community Strategy, as well as strategic and operational plans.
10. The following table outlines the main advantages and implications of this tool:

Advantages	Implications
<p>Provides a central reporting mechanism that offers shared information on the state of the environment that cover a wide range of environmental issues</p> <p>Paints a clearer picture of the environment and the people who live in it and are affected by the environment</p> <p>Provides accessible and scientifically sound information to inform the preparation of policy</p> <p>Increases public, officer and Member level understanding of environmental issues</p> <p>Helps to identify pressures and priority environmental issues and can help develop action plans for a sustainable future</p> <p>Because they cover a wide range of environmental issues, State of the Environment Reports can help to provide a more holistic approach to sustainability.</p> <p>By linking them in to local quality of life indicators (audit commission), it is possible to make links with the social and economic pillars of sustainable development.</p>	<p>There is a need to establish what indicators are to be measured and whether there is baseline data available</p> <p>The decision makers need to be in a position to create change if trends show no, slow, or backwards progress</p> <p>Change does not always occur on a frequent basis, so there may be little change to report annually.</p> <p>Legislation (FOI Act) allows everyone the right to access environmental information held by public authorities – the provision of environmental reporting can help this</p> <p>It could be a process managed by the Dudley Community Partnership as it relates to local quality of life issues</p> <p>There is a need to agree appropriate reporting/review timescales to take into account that not all indicators will change at the same rate (some will do so more slowly than others)</p>

11. It is considered that State of the Environment Reporting would be a useful tool for assessing environmental performance indicators. It is possible that this tool could be managed by the Strategic Housing and Environment partnership (one of the themed partnerships set up to support the Dudley Community Partnership).

Eco-management and Audit Scheme (EMAS)

12. EMAS is a voluntary regulation scheme for organisations to improve their environmental performance by setting up an environmental management system and reporting publicly on their performance. The EMAS provides the organisation’s management with a structured framework for identifying, evaluating, managing and improving its environmental performance. It helps to ensure that the organisation’s overall environmental goals, as set out in its environmental policy, are implemented throughout the organisation and that employees, contractors and suppliers know their roles and responsibilities in helping the organisation to achieve them.
13. The following table summarises the advantages and implications of EMAS:

Advantages	Implications
<p>EMAS requires consideration of all environmental aspects when making decisions.</p> <p>An accredited EMAS is a mark of quality – the EMAS logo represents a seal of reliability on the information that is presented with it.</p> <p>An accredited EMAS adds credibility to funding bids, particularly environmental ones.</p> <p>The EMAS provides a system for collecting and managing data on environmental performance which can be used to make validated product claims.</p> <p>EMAS provides organisations with a quality label for voluntary environmental management, internal efficiency, environmental communication and transparency.</p> <p>EMAS provides a systematic framework for setting targets, and measuring, monitoring and reporting on performance.</p>	<p>Concentrates primarily on the environmental aspect of sustainability</p> <p>The implementation of EMAS will take both financial and staff resources, for example, nominated officers will acquire new responsibilities and accountabilities</p> <p>Staff will require training</p> <p>Annual fee of £4,000 for auditors to assess continuous improvement and ongoing accreditation</p>

Although an EMAS for the Council would provide a detailed framework for managing the Council's environmental performance, there are concerns about the resources that would be required to implement it. This is both in terms of staff

resources which could probably not be met from existing budgets and an annual auditors fee of around £4,000.

Sustainable development in practical terms

14. At its meeting, the Committee also requested some examples of what sustainable development means in practical terms.

Sustainable development is about improving peoples quality of life, both now and in the future without using up the earth's resources upon which we depend or put simply, leaving the planet as you would wish to find it.

15. Three examples of sustainability initiatives are listed below:

1. Brierley Hill Transport Access Strategy: The Transport Access Strategy aims to support the proposed redevelopment of Brierley Hill as a sub regional centre. An integrated set of proposals aims to complement existing bus showcase improvements and other public transport initiatives being implemented by the developer. The procurement process through the award of the contract to developers considered sustainability in terms of materials to be used in construction and repair and maintenance work.

Social Benefits: *emphasis on an integrated public transport system will give local people greater choice and flexibility of how they travel, thus improving access to local facilities and jobs, especially as this is an area of low car ownership. The expected reduction in pollution should also have greater health benefits.*

Environmental Benefits: *The Scheme aims to reduce nitrogen dioxide and carbon dioxide emissions and improve air quality as part of the Brierley Hill Air Quality Management Plan. It also uses environmentally friendly materials where possible.*

Economic benefits: *The strategy supports the planning policies for the development of Brierley Hill as a centre by supporting economic expansion and continued investment in the area.*

2. Safe routes to school initiative - aims to encourage parents and children to travel to school safely and use modes of transport other than the car, e.g., walking and cycling.

Social benefits – *opportunities for more exercise and social interaction with the associated health and well being benefits.*

Economic benefits – *freer flow of highway network and fuel savings.*

Environmental benefits: - *reduced carbon dioxide emissions and improved air quality.*

3. Ultra low energy housing development at Linden Glade, Halesowen – development of 15 elderly persons dwellings (near completion).

Social benefits – affordable warmth and good insulation should improve health and wellbeing.

Environmental benefits – a zero carbon scheme achieved by high insulation levels, maximum use of solar heating, recycled materials, etc., and sedum grass on the roof which acts as a carbon sink (absorbs carbon dioxide)

Economic benefits – reduced heating bills and greater disposable income which benefits the economy and can have a knock-on effect on issues such as obesity because people have the option to spend more of their income on healthier food.

16. Therefore, the key message is to balance economic, social and environmental objectives when we are making plans or taking decisions in our day to day service provision or project delivery.

Sustainability and decision making in context

17. To attempt to put the work that is being carried out on sustainability and decision making into context, Appendix A shows how sustainability fits within the hierarchy of plans from the Community Strategy down to Council service plans. Appendix B indicates the main themes of sustainable development that need to apply for projects and initiatives to be sustainable.

Finance

18. There are no financial implications with regard to sustainability appraisals and State of the Environment reports. However, the implementation of EMAS would incur an annual fee of £4,000 for auditors to assess continuous improvement and ongoing accreditation. Undertaking EMAS would also require new staff responsibilities which probably could not be met within existing posts.

Law

19. Under Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 (the Act), the Council has the power to do anything which they consider is likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of their area; the principles of sustainability would help to achieve these objectives.

Under Section 4 of the Act the Council has a duty to prepare a strategy for achieving the objectives set out in Section 2 and for contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in the United Kingdom.

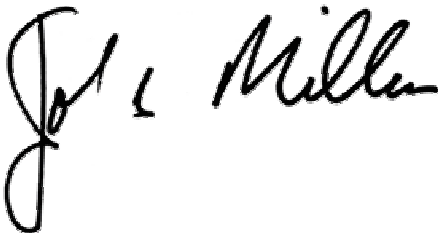
Equality Impact

20. One of the principles of sustainable development is about achieving equality and a better quality of life for all; therefore by integrating sustainability objectives into

decision making should make a positive contribution to delivering equal opportunities within the Borough of Dudley.

Recommendation

21. That of the 3 tools outlined in this report, the Committee agrees to oversee further evaluation of:
- the practical application of a sustainability appraisal tool by:
 - Assessing the practicality of the sustainability toolkit that is currently being piloted by the Dudley Community Partnership for wider Council use.
 - Consideration of the level of projects/initiatives that should be subject to a sustainability appraisal, in practical terms and how it would be built into the Council's decision making processes
 - the practical application of State of the Environment reporting:
 - In connection with Dudley Community Partnership and in particular monitoring the outcomes of the Community Strategy
22. That, due to concerns raised about significant staff and financial resources, the Committee agrees not to undertake further evaluation of EMAS in the immediate term.



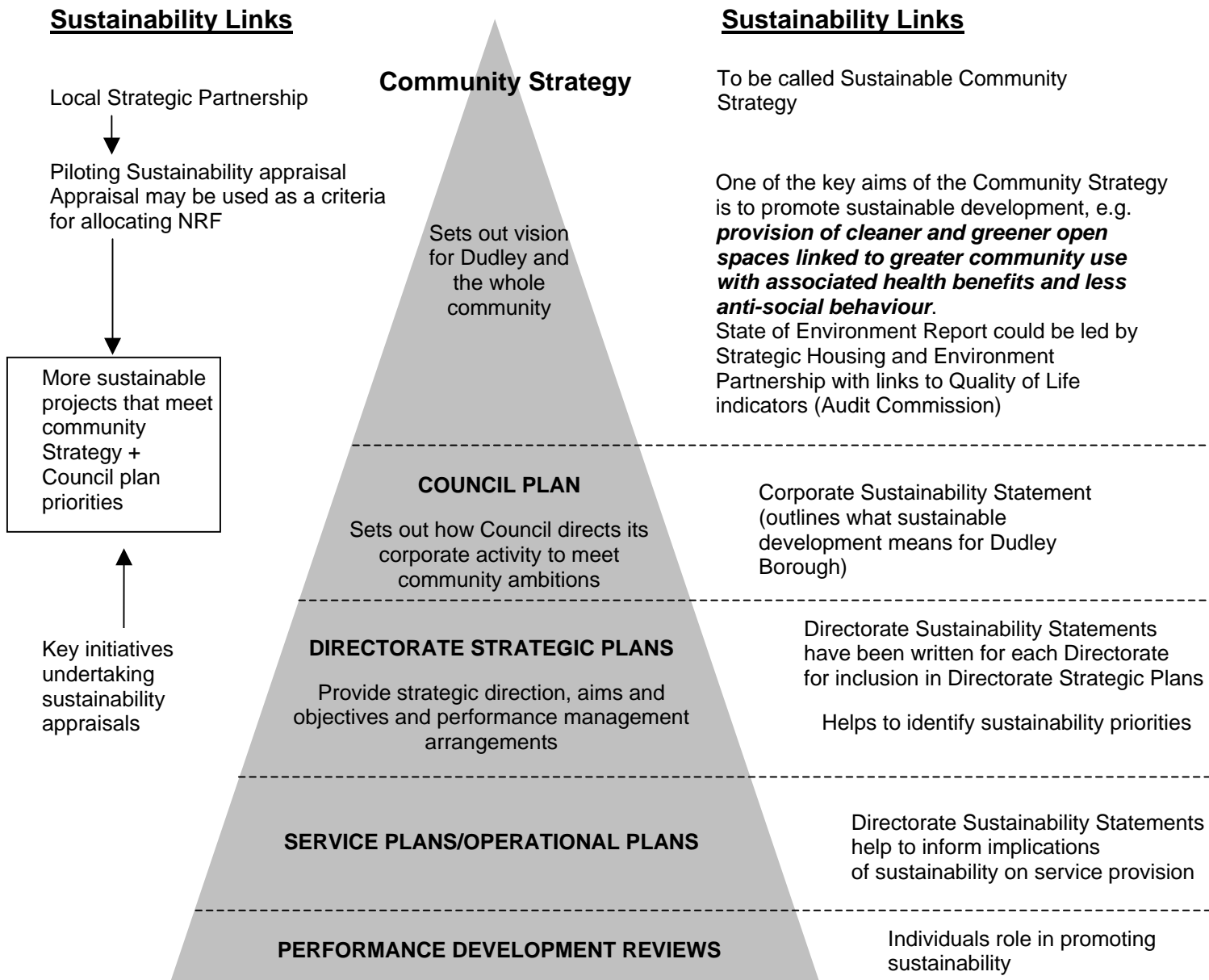
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John Millar
Director of the Urban Environment

Contact Officer: Clare Palmer
Telephone: 01384 814403
Email: clarepalmer@dudley.gov.uk

List of Background Papers

None.

WHERE DOES SUSTAINABILITY FIT INTO THE HIERARCHY OF PLANS?



The main themes of sustainable development

- Addressing social, economic and environmental themes together rather than as separate entities i.e. joined up thinking
- Making decisions bearing in mind their long term cons i.e. avoiding problems in the future by acting today
- Taking account of the environment and its capacity to support peoples activities in decision making
- Improving quality of life by focusing on the importance of non-monetary factors e.g. environment, community and family rather than just monetary ones
- Working in partnership with other agencies and communities and working towards fairness and equality