

Informal Consultation on Sustainable Development Indicators

Date: 24th July 2012

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Scope of this consultation

Topic of this informal consultation:	The publication of a new set of Sustainable Development Indicators.
Scope of this informal consultation:	The reason for issuing this as an 'Informal' consultation is that there are no legislative or regulatory issues attached to the revised indicators.
Geographical scope:	These indicators are for the UK Government. The commitment to produce a new set of Sustainable Development (SD) Indicators does not apply to the Devolved Administrations and they have their own arrangements in place on SD, including the publication of indicators. However in some instances it is not sensible to present the indicator for anything other than the UK.
Impact Assessment:	The publication of these Sustainable Development Indicators does not require an Impact Assessment.

Basic Information

To	Anyone with an interest in sustainable development (economic, social and environmental issues) and how progress should be reported.
Body/bodies responsible for the consultation:	The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Duration:	12 weeks. From the 24 th July 2012 to the 15 th October 2012
Enquiries	Defra's sustainable development team at sd.scene@defra.gsi.gov.uk
How to respond	Via an online survey at: http://sd.defra.gov.uk/new-sd-indicators/ Or in hard copy to:

	<p>Defra - SDI Consultation</p> <p>Area 1 C</p> <p>Nobel House</p> <p>Smith Square</p> <p>Westminster</p> <p>SW1P 3JR</p>
<p>Additional ways to become involved:</p>	<p>You can read more about the proposals at http://sd.defra.gov.uk/new-sd-indicators/ in an SD Scene article, You can also take part in an open discussion by commenting on the article or responding directly by email to Defra's sustainable development team at sd.scene@defra.gsi.gov.uk</p>
<p><i>After the consultation</i></p>	<p><i>A response to the consultation will be published by the end of December 2012 and the responses to this consultation will inform the publication of these indicators in 2013.</i></p>

Introduction

1. The Government's vision for mainstreaming Sustainable Development (SD) (Feb 28th 2011) gave a commitment to: *measure and report our progress through a new set of sustainable development indicators*. This informal¹ consultation asks for your views on the indicator set proposed in Annex I.
2. The mainstreaming vision set out the coalition Government's commitment to SD, stating that: *This means making the necessary decisions now to realise our vision of stimulating **economic** growth and tackling the deficit, maximising wellbeing in **society** and protecting our **environment**, without negatively impacting on the ability of future generations to do the same. This Government believes in going beyond the short term with eyes fixed firmly on a long term horizon shift in relation to our economy, our society and the environment.*
3. Indicators are generally aggregate or summary statistics, usually providing trends to show changes over time, used to highlight important issues. Sustainable development indicators are used to look at economic, societal and environmental issues together - whilst individual indicators are likely to cover only one of these, the essence of the set of indicators is that different indicators can be examined together.
4. The intention is that the proposed sustainable development indicators (SDIs) will provide, for Ministers across Government, Parliament and the public, high level transparent measures of whether the UK is developing on a sustainable path. The SDIs should also support our evidence base for policy development across Government.
5. In September 2011, Defra issued an online questionnaire and invited feedback from stakeholders on our plans to develop a new set of indicators. A summary of the responses are available at Annex III and IV. This feedback confirmed that the current SDIs are actively used outside central Government, including in local government, businesses, the third sector and in education. Reported uses for the existing set include: development of environmental strategies; supporting organisational reporting; informing target setting and base-lining; benchmarking and providing a context for local

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reporting; research and policy development; teaching, training and engaging people on SD. There is also national and international stakeholder interest in SDIs (there were 250,000 downloads of the update of the previous indicators between August 2010 to March 2011), and the publication of this provisional indicator set for consultation will help the UK maintain its position in international leadership on this agenda.

6. These indicators will therefore be published as provisional SDIs for 2012, with the feedback from the consultation informing the indicator set from 2013 onwards. This way will be able to align with the ONS National Wellbeing Measures, then reflect on both the responses to this consultation and actions emerging from the Rio+20, United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development before publishing an update in 2013.

Revising the indicator set

7. The work to revise and streamline the indicators was first initiated as a joint project between Defra and the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC), and we would like to thank the then members of the SDC for their early input into this work. The work has been further developed to reflect initial stakeholder input, ONS work on measuring National Wellbeing, work on departmental business planning and emerging international thinking.
8. The most recent indicator set (published 2005 to 2010) consisted of 68 indicators, with many of those indicators comprised of component indicators, which were individually assessed.
9. We are now looking to *streamline* the indicators, by which we mean drawing out a small set of 'headline' indicators which can give a summary assessment of overall progress towards SD, with background data also available. We recommend that the streamlined indicators are presented in two main tiers:
 - tier 1 comprising 12 headline indicators; and
 - tier 2 comprising 25 supplementary indicators.
10. We have selected 12 provisional headline indicators which are high-level outcome measures and capture priority issues for making economic, environmental and social progress for this and future generations, in line with the UK Sustainable Development Strategy's 'guiding principles' of sustainable development: *living within the planet's*

environmental limits; ensuring a strong, healthy and just society; achieving a sustainable economy; promoting good governance; and using sound science responsibly.

11. Where possible we have tried to focus on end outcome measures. For example on the issue of water resources we have selected a measure of water availability over domestic water consumption, as availability is an end outcome.
12. We have also tried to identify indicators that give us an idea of the 'stocks' that we carry forward to the future (i.e. how much of something have we generated or how much is left, rather than just how much are we using) – this is referred to as our 'capital'. However, this can be difficult to do, and so for example we cannot determine our entire capital of natural resources and instead have to focus on selected aspects of the natural environment and changes to them. In some places we have identified priority issues for sustainable development where indicators are not yet available, and have suggested possible approaches to developing suitable measures - noting that further consideration will have to be given to the availability of data and possible burdens.
13. There are three main reasons for streamlining the indicator set:
 - i. The SDIs previously included a set of measures of wellbeing (introduced in 2007). A new set of measures of national wellbeing (NWB) are being developed, with work on these being led by the Office of National Statistics (ONS), independently of Government. This gives us the chance to look afresh at the SDIs, casting them as indicators of 'inter-generational wellbeing' which will complement and sit alongside the national wellbeing measures under a banner of 'Measuring Progress'. This aligns with the overarching sustainable development objective of ensuring that our development *meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. This approach is also advocated in the Stiglitz/Sen/Fittoussi report commissioned by the then French President Nicolas Sarkozy which states that: *"The assessment of sustainability is complementary to the question of current wellbeing or economic performance..."*

The inextricable links between wellbeing and sustainable development may result in some indicators sitting in both the NWB and SDI sets if they look at issues that are both relevant to current wellbeing and long term inter-generational wellbeing. The provisional ONS NWB measures are available on the ONS website at:

<http://ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/wellbeing/measuring-national-well-being/summary-of-proposed-domains-and-measures/summary-of-proposed-domains-and-measures-of-national-well-being.html#tab-abstract>). ONS and Defra will be discussing the coverage and overlaps as the indicator sets develop in parallel.

- ii. Whilst the previous (2005 to 2010) indicator set was arguably comprehensive it was both resource intensive to maintain and difficult to arrive at a summary of overall progress towards sustainable development.
- iii. Previous SDIs included a headline set, and this proved effective in highlighting sustainable development priorities. There is now a clear international trend towards a focus on high priority indicators, and a number of other countries and international institutions (including the European Commission) are following this approach.

The balance of the Indicator set

14. The indicator set proposed is not a 'balanced' set with equal numbers of indicators covering the economic, society and environment domains. There are 12 under *Economy*; 11 under *Society*; and 14 under *Environment*. There is a smaller number of indicators under the society domain as issues relating to society will be strongly represented in National Wellbeing (NWB). Conversely there are a relatively large number of environmental indicators because the environmental pillar is most strongly inter-generational. Stakeholder feedback on the previous SDIs also highlighted the importance of the environment.

Implications of streamlining

15. Streamlining inevitably means that some of the indicators included in the 2005 to 2010 set do not feature in the proposed SDI set, and so it will not be so comprehensive and detailed. In particular given the parallel development of the NWB measures we propose that it is no longer necessary to include all of those measures relating to current wellbeing. Annex II lists the 68 indicators in the previous SDI set and highlights and provides links to source data.

16. In addition to drawing the links with the NWB measures we will also sign-post the availability of other 'sustainable development relevant' data when we publish a revised

indicator. For example, there are indicators sets (already published or in development) for: The Social Mobility Strategy; The Child Poverty Strategy; The Public Health Outcomes Framework; The National Infrastructure Plan; The Food System; The Marine Strategy; The Natural Environment White Paper; The Government Review of Waste Policy in England; while Departmental Business Plans also include a range of other ‘sustainable development relevant’ indicators which stakeholders may find useful. So while we are recommending indicators that work as high level measures for the UK they will link to other areas of concern for sustainable development and will continue to support more specific reporting, for example: we can sign-post the Greening Government Commitments which require Government Departments to report on their own operations and procurement which might be of interest to stakeholders concerned with organizational level reporting.

17. In many instances it is not just the overall level of an indicator that is important, but also whether there are inequalities in how people are affected. Whilst it is not practicable to present all the indicators in the headline or supplementary set in terms of inequalities, where practicable links to data that disaggregate the indicators will be made available.

“Periodic Policy Specific Indicator Reports”

18. The announcement on mainstreaming sustainable development also noted that: *‘The high level [indicator] set will be supplemented by periodic (policy-specific) indicator reports...’* These reports will provide a further tier to the headline and supplementary indicators and we would like your views on possible priority issues for themed indicator reports.

19. A number of the indicators are also helpful in assessing our progress in moving towards a green economy (such indicators are highlighted in the consultation as ‘green economy’ indicators). A ‘green economy’ is defined as an economy where value and growth are maximised while managing natural assets sustainably. Environmental damage will be reduced across the whole economy in the most cost-effective way, while increasing energy security, resource efficiency and resilience to climate change. A green economy will be supported and enabled by lower carbon energy generation, by a thriving low carbon and environmental goods and services sector and by maximising the value from the green transition of more traditional sectors.

Assessing performance

20. In the past, sustainable development indicators have been summarised by use of traffic light symbols, indicating:

-  Improving
-  Little or no overall change
-  Deteriorating
-  Insufficient or no comparable data

21. compared with baseline year The traffic lights are not assessments of performance against targets but rather a way of simplifying the data and enabling a quick summary of the general direction of travel on the indicators. We recommend continuing with them for the new indicator set, although further consideration is required concerning the basis of assessment. An example of a traffic light assessment is given for one of the proposed indicators (see the indicator on Climate Change).

Questions

22. Taking all the above into consideration, we now have a proposed set of indicators on which we invite feedback. The indicators are presented in Annex I.

23. *Overall, do you agree that this is a suitable indicator set for measuring progress on sustainable development?* (using the following scale: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree);

24. For each indicator we would like to know whether you:

- i. agree with the inclusion of this issue *in the overall indicator set* (using the following scale: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree);
- ii. agree that this issue should be a headline indicator **indicator**/or supplementary (using the following scale: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree); and
- iii. agree that this indicator is suitable to capture this issue?
- iv. We would also welcome general comments on each indicator.

25. We would also like views on:

- i. whether there are any significant gaps in this indicator set *and any suggestions of indicator data sources* (bearing in mind the need for streamlining and the relationship with other indicator sets)? .
- ii. whether it would be useful when presenting these indicators to highlight those indicators relevant to a particular theme so that they can be pulled out as a subset e.g. as we have with those indicators relevant to a green economy. If so, which themes would you want to see highlighted?
- iii. are there any 'policy specific' themes that you think should be explored in *our periodic (policy-specific) indicator reports*.

26. Finally, from which perspective / sector are you responding? I.e.

- i. Central Government
- ii. Local/Regional Government
- iii. Agency/Public Body
- iv. Business/Private Sector
- v. Teacher/Education
- vi. Charity/Voluntary
- vii. General Public
- viii. Other