



The Government's approach to sustainable development

Environmental Audit Committee
House of Commons
London
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Written submission response from the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC) to the Environmental Audit Select Committee

About us

The EAUC is a strong alliance of universities and colleges, sector bodies and commercial organisations, working together both in the UK and internationally. We stand strong individually, but we make a far stronger impact when we work together. Education has a huge role to play but we need to drive next generation leadership to address next generation sustainability. We need to look wider, internationally, globally, to business and to the next leaders: students.

The EAUC Vision is a university, college and learning and skills sector where the principles and values of environmental, economic and social sustainability are embedded. Our Mission is that we will lead, inspire and equip Members and stakeholders with a shared vision, knowledge and the tools they need to embed sustainability within curriculum and operations.

Our Membership is made up of 215 Member institutions (Universities and Colleges across the UK and internationally) comprising some 4,216 professionals.

Our Response

What key policies are needed over the course of this Parliament to adequately protect the environment, promote growth in the low carbon sector and improve wellbeing?

In addressing key themes of this Government, in particular low productivity, social inequalities (health and economic) and place-based interventions it is essential that environmental concerns are addressed in delivering solutions and are explicitly measured in assessing benefits delivered. For example, in skills policy, attention needs to be provided to developing people (apprenticeships, adult skills, higher education) for low carbon jobs and greening the economy. In health policy, the positive impact of the environment can be championed as a health intervention open to all. And in developing the economy, sustainable growth should be a key concern in supporting job creation and retention. In place-based interventions in support of localism, attention should be given to co-ordinating the efforts of organisations (public bodies)

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such as local councils working with hospitals and universities/colleges on waste, space usage and capital investments etc.

Policy drivers for reporting on environment measures should be compulsory for all public bodies and must include universities and colleges. Clear targets should be expressed showing how these accord with meeting those in the Climate Change Act.

It is also key that Education (including tertiary education, i.e. universities and colleges) is included as an authority that needs to report under the Adaptation Reporting Power and that there is an established agency nominated to be the reporting authority. Given the societal influence of education, it is staggering that education is not mentioned at all and the EAC can make a difference in challenging this situation and ensure that all institutions have Sustainable Development Management Plans agreed at Board level. As such, a key theme for the Committee could be to explore how the UK is performing in terms of the forthcoming Education Sustainable Development Goal coming out of the UN system.

Does the Government's current fiscal and legislative agenda accord with the action required and, if not, why not and where might it be improved?

Simply put, no. The loss of the independent expertise that contributed to the previous Sustainable Development Commission has been a retrograde step as it worked across the whole of the UK and was able to consider positive developments in different parts of the UK. There are currently few drivers at UK Government level that address sustainable development. There is a lack of an overarching narrative to capture the agenda as a co-ordinated cross-Whitehall theme. This means that interventions, in terms of delivering policy, lack a cohesive approach. As such, public bodies and indeed private business are not held accountable in terms of assessment against agreed measures.

The Government has important levers, such as procurement and grants, that could easily be amended to make sustainable development a key outcome measure of any contract or award. The EAC could usefully explore how best to support Government in this area through its work.

In light of the National Assembly for Wales recently passing the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, it would be interesting to establish a mechanism to independently monitor the effectiveness of sustainable development delivery in a part of the UK that will require its public sector to make explicit its commitment to sustainable development following the commencement of the Act in April 2016 and the other parts of the UK which have no similar legislative requirement.

Where should responsibility lie in Government for ensuring the sustainable development approach is adopted by all Government departments?

The Cabinet Office could assume a cross-Whitehall agenda in line with its other pan-Government responsibilities such as equalities. It should be informed by experience in other parts of the UK, e.g. from Wales and Scotland.

The influence of Treasury is felt across Government and in drawing up spending plans and promoting efficiency and effectiveness, the argument for sustainable development being a fiscal consideration and contributing towards a wider integrated reporting agenda would be powerful if led from here.





What metrics could the Committee use to monitor the Government's performance on sustainable development over the course of the Parliament?

Rather than presenting sustainable development as yet another thing to report on, the EAC could champion a powerful narrative that this is at the very heart of a successful Government demonstrating responsibility for future generations. Making best use of resources, both people and planet, as well as driving innovation and addressing social and health inequalities are powerful and energising for Government. This is always so, but perhaps more so in times characterised by austerity. As such, the EAC can influence through its action to encourage Government departments to reflect on how sustainable development thinking can advance their delivery plans. That is, to incorporate and embed it within their business planning and in building their delivery plans. Current reporting measures should be extended to include sustainable development targets.

The Government should agree key generic measures and targets, which can be applied differentially in accord with each Department's focus. For example, Health, Education, and Transport would have very different measures that together would deliver on overall goals.

Such metrics should be linked to the Climate Change Act. There needs to be clear accountability measures linked to driving improvement as well as characterising 'at risk' organisations.

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

Iain Patton
CEO