



The Centre For Business Relationships,
Accountability, Sustainability and Society

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**Communities and their Quality of
Life: how Local Government is
Delivering Sustainable Development**



Andrew Flynn and
Alan Netherwood



Communities and their quality of life:
How local government is delivering sustainable development

Dr. Andrew Flynn and Dr. Alan Netherwood

About the BRASS Centre

In 2001, Cardiff University won £3.1 million in research funds from the Economic and Social Research Council to develop a Research Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS). The Centre is a joint venture between the University's Schools of Business, City & Regional Planning and Law. It brings together the three Schools' existing research expertise on issues of sustainability, business ethics, company law, corporate reporting and business communication.

The Centre started work in October 2001 under the leadership of Professor Ken Peattie of the Business School, Professor Terry Marsden of the Department of City and Regional Planning and Professor Bob Lee of the Law School. The funding of the Centre covers an initial five-year period, but this should just mark the beginning of BRASS' contribution to creating more sustainable and responsible businesses locally, nationally and globally.

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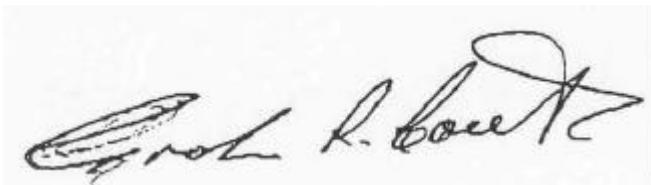


Preface

Sustainable development is a much used and, indeed, abused phrase. It is my belief that the principles of sustainable development should lie at the heart of everything that local government does: it is the key to good corporate management and to improving the well-being of our communities now and in the future.

The Welsh Local Government Association (in partnership with the Local Government International Bureau) commissioned Dr. Andrew Flynn to research and write a report on how local government in Wales is delivering sustainable development as a contribution to the global conference on sustainable development held in Cardiff in March 2004. We are particularly grateful to Dr. Alan Netherwood of Cardiff County Council who, as Chair of Sustainable Development Co-ordinators Cymru, helped to prepare this report.

Wales led the industrial revolution, our current challenge is to lead the 'sustainable revolution'. Local government must be at the heart of this 'revolution'. I am keen to ensure that the Association plays an active part in this transition. We have recently agreed to enter into a partnership with Forum for the Future to provide expertise on sustainable development and we are looking at developing a sustainable development standard or framework which would provide practical advice to local authorities on how to mainstream sustainability issues across all service areas.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Graham R. Court". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a vertical line.

Councillor Graham Court OBE

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Finally, the views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the WLGA or any of its constituent members.

Andrew Flynn and Alan Netherwood

Cardiff, March 2004

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1.0 What is Sustainable Development?

Sustainable development is one of the most widely used but misunderstood terms currently in use in public policy. Essentially sustainable development is

“the simple idea of ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for future generations to come” (Great Britain, 1999, para 1.1).

Improving the quality of people’s lives will depend upon maintaining the environmental resource base upon which life depends. Decision making for sustainable development will therefore bring together economic, social and environmental issues and recognise the interdependencies between them. It is a quite different approach to decision-making and policy development than has prevailed because:

- Decisions must be made in an integrated manner;
- Policy cannot, for example, simply trade-off economic development against the overuse of environmental resources; and therefore
- Public bodies must think in innovative ways to deliver on their responsibilities for sustainable development.

The interdependencies between economic development, social (or community) issues and the protection of the environment are now well recognised. Strong economies if they are to continue to prosper need vibrant communities and to be able to maintain or improve the (environmental) resource base. Similarly communities increasingly demand high quality economic growth that enhances the local and global environment rather than simply takes resources from it or puts wastes in it.

1.1 Sustainable development, well-being and quality of life

Local authorities in Wales have a duty under the Local Government Act 2000 to prepare a community strategy. The purpose of these strategies is to enhance the quality of life of local communities through action to improve their economic, social

and environmental well-being, and contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.

This duty was reinforced by significant new powers for local government to

“do anything which they consider is likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, the social or the environmental well-being of their area” (Local Government Act 2000).

The belief that decisions should be made in an integrated way is central to this idea of economic, social or environmental well-being. The terms well-being and sustainable development can be interchanged provided that the former is used to mean the simultaneous meeting of economic, social and environmental goals. Meeting one or two of these goals may not be sustainable.

The power that councils have under the Local Government Act 2000 to promote the economic, social or environmental well-being of their area harks back to the origins of local government and the motivations of many who work within it. More particularly, local government can

“consider how the power can promote the sustainable development of its area by delivering the actions and improvements identified in its community strategy, which could include tackling social exclusion, reducing health inequalities, promoting neighbourhood renewal and improving local environmental quality” (DETR, 2001, para 6).

Quality of life is another concept that is closely related to sustainable development. More sustainable societies will improve the quality of life of their citizens. Quality of life may also be a rather ambiguous term but would seem to include satisfying peoples basic needs for food, shelter, security and safety and their higher order needs such as living and working in good environments.

The term sustainable development will not go away but what is needed is the application of the thinking behind the idea in a way that makes it meaningful. The important point is that the principles and goals (but not necessarily the language) of sustainable development are integrated into the actions and strategies of local

government. Sustainable development must be made meaningful for local government and its communities. One possible starting point is that for some it may be of more help to use terms such as quality of life or well-being both of which have a resonance at the local level and for local action. Strategies to promote both quality of life and well-being would also include the following three points.

- Solutions – providing, and working with others to provide, integrated solutions to the social, economic and environmental needs of the community.
- Equity – seeking to improve the quality of life of all in the community, especially those whose needs are greatest.
- The future – recognising that decisions taken now will have impacts for the future.

1.2 The contribution of local government to sustainable development

Local government has a unique contribution to make to promote more sustainable societies. It is close to its communities, recognises the need to work in partnership with its communities, and all of its services impact to a greater or lesser extent on the economy, environment and society. Meeting their communities well-being is at the heart of local government. In Section 2 we briefly outline the range of sustainable activities that Welsh local government is taking. The I&DeA Knowledge website identifies a number of opportunities of how the power of well-being might be used by local government and its partners to promote novel initiatives. These include:

- Involvement in energy savings companies to provide power to communities. Cheaper energy could be sold as part of a strategy to tackle fuel poverty.
- Bring empty properties back into use, as councils will be able to buy, renovate and sell properties.
- Powers to promote sustainable housing which go beyond current requirements in terms of their energy efficiency or water conservation measures.

1.3 Challenges for local government

For local government the ambiguity of sustainable development may be a disadvantage. It is quite legitimate for sustainable development to mean different things to different local authorities. Local authorities can therefore undertake distinct activities and have individual structures that they put under the umbrella of their own approach to sustainability. And yet the diversity of processes and practices that may emerge can lead to questions over the commitment of local government to the sustainable development agenda.

A second major problem for local government is that sustainable development is often formulated in high-level or abstract terms. There is a sustainability language that may not be immediately apparent to the day-to-day concerns of local government.

A third issue for local government is that it is regarded as a key mechanism for the delivery of sustainability. But local government has historically rarely been given additional resources or statutory responsibilities to deliver on sustainability. What may need to be recognised, though, is that by addressing sustainable development in an integrated (i.e. corporate) manner councils can act more strategically for the benefit of their communities and to do so may not necessarily require additional powers or resources.

Fourth, thinking in a more integrated manner challenges existing practices and structures. To overcome traditional patterns of decision-making requires commitment and leadership from senior politicians and officers.

2.0 Meeting the Challenge: Delivering sustainable development

Welsh local government is beginning to address the challenge of delivering on its responsibilities towards sustainability in a number of ways. Most common is council involvement in specific projects that are labelled as 'sustainable development'. Whilst These are often innovative demonstration projects demonstrating how to put sustainable development principles into operation in certain service areas. However, a

more formidable challenge is to bring ideas on sustainability into the mainstream of an organisation. This involves embedding sustainability principles in the plans, programmes and policies of local government. The remainder of this section draws on a series of examples from across Wales to illustrate the breadth – though not the outcomes – of sustainability activities of local government. The examples are divided into three groups:

- structures and processes to mainstream sustainable development;
- cases of sustainability linked to service delivery; and
- ways of measuring progress on sustainability.

The examples that have been selected are not necessarily those that the councils would regard as their most important but they do illustrate the rich variety of activity.

2.1 Structures and process to mainstream sustainable development

In many ways structures and processes to mainstream sustainable development are an expression of good corporate governance. This is because sustainability thinking involves a council being able to co-ordinate its internal working arrangements so that policies complement rather than compete with one another. Moreover, externally sustainable practices demand engagement with local partnerships and the full involvement of local communities in partnership working. Current good practice on corporate governance, like that of sustainability, challenges top down, narrowly focussed and department based structures – the so-called silos. The following elements are therefore needed:

- Processes that lead to integrated decisions
- Strong links with the community and community organisations
- Commitment to partnership working and investment in community capacity building.

2.1.1 Case studies

- Blaenau Gwent

Formulating the community strategy has enabled the Council to develop its approach to sustainability and has encouraged joined-up thinking both within divisions in the Council (e.g. the implications of promoting a modal shift in transport) and externally where a regional perspective is increasingly important.

- Caerphilly

Sustainable development has been given a high political profile and political leadership. A Sustainable Development Advisory Panel is chaired by one of the deputy leaders. Its remit allows it to look at any area of the Council's work and also to check that new developments are considered from a sustainability perspective. The Panel reports direct to Cabinet. A senior officer group has also been formed which has a similarly wide brief and report on their work to the Panel. The Council also engages in consultation with its communities as part of its community strategy and also engages in a bi-annual public satisfaction survey. As a result of its feedback from the community the Council has sought to realign its budget spend and service delivery.

- Cardiff

The Council has a corporate working group of 20 Sustainability Advocates and 15 green teams who bring the sustainability message into their own service areas. Each advocate and green team member has received training in sustainability appraisal, and a corporate review of sustainability performance has been undertaken.

- Carmarthenshire

Sustainable development is a core value for the Council. There is an Executive Board member with responsibility for sustainable development and senior management commitment and interest in the issue. As part of the corporate mainstreaming of sustainable development the Council have worked with Forum for the Future to

develop a sustainability appraisal mechanism – the Carmarthenshire Integration Framework – against which new policy developments can be tested. The community strategy is being informed by six independent Area For a each of which has produced an Area Plan for People and the Local Environment (APPLE).

- Ceredigion

The Wales Programme for Improvement enabled the Council to evaluate its sustainability activities. The review led to a Cabinet member taking on the mantle of sustainability champion. As further recognition of the importance of sustainability a Sustainable Development Standing Committee is to be established. This will be similar to a scrutiny committee, as it will be able to hold people to account.

- Flintshire

The Council is seeking to mainstream sustainability by complying with Green Dragon. The corporate nature of an environmental management system means that all staff must be aware of their responsibilities. New staff are made aware of the Council's environmental commitments as part of an induction training programme.

- Neath Port Talbot

Work is underway on developing a sustainability appraisal mechanism. The appraisal is to help shift the decision making process from its focus on individual policies and strategies to an integrated and inclusive approach.

- Newport

A sustainability check list has been developed so that all decisions for members of the Cabinet must contain information on the implications of each decision in terms of sustainable development. The check list is designed to get officers to think out of their particular 'box'.

- Powys

The Council is working to 'green' its corporate structures by mainstreaming Green Dragon, a Welsh environmental management standard. Externally Powys has engaged in an extensive consultation process in developing its community strategy. This has involved establishing fifteen community forums based on the main market towns. The agendas for the meetings were set by the communities and were able to address strategic issues such as employment rather than simply local concerns.

Challenges

Efforts to mainstream sustainability confront common challenges. First, sustainable development is often seen simply as an alternative term for environment. Sustainable development thus remains in an environmental 'ghetto'. Second, on a crowded policy agenda it is difficult to secure the necessary senior political and officer commitment that is necessary to drive through a process of mainstreaming. Third, problems of integration can still remain because structures continue to perpetuate a silo-based approach to policy making and delivery.

2.2 Service delivery

Innovations in service delivery are often those most visible to external and internal audiences. Improvements based around sustainability can demonstrate how services can be reformed and are a practical example of what local councils can achieve. As we shall see below these initiatives range across local government service delivery and in their scale.

2.2.1 Regeneration/economic development

- Pembrokeshire National Park

The Roundhouse Eco Cottage project converted a former croquet pavilion built at the turn of the 20th Century, into a showcase for sustainable tourism. The idea behind the project was to design a conversion that would use every available source of natural energy; the use of building materials that were benign, the use of a low impact waste

disposal system, and the collection of rain water. The completed project now serves as hotel accommodation and educational facility.

- Swansea

The Mumbles Local Producers Market is a monthly Saturday morning market and was set up by the Mumbles Development Trust and has about 18 to 22 stalls. Many of the producers take part monthly and there is a good variety of products on offer from Swansea and the surrounding region including, fish, lamb, beef, seasonal vegetables and fruit, preserves, breads and cakes, wines and sauces.

2.2.2 Planning

- Conwy

The Council has undertaken a sustainability appraisal of its draft UDP. This has identified policies that need to be reformulated, tensions between policies and ensured that sustainability is a consistent theme running through the document.

2.2.3 Waste management

- Wrexham

Wrexham County Borough Council introduced Recycle with Michael in June 2002 to six thousand households. Along with the familiar black wheeled bin for rubbish a green bin is supplied for garden waste. Households are also supplied with pink sacks for plastic bottles and food and drink cans and green sacks for paper. The Recycle with Michael scheme will be rolled out in 2004 to a further twenty thousand households. In addition 11 Neighbourhood Recycling Sites have been being introduced which have facilities for recycling glass, paper, card, cans, plastic bottles and textiles. Ten more Neighbourhood Recycling Sites are to be introduced by 2004.

2.2.4 Health and well-being

- Merthyr Tydfil

Merthyr became the first Local Authority in the UK to install Eco Pole units that power standard street lighting fittings. Two new 'Eco Poles' – street lighting units are now operational in Darren Las, Merthyr Vale. The units require no external source of electricity, as the solar panel is the primary charging source in the summer months, and the wind turbine during the winter. Although the whole unit costs initially 2-3 times more than a traditional unit, saving is seen when there is no electrical service available in the vicinity and large scale excavation would be involved to run such a supply.

- Monmouthshire

In 2000 Monmouthshire County Council was awarded a grant from the Countryside Council for Wales to establish a walking group for sedentary people and those with health problems. The scheme is to be expanded to addresses health issues, reduce social isolation and create safe groups for people to enjoy the environment.

2.2.5 Corporate services/green housekeeping

- Pembrokeshire

Three units in Pembrokeshire County Council have embarked on the Green Dragon Environmental Standard. If environmental improvements and cost benefits are identified, it will provide a business case for rolling Green Dragon out across the authority.

2.2.6 Environmental protection

- Snowdonia

Bugeuliaid y Coed (no fence tree planting) is a charity and workers co-operative

which seeks to increase the cover of native tree species throughout Snowdonia by allowing the establishment of young trees alongside sheep and cattle farming.

2.2.7 Transport

- Pembrokeshire

The Greenways Project was launched in May 1994, promoted by the Countryside Council for Wales as a demonstration project and managed by PLANED/SPARC in partnership with others including Pembrokeshire County Council. It enables visitors and local people to travel to and enjoy the South Pembrokeshire countryside without using a car. It provides opportunities for people to access walking and cycling routes via public transport.

- Torfaen

The Council has adopted sustainable commuting “Travel Plans” for both County Hall and Civic Centre sites, both aiming to promote alternatives to the private car. These include installing cycle racks, improved bus links and timetable information, and the provision of Care2Share databases where Officers can organise joint carshare arrangements.

2.2.8 Education

- Anglesey

The Gwynedd and Anglesey Green Schools Scheme is to provide a framework for encouraging and supporting primary and secondary schools in both counties to adopt policies and undertake activities that will protect, improve and enhance the environment as a central part of the school’s daily life. Schools must also demonstrate that the whole school (pupils, teachers, governors, parents and ancillary staff) are fully committed to and involved in the process of implementing the requirements of the scheme within the school environment by forming a Green Group and formally adopting the Green Schools ‘Charter’.

- Bridgend

The Bridgend Environmental Education Partnership brings together many organisations who support environmental education. The Partnership has organised a one day workshop for head teachers, governors and parents, has worked to increase environmental education content within the INSET programme, promoted registration to Eco-Schools and developed a comprehensive website. In 2003 it broadened its remit to emphasise education for sustainable development (ESD) and life long learning.

Challenge

The major challenge to be faced in the service delivery of sustainable development is creating the conditions in which good practice is able to spread through the organisation (both horizontally and vertically). The culture change that is required will need leadership and commitment from the top.

2.3 Measuring Progress

2.3.1 Quality of life indicators

The Audit Commission consulted on a set of voluntary Quality of Life indicators for local authorities during the autumn of 2000. The exercise was prompted by the new powers given to local authorities in the Local Government Act 2000 to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their area, and their new duty to work with partners to prepare a community strategy. During 2002/03, all 22 local authorities in Wales 'signed up' to be part of the pilot of a set of Quality of Life indicators. There are 43 indicators for 2003/4 in the Welsh set covering the areas of economic, social and environmental well-being. The proposed indicators are designed to paint a picture of the quality of life in an area and to challenge all partners involved in the community strategy to show how they are addressing its thematic priorities.

- Rhondda Cynon Taf

The indicators have helped to revise the approach to the community plan in RCT. Previously it had been a Council focused document, which had not contained detailed information on measurement or specific outcomes. However, the revised document focuses on the community that Rhondda Cynon Taf wishes to achieve and ways to measure it, including Quality of Life indicators.

2.3.2 Ecological footprinting

A quite different approach to measure progress is that of the ecological footprint which measures the area of land needed by each citizen in terms of their annual consumption (i.e. products, resources) and production (i.e. waste, gas emissions, pollution). The footprint is calculated in global hectares of 'earth portions'. The councils intend to use the footprint data to: assess long-term trends, guide and develop policies, measure environmental performance, evaluate the success of similar strategies, model scenarios and for the purposes of education and raising awareness.

- Cardiff and Gwynedd

Cardiff and Gwynedd Councils are currently calculating their local footprint and piloting the use of this tool in decision-making by considering how different decisions or service provision could reduce their footprint.

3.0 Where next?

Further progress on mainstreaming sustainable development in Welsh local government will rest upon:

- Making the language of sustainability more meaningful to local government and its communities.

- Engaging senior management and political leaders in the sustainability agenda. Sustainable development cannot simply be a bottom-up process; it also needs direction and commitment from the top.
- Promoting good corporate governance in which it is recognised that thinking in an integrated way is also promoting sustainability.
- Supplying the resourcing and the responsibility for sustainable development that reflects its significance to the overall performance of the council.
- Providing the legislative backing to ensure that local government does commit itself to the sustainable agenda. In a crowded policy field and with limited resources sustainable development too often becomes an option and not a duty.

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