

Sustainable Development
The Government's approach - delivering UK sustainable development together

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A better quality of life - strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom - 1999

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Chapter 4

Guiding Principles and Approaches

4.1 This Strategy concentrates on setting key objectives, supported by indicators and targets. The Government's policies will also take account of ten principles and approaches which reflect key themes from the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*,¹ the 1994 strategy, and responses to Opportunities for change. Some are established legal principles.² Others might better be described as 'approaches' to decision making.

- **Putting people at the centre.** Sustainable development must enable people to enjoy a better quality of life, now and in the future. In the words of the *Rio Declaration*, 'human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.'
- **Taking a long term perspective.** Sustainable development thinking cannot restrict itself to the life of a Parliament, or the next decade. Radical improvements have to begin now to safeguard the interests of future generations. At the same time we must meet today's needs - for example, people need warm homes, which, at present, means using predominantly fossil fuels.
- **Taking account of costs and benefits.** Decisions must take account of a wide range of costs and benefits, including those which cannot easily be valued in money terms. In pursuing any single objective, we should not impose disproportionate costs elsewhere. Public values, the timing of costs and benefits and risks and uncertainties should be taken into account.
- **Creating an open and supportive economic system.** Sustainable development requires a global economic system which supports economic growth in all countries. We need to create conditions in which trade can flourish and competitiveness can act as a stimulus for growth and greater resource efficiency.
- **Combating poverty and social exclusion.** Eradicating poverty is indispensable for sustainable development. We must help developing countries to tackle widespread abject poverty. In this country, everyone should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, through access to high quality public services, education and employment opportunities, decent housing and good local environments.
- **Respecting environmental limits.** Serious or irreversible damage to some aspects of the environment and resources would pose a severe threat to global society. Examples are major climate change, overuse of freshwater resources, or collapse of globally significant fish stocks. In these cases, there are likely to be limits which should not be breached. Defining such limits is difficult, so precautionary action needs to be considered.
- **The precautionary principle.** The *Rio Declaration* defines the precautionary principle as 'where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation'. Precautionary action requires assessment of the costs and benefits of action, and transparency in decision-making.
- **Using scientific knowledge.** When taking decisions, it is important to anticipate early on where scientific advice or research is needed, and to identify sources of information of high calibre. Where possible, evidence should be reviewed from a wide-ranging set of viewpoints.
- **Transparency, information, participation and access to justice.** Opportunities for access to information, participation in decision-making, and access to justice should be available to all.
- **Making the polluter pay.** Much environmental pollution, resource depletion and social cost occurs because those responsible are not those who bear the consequence. If the polluter, or ultimately the consumer, is made to pay for those costs, that gives incentives to reduce harm, and means that costs do not fall on society at large. At the same time, it may not always be

possible for everyone to bear all such costs, particularly for essential goods and services.

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ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CAPITAL

4.2 These principles and approaches give full weight to economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development. Sometimes discussion of sustainable development, particularly in richer countries, has focused mainly on environmental limits. But economic and social boundaries must also be recognised. An economy in long term recession is not sustainable. Nor is a situation where many people are denied opportunity and face poverty and exclusion. Development which ignores the essential needs of the poorest people, whether in this country or abroad, is not sustainable development at all.

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Applying the precautionary principle

The precautionary principle means that it is not acceptable just to say "we can't be sure that serious damage will happen, so we'll do nothing to prevent it". Precaution is not just relevant to environmental damage - for example, chemicals which may affect wildlife may also affect human health.

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At the same time, precautionary action must be based on objective assessments of the costs and benefits of action. The principle does not mean that we only permit activities if we are sure that serious harm will not arise, or there is proof that the benefits outweigh all possible risks. That would severely hinder progress towards improvements in the quality of life.

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There are no hard and fast rules on when to take action: each case has to be considered carefully. We may decide that a particular risk is so serious that it is not worth living with. In other cases society will be prepared to live with a risk because of other benefits it brings. Transparency is essential: difficult decisions on precautionary action are most likely where there is reason to think there may be a significant threat, but evidence for its existence is as yet lacking or inconclusive. Decisions should be reviewed to reflect better understanding of risk as more evidence becomes available.

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The Government has taken action in areas such as air, marine and freshwater pollution where an insufficiently precautionary approach has been taken in the past. It is also committed to acting proportionately. It is working to develop a more consistent approach to the principle across Government and will report on this work in forthcoming reports on this Strategy.

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4.3 We are all familiar with the idea of **economic** capital, and the need to conserve it. Families save money for a rainy day; businesses invest in order to expand and flourish; local and central governments lead the way in investing in schools, hospitals and roads.

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4.4 Our **social** capital consists of the skills and knowledge, health, self-esteem and social networks of people and communities in the UK. The failure of urban renovation schemes of the recent past, which concentrated on physical investment alone - for example some 1960s and 1970s housing estates - demonstrate the importance of building social capital as well as bricks and mortar.

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4.5 **Environmental** capital provides the third side of the triangle. We cannot protect every bit of the environment for ever: in some cases, individual development decisions will require trade-offs between economic, social and environmental objectives. But it is important to seek opportunities to achieve objectives simultaneously, and to consider the cumulative impact of decisions on overall environmental capital. The Government aims to prevent further overall deterioration, and to secure enhancements which contribute to an overall improvement in quality of life. That means environmental indicators in this Strategy moving in the right direction, alongside those on economic and social objectives.

4.6 Throughout this Strategy, the emphasis is on developing our economic and social capital while exercising sound stewardship over our environmental capital. That approach will underpin the Government's policies for sustainable development, and the way in which it applies the principles and approaches described above. It will commend this approach to others, including its own sustainable development advisory bodies (see [chapter 5](#)).

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1. *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, made at UNCED 1992. ISBN 9 21 100509 4.
2. e.g. see Article 174 of the Treaty establishing the European Community.

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