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Sustainable development in post-devolution UK and Ireland

Graham Haughton,¹ Dave Counsell¹ and Geoff Vigar²

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Abstract: Strategies for sustainable development have been produced aplenty in recent years, with numbers increasing in the context of devolution. This article examines the way in which they have developed. We examine the role of strategies for sustainable development as a metagovernance and policy integration device. The limited evidence of diversity in approaches to sustainable development post-devolution is a key finding.

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Keywords: sustainable development multi-level governance
metagovernance policy integration devolution

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6 JEL: Q01, Q28 - Q2 R5
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9 Le développement durable au Royaume-Uni et en Irlande depuis la régionalisation.
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12 Haughton et al.
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14

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16 Au cours des années récentes, de nombreuses stratégies en faveur du développement
17 durable ont été mises au point, dont un nombre croissant dans le domaine de la
18 régionalisation. Cet article cherche à examiner la façon dont elles ont été élaborées.
19 On examine le rôle des stratégies en faveur du développement durable comme
20 système de métagouvernance et d'intégration de politique. Un résultat clé c'est
21 l'absence de preuves d'une diversité de façons d'aborder la question du
22 développement durable depuis la régionalisation.
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27 Développement durable / Gouvernance à plusieurs niveaux / Métagouvernance /
28 Intégration de politique / Régionalisation
29

30
31
32 Classement JEL: Q01; Q28; Q2; R5
33

34 **Nachhaltige Entwicklung in Großbritannien und Irland nach der**
35 **Dezentralisierung**
36

37
38 Graham Haughton, Dave Counsell and Geoff Vigar
39

40
41 Abstract:

42 In den letzten Jahren wurden zahlreiche Strategien für nachhaltige
43 Entwicklung hervorgebracht, wobei die Anzahl im Kontext der
44 Dezentralisierung noch weiter anstieg. In diesem Beitrag wird untersucht, in
45 welcher Weise sich diese Strategien weiterentwickelt haben. Wir untersuchen
46 die Rolle der Strategien für nachhaltige Entwicklung als Mittel der Meta-
47 Regierungsführung und politischen Integration. Eines der wichtigsten
48 Ergebnisse hinsichtlich der Ansätze zur nachhaltigen Entwicklung in der Zeit
49 nach der Dezentralisierung sind die begrenzten Anzeichen von Vielfalt.
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51

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53 Keywords:

54 Nachhaltige Entwicklung

55 Regierungsführung auf mehreren Ebenen

56 Meta-Regierungsführung

57 Politische Integration

58 Dezentralisierung

59 JEL: Q01, Q28 - Q2 R5
60

Desarrollo sostenible tras la transferencia de competencias en el RU e Irlanda

Graham Haughton, Dave Counsell and Geoff Vigar

Abstract:

Se han creado abundantes estrategias para el desarrollo sostenible en los últimos años con un número creciente en el contexto de la transferencia de competencias. En este artículo examinamos el modo en que se han desarrollado estas estrategias. Examinamos el papel de las estrategias para el desarrollo sostenible como dispositivo de metagobierno y para la integración de políticas. Un resultado clave fue la evidencia limitada de la diversidad en enfoques para el desarrollo sostenible tras la transferencia de competencias.

Keywords:

Desarrollo sostenible

Gobierno multinivel

Metagobierno

Integración política

Transferencia de competencias

JEL: Q01, Q28 - Q2 R5

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Sustainable regional development in post-devolution UK and Ireland

Devolution, sustainable development and new systems of territorial management

Since the early-1990s there have been significant moves towards political and administrative devolution across the British Isles. Focusing on the period of intensive devolution since 1997, this paper examines whether devolution is leading to innovation and divergence in the recently published strategies for sustainable development in the UK and Ireland. Our expectation was that some divergence in practices in the new territorial systems should be evident, especially as the newly created devolved administrations working from the 'bottom up' would develop policies better aligned with the specific needs and aspirations of their territories, rather than those of central government (Morgan 2001, 2002). We also expected the different levels of devolved responsibility to be an influence, given that the varying powers and resources accompanying the creation of the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Greater London Authority would influence their ability to deliver sustainable development. Whilst political devolution to the English regions appears to have stalled, devolved administrative responsibilities have been established at regional level, including responsibility for the production of regional sustainable development frameworks and regional spatial strategies. The Republic of Ireland is

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3 interesting because of its growing links to Northern Ireland, plus it has been
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5 active in promoting both sustainable development and limited forms of
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7 regional devolution.
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12 Policy in the devolved territories might well be expected to show varying levels
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14 of divergence from national policy, not least given the path dependencies
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16 arising out of previous devolutionary initiatives (Keating 2005) and the
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18 asymmetrical nature of contemporary devolution (Cooke and Clifton 2005).
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20 Taking this further, Cooke and Clifton (2005) argue that it is already possible
21
22 to see 'varieties of devolution' across the devolved UK territories in relation to
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24 economic governance. This fits well with the view that greater distinctiveness
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26 might be expected to emerge in those policy arenas where greatest powers
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28 and resources are devolved, such as economic development and transport
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30 (MacKinnon and Vigar forthcoming). By contrast, 'sustainable development' is
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32 a policy area where devolved responsibility is not fully reflected in devolved
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34 powers and resources. For example two key policy areas of relevance to
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36 sustainable development, energy and airports, have been 'retained' by the UK
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38 Government.
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48 The 1992 Rio Earth Summit called on governments to take the lead in
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50 producing national and local strategies for sustainable development, leading
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52 to considerable policy work at both national and local level and with it a
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54 considerable academic literature (e.g. Lafferty and Eckerberg 1998, Low *et al.*
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56 2000). Reflecting the growing strengthening of regional institutions in many
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58 countries, recent years have seen the rise of regional strategies for
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3 sustainable development (Benneworth, Roberts and Convoy 2002, Lafferty
4 and Narodoslowsky 2003). This article seeks to conceptualise the later rounds
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6 of sustainable development strategy making as a form of metagovernance,
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8 linked into a wider process of rescaling governance arrangements. Arguing
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10 that these strategies are important devices for policy integration, which bring
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12 together new policy communities to negotiate strategy statements, sustainable
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14 development strategies are seen as one aspect of negotiating around the
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16 contradictory tendencies inherent in the current round of state restructuring,
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18 not least the desire to enhance devolution whilst retaining some sense of
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20 central coordination.
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29 **Policy integration, policy communities and metagovernance**

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34 In the context of the wider rescaling of the state, the emerging institution-
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36 building and strategy work of devolved nations and regions represents the
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38 'filling in' of the sub-national systems of governance, a process which is
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40 working out variably in different places (Goodwin et al. 2005) The process of
41
42 developing strategies at newly empowered scales of governance allows new
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44 communities of practice to emerge, as stakeholders seek to shape not only
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46 the strategy itself but subsequent policies for implementation. The breadth of
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48 these policy communities has tended to increase, not only as governments
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50 come under pressure for greater transparency and public engagement, but
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52 also as a result of the political impetus to improve the integration of policy
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54 across scales and across policy sectors. We want to argue here that for wide-
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3 reaching policy areas such as sustainable development, the performance of
4 agreeing a strategy itself represents an important metagovernance function.
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10 Metagovernance refers to the ways in which the 'rules of the game' are
11 established for devolved systems of governance, that is the steering of
12 governance (Jessop 2000, 2004). If governance is about selectively engaging
13 new actors and voices in the policy process, metagovernance is about finding
14 a variety of ways for ensuring that through internal processes of debate and
15 external rule setting, the new governance mechanisms work within a series of
16 visible and less visible constraints. Requiring policy coordination and
17 integration across actors and between different sectoral strategies not only
18 reduces conflict and duplication, it also brings with it a certain disciplinary
19 power over maverick elements in the new policy communities. One of the
20 roles of metagovernance is to provide coherence across the increasingly
21 fragmentary landscapes of governance, as new sub-national governance
22 bodies are created at a range of different scales and with different mixes of
23 policy mandates. In Jessop's (2000) strategic relational approach, state
24 structures, including governance structures, are not necessarily unified or
25 functional for capital, pushing through a particular agenda. He argues instead
26 that each situation must be explored historically-empirically, examining the
27 structural contradictions and strategic dilemmas involved. Metagovernance
28 then is not simply the functional imposition of a set of rules by some higher
29 authority. Rather it refers to the processes by which different social forces
30 come together to develop and pursue particular strategic approaches, which
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3 may be contested at and across different spatial scales and by different sets
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5 of actors (Jessop 2003, 2004).
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8 This latter point can usefully be explored through thinking of how policy
9
10 communities form and subsequently function, particularly during periods of
11
12 organisational creation and turbulence. Individuals within policy domains tend
13
14 to cohere into networks with varying degrees of openness and cultures of
15
16 practice. Established networks can become very conservative with an
17
18 established set of rules and resources that govern what constitutes legitimate
19
20 knowledge and action (Marsh and Rhodes 1992; Coleman et al. 1997, Smith
21
22 1993). By contrast, when governance systems are opened up, or where new
23
24 policy domains emerge, things tend to be relatively fluid with new networks
25
26 and communities of practice being formed, as in the case of developing
27
28 sustainable development strategies in newly devolved territories.
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36 This creates the opportunity for existing policy communities to adapt to the
37
38 new circumstances, or for new policy communities to form. In either case their
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40 rationale essentially stems from being given the metagovernance task of
41
42 producing a sustainable development strategy, encompassing a mandate to
43
44 integrate sectorally across policy domains, bring together diverse stakeholder
45
46 groups, and join-up policy vertically across scales of governance. The polity
47
48 from which such strategies emerge is thus made up of various communities
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50 which are variously interlocking and shifting in composition and place within
51
52 the broader multi-scalar polity. These may be ephemeral and dissolve
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54 following strategy preparation, or may be derived from an existing community,
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56 and may in any case endure for the purposes of implementation.
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6 Policy integration can be justified in terms of avoiding risks of duplication,
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8 governance failure and avoiding counter-productive policy directions
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10 (Allmendinger and Haughton 2007, Vigar et al 2000). Its pursuit is of itself
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12 complex, requiring a range of policy devices for ensuring different strategies
13
14 are joined-up. Effective policy integration generally requires coherent policy
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16 communities to come together to agree both on individual sectoral strategies,
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18 and on how different sectoral strategies 'join up'. The politics of integration
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20 then requires the brokering of agreement around particular approaches that
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22 need to be 'bought into' by all the dominant players, with those outside the
23
24 process risking alienation and disengagement. This is particularly evident in
25
26 the case of work to produce sustainable development and spatial strategies,
27
28 which are inherently multi-sectoral in nature, requiring considerable
29
30 investment of time in discussion and negotiation. In order to police these
31
32 agreements, systems of audit, appraisal, scrutiny, monitoring, and evaluation
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34 are now common-place, seeking to ensure all those who agreed to a strategy,
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36 and those who want to use it to pursue their own strategic interests, follow its
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38 spirit and its specific policies.
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48 The metagovernance challenge which arises from the devolution impetus is
49
50 to retain legitimacy for the wider devolution project through not simply
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52 allowing but encouraging policy diversity, whilst retaining some level of
53
54 coherence to the way in which policy in different sectoral domains is pursued.
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56 These are some of the structural contradictions and strategic dilemmas that
57
58 Jessop's work highlights. We might reasonably expect greater distinctiveness
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3 to emerge where the devolution settlement is most generous. This, though, is
4 mediated through the very practical realities of whether the new territorial
5 politics align with those of the central government of the day. Where different
6 political parties have control, greater distinctiveness ought to ensue. With a
7 national Labour government in power, the first two elections after devolution
8 returned Labour administrations in Scotland and Wales, a situation which
9 radically changed in 2007 when the Scottish National Party took control in
10 Scotland and a Labour-Plaid Cymru coalition was established in Wales. In the
11 Irish regions and most English regions, there is no elected tier of government,
12 reducing the legitimacy, and the capacity, of regional authorities to challenge
13 national authorities.
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32 In this context, metagovernance works through an interplay of previous modes
33 of hierarchical 'command and control' decision-making, with more networked
34 forms of governance, especially at sub-national levels (Whitehead 2003).
35 Seen as a reflexive set of experiments in devolution and filling-in of the state,
36 metagovernance provides a useful way of understanding how certain policies
37 for sustainability might still be being transferred largely unchanged from the
38 centre to devolved spaces, whilst elsewhere greater local distinctiveness
39 emerges.
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50 **Sustainable development policy as an integrative device**

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55 Recent official definitions of sustainable development have tended to promote
56 an integrative approach, where economic, social and environmental issues
57 are meant to be accorded equal status. This integrative approach echoes the
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3 wider political and administrative impetus for moving away from 'silo thinking'
4
5 towards more joined-up government (Cabinet Office 1999a, 1999b;
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7 Performance and Innovation Unit 2000). Such a move was also a justification
8
9 for devolution itself (Cabinet Office 1999a). There are other political
10
11 imperatives at work too, since the integrated definition of sustainable
12
13 development helps ensure that the moral high ground of 'sustainability' cannot
14
15 be captured solely by 'environmental' interests. Moreover, promoting
16
17 'stakeholder' agreement around an agreed understanding of sustainable
18
19 development is one way of reigning in 'maverick' elements in a policy
20
21 community, so that the strategy making process does not end up in major
22
23 dispute and disarray (Vigar *et al.* 2000). Alternatively, following Gunder (2006),
24
25 it may be that the integrated definition of sustainable development, with its
26
27 insertion of an economic rationality into the heart of sustainability, is one of the
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29 ways in which sustainable development is being captured by and deployed
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31 within neoliberalist discourse, reducing its capacity to engender radical
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33 change.
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44 The integrative thrust of recent definitional work on sustainable development
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46 is reinforced though political pressure to ensure that different sectoral
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48 strategies are mutually supportive and that consultation processes for each
49
50 strategy are broadened out to cover all actors with a potential interest. The
51
52 result is an increasingly complex set of inter-penetrating relationships, as
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54 those responsible for producing specific strategies seek to ensure that they
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56 show some level of recognition of other strategies. Whilst there is a danger of
57
58 such governance arrangements leading to a 'lowest common denominator'
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3 blandness around minimalist agreements, devolution demands some level of
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5 distinctiveness. Some of this may be genuine, some largely presentational.
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10 Sustainable development strategies then are interesting in terms of their
11 metagovernance role as integrative devices both in their own right, and in
12 terms of how other governmental strategies are expected to incorporate the
13 resulting understanding of sustainable development into their own work. We
14 explore below the recent experience of creating new national and sub-national
15 formal strategies for sustainable development, focusing particularly on how
16 policy communities operate. Because of our interest in the ways in which
17 different strategies are expected to 'join up' with each other, we examined the
18 interplay of how sustainable development strategies worked with those
19 preparing sub-national spatial strategies, as these are all expected to make
20 sustainable development a guiding theme. In undertaking this analysis we
21 draw on 45 interviews with people involved in sustainable development
22 debates, drawn from a range of sectoral backgrounds, about half of them from
23 a planning background. The interviews were undertaken in 2005-6, and
24 involved national lobby groups, government officials in various national
25 ministries in Ireland and the UK, and in the devolved administrations.
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53 **Sustainable Development Strategies at national and sub-national scales**

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57 The UK Government, the Irish Government and the devolved administrations
58 in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all issued sustainable
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3 development strategies indicating how they define sustainable development
4 and their policy approach (Figure 1).
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10 Figure 1 around here
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15 ***UK Sustainable Development Strategies and Framework***

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17 The UK government has produced three national sustainable development
18 strategies (DoE 1994; DETR 1999; and DEFRA 2005), each defining
19 sustainable development and associated objectives and priorities in different
20 ways. The first national sustainable development strategy reflected the wave
21 of environmental concern that accompanied the period leading up to and
22 following the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (Owens and Cowell 2002).
23 This strategy was far from being environment-led, and indeed was clear that it
24 did not wish to impede economic development, but it did push government
25 policy in the direction of greater environmental sensitivity than previously. The
26 stronger environmental concern fed into various sectoral documents and
27 practices, not least in planning.
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46 The second strategy, *A Better Quality of Life* (DETR 1999), was produced by
47 the new Labour government, and shifted the focus significantly, outlining four
48 objectives which it suggested could and should be addressed simultaneously:
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- 55 ○ social progress which recognises the needs of everyone;
- 56 ○ effective protection of the environment;
- 57 ○ prudent use of natural resources;
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- maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment.

In pursuing this approach the strategy drew on a new vocabulary for promoting better policy integration: the removal of policy 'silos'; and the need to identify 'win-win-win' solutions where economic, social and environmental 'wins' could all be achieved rather than traded off against each other. In practice the UK government's definition for integrated sustainable development, though gaining widespread acceptance, proved difficult to interpret and to translate into other strategies.

The 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy, *One Future – Different Paths* (DEFRA 2005), explicitly acknowledges the problems which the government had come up against in achieving integration of all four sustainable development objectives, given that "different agencies focused on those one or two most relevant to them" (p.6). Arguing that it was developing rather than departing from the previous definition the strategy set out five new guiding principles (Figure 2).

Figures 2 and 3 around here

These principles are intended to apply UK-wide, forming part of a Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development (Figure 3). Critically however they were intended as a starting point for further policy elaboration, involving additional sustainable development strategies from the devolved

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administrations. A rationale for these changes is provided, namely that the new statement: “takes account of developments since 1999, both domestically and internationally: the changed structure of government in the UK with devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; greater emphasis on delivery at regional level and the new relationship between government and local authorities.” (DEFRA 2005 p.13). England is in an anomalous position, lacking an overall ‘national’ strategy similar to those elsewhere, but with a network of regional frameworks (see below). This is perhaps one of the most clear-cut illustrations to date of an overt metagovernance mechanism being set in place that simultaneously brings actors together to agree a shared overarching framework, whilst allowing some further discretion for interpretation in the different devolved institutional settings.

The lead government department for sustainable development is now the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), but much play is made in the national strategy of a government-wide commitment to sustainable development. However, this has been pursued by government departments in an incoherent fashion, leading to confusion and frustration at the regional level (Sustainable Development Commission 2005 p.30).

These confusions also played out when it came to using sustainable development debates to shape policies. Our interviews revealed how some departments took it upon themselves to champion one or other of the four objectives or ‘pillars,’ in the process reinforcing longstanding differences between, for instance, those departments with an environmental remit such as

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3 DEFRA and those promoting national economic growth and competitiveness,
4 such as the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and The Treasury. The
5 joining-up was expected to occur elsewhere, but quite where was not always
6 clear. As an example, one of our interviewees from one of the UK
7 government's more 'economic' departments explained to us that whilst
8 accepting the need for an integrated perspective of sustainable development,
9 it was still quite appropriate for them to focus largely on one aspect:

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22 I think we agree across government with the purpose of planning as
23 expressed in PPS1... that sustainable development should be at the
24 heart of the planning system... I think in practice we would focus on
25 and champion the economic pillar... and where changes in planning
26 policy are taking place we'll come to it with that perspective (Interview,
27 UK government official: 10).

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39 Whilst this interviewee felt that overall the approach worked and did deliver a
40 'balanced' approach, those outside central government tended to be less
41 convinced.
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45 46 47 48 ***Wales Sustainable Development Scheme and Action Plan*** 49

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51 The devolution settlement in Wales is weaker than those in Scotland and
52 Northern Ireland. The Welsh Assembly's legislative responsibilities are
53 restricted to secondary and supplementary legislation limiting its ability to
54 deliver sustainable development. Nevertheless, the Welsh Assembly is unique
55 among the devolved governments in being required by law to prepare a
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scheme showing how it will promote sustainable development in exercising its functions (although see Greater London, below). The first scheme, *Learning to Live Differently*, was adopted in 2000, and a revised scheme was adopted in March 2004. The sustainable development scheme, together with the accompanying action plan, substitute for the sustainable development strategies of the other administrations. There are two other documents which support the Welsh approach to implementing sustainable development, the overall national strategy, *Wales a better Country* (2003) and the national spatial strategy, *People, Places, Futures - the Wales Spatial Plan* (2004).

The Welsh Assembly is required to revisit its sustainable development scheme every four years, after elections, and also to have an effectiveness report produced. The report on the effectiveness of the first Sustainable Development Scheme (CAG Consultants 2003) praised the Assembly for its efforts to mainstream sustainable development into its policies, but also noted that “There is little evidence that real change is happening on the ground” (ibid p.ix). Whilst the efforts of ministers and senior officers were praised for driving forward on sustainable development the Scheme itself was described as “Marginal to the Assembly’s efforts to promote sustainable development, perhaps because it did not focus sufficiently on the crucial sustainable development issues facing Wales...” (p.xii). Building on the effectiveness report on the first scheme and consultation on a draft revision, a second scheme was issued in 2004, *Starting to Live Differently*. The same year, the *Sustainable Development Action Plan* was released, identifying priority actions for the period 2004-2007.

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Given the high profile of the Welsh Assembly's sustainable development activities, they have attracted a number of critiques already (see Flynn et al. 2003 Bishop and Flynn 2004, Williams and Thomas 2004, Mainwaring, Jones and Blackaby 2006). Particularly notable is a contribution to consultations on the Second Scheme from Friends of the Earth Wales (James 2004), which argued that the first years of activity had seen strong efforts at awareness raising, mainstreaming into different policy domains, and commitment at high levels within the Assembly. Despite such achievements however the report argued that sustainable development remained poorly understood by many individuals and organizations. Whether because of this poor understanding or for other reasons there have been issues when it come to implementation of developments on the ground. High profile decisions over leisure developments and controversy associated with introducing policy advice on renewable energy illustrate the complex politics of sustainable development. The Welsh Assembly's consultation on its renewable energy advice note exposed tensions within the environmental movement and within government itself about the benefits of onshore wind-farms in particular and their impact on high quality landscapes. The sustainable development scheme appears to have had limited influence when it comes down to the politics of these individual decisions.

There are some distinctive elements in the Welsh approach to sustainable development, including the breadth of issues which are seen to be part of the sustainable development agenda, and the strong link between the three main strategies, bringing together investment frameworks, spatial frameworks and a

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3 broad and integrative approach to sustainable development. There is also a
4 strong commitment to working with overseas countries on sustainability issues.
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6 From our point of view, the distinctiveness of the Welsh approach is not so
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8 much in its thematic coverage of issues, but the way sustainable development
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10 is being deployed as part of an agenda for improving policy integration more
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12 broadly across the activities of the Assembly and those it works most closely
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14 with. This process is policed in many ways, the most high profile of which is
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16 the introduction of a 'policy integration tool'. This tool operates across all
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18 aspects of the Assembly's policy work, in effect performing a metagovernance
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20 role in seeking to ensure adherence to a centrally agreed set of criteria,
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22 including ones related to sustainable development. It is also quite striking
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24 how seriously engagement in transnational EU partnerships is taken by the
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26 Welsh Assembly, in contrast to say the English regions, where EU
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28 partnerships tend to be forged more at the local and sub-regional levels. The
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30 Welsh Assembly Government also makes strong play of its role in the
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32 European Sustainable Regions network (www.sustainable-euregions.net) and
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34 the Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development, which
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36 encourages networking, sharing of strategies and partnerships between
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38 members (see www.nrg4sd.net). In 2007 a £48m EU INTERREG programme
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40 was announced for improving links between Ireland and Wales, with
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42 sustainable development as one of its central themes. In essence the
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44 distinctive elements of the Welsh approach are its emphasis on the role of
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46 governmental purchasing (see Morgan, this special issue), policy integration
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48 and its associated scrutiny arrangements, and its extra-territorial networking.
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Scotland's Sustainable Development Strategy

The Scottish Parliament, with its greater devolved powers including primary legislation is perhaps in a stronger position to address sustainable development than Wales. The Scottish Executive set out its vision, priorities and indicators for sustainable development in *Meeting the Needs... priorities actions and targets for sustainable development'* (Scottish Executive 2002). Rather than set out a distinctive vision at that stage it sought to open up a debate based on the definition used by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). Whilst acknowledging that its priorities were for high economic growth and better quality of life, the executive indicated that this should not be achieved at the expense of the environment:

... the challenge of sustainable development is that these outcomes must be achieved whilst not requiring more than our fair share of the world's resources; and without giving rise to unacceptable discharges of pollutants (Scottish Executive 2002 para. 15).

More recently the Executive published *Choosing our Future: Scotland's Sustainable Development Strategy* (Scottish Executive 2005), which sought to build a distinctive Scottish approach. For example it emphasized environmental justice more strongly than other sub-national strategies, whilst also placing a major emphasis on health, welfare, food and nutrition.

There are evident tensions over the Scottish Executive's promotion of economic growth as a first order priority, including in planning where it is very much to the fore, albeit with sustainable development also presented as a key

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3 issue. Not surprisingly, this approach led to some critical comments in our
4 interviews in Scotland, where the strong pursuit of economic development
5 was recognized by all, but only recognized as a problem by some, mainly
6 those not directly employed by the government. For some observers the
7 emphasis on 'economic growth' was not simply driving sustainable
8 development, but the form of growth being pursued was not much tempered
9 by the environmental or social considerations which sustainable development
10 is intended to capture:
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25 I think this is another case of whether it does or does not do what it
26 says on the tin. There is an awful lot of mantra to say that sustainable
27 development is central to the Scottish Executive's policy yet when the
28 chips are down economic growth has the highest priority... and it's not
29 sustainable economic growth, it's just economic growth (Scotland,
30 stakeholder interview: 2).
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41 Whilst it could be argued that the strong economic emphasis within
42 sustainable development reflects the distinctive needs of Scotland, in practice
43 a similar set of arguments was encountered in London (see below), and to
44 varying degrees in Wales, Northern Ireland, and many English regions. In
45 Scotland itself there is some coherence in how sustainable development is
46 being addressed across different strategies - but where in Wales the
47 distinctive unifying theme concerned social issues, in Scotland the approach
48 is most strongly focused around 'economic' matters. In content terms, the
49 Scottish approach displays a strong commitment to health and poverty issues.
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3 This appears to be married to an enthusiasm to engage with practice
4 elsewhere, not least with those working on sustainable development issues in
5 others parts of the British Isles. As with Wales, levels of engagement with EU
6 projects such as those funded under INTERREG, appear to attract
7 considerable support from the Scottish Executive.
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20 ***Northern Ireland's Sustainable Development Strategy***

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22 As devolution in Northern Ireland was suspended between 2002 and 2007,
23 the first Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, *First Steps*
24 *Towards Sustainability*, was published by the UK Government's Northern
25 Ireland Office (DOENI 2006). It is a large document, covering essentially the
26 same thematic issues as those produced for Wales and Scotland, albeit with
27 some presentational differences. Like them, great play is made of global
28 environmental challenges as a starting point, in essence legitimating the need
29 for a strategy and engendering a sense of urgency. There are calls for
30 sustainable development to be addressed in a 'joined up' way, including
31 across policy sectors and across the public, private, community and voluntary
32 sectors. Taking its cue from the Welsh approach, a key tool for addressing
33 such (metagovernance) issues is 'Integrated policy assessment', which is
34 intended to allow departments and other public agencies to 'policy proof' all
35 policies by combining Health Impact Assessment, Equality Impact
36 Assessment, Rural Proofing, and Environmental Impact Assessment.
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First Steps is particularly strong in addressing social issues, not least fuel poverty, arguing that the social dimension of sustainability is essential given the high levels of deprivation which exist in Northern Ireland. Noting that the most disadvantaged lived in the most degraded environments, the document then highlights that in the context of Northern Ireland social and economic divides are overlain with the inheritance of “decades of sectarian conflict which divided communities at a time when they should be uniting to face the bigger challenges of the future” (*ibid*, 2006 p.68). Environmental justice issues in general emerge generally more strongly in the devolved territories relative to the UK national strategy and the strategies of the English regions.

Environmental governance also merits considerable attention, covering many of the issues found elsewhere, but overlain by a concern that

The contested nature of society in Northern Ireland has forged a culture that is not yet fully adapted to the new demands that sustainable development will place upon it in order to make the transition from global problems to inclusive local solutions. In some ways we have a steep learning curve compared with the rest of the UK or the Republic of Ireland, where sustainable development strategies have been in place since the late 90s. Where there is a challenge however there is also opportunity and we can and should learn from the lessons and experiences elsewhere” (p.123).

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3 This section is particularly interesting as an example of how sustainable
4 development becomes embedded within existing discourses, in this case of
5 rebuilding community relations at the local level and encouraging greater
6 public engagement with the democratic apparatus. These are of course
7 concerns found elsewhere, but in Northern Ireland there is an additional layer
8 of meaning built into calls for greater public participation.
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20 As in the other administrations, there was concern that whilst many
21 departments paid lip-service to an integrated approach to sustainable
22 development, in practice they continued to pursue their separate departmental
23 interests:
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32 [I]n government terms all departments are equal... no department has
33 any priority over any other... and they all have their own programmes...
34 they all have their own priorities... and sustainability is supposed to be
35 right up there... and whilst this document [the Regional Development
36 Strategy] is grounded in it, other strategies don't necessarily give
37 sustainability that level of priority. So therefore they pay lip-service to it
38 and they still carry on with their own programmes (Northern Ireland,
39 stakeholder interview 6)".
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53 Providing a helpful segue into the next section, the sustainable development
54 strategy for Northern Ireland also notes that "We are acutely aware of the
55 need to look at sustainability issues on All-Island basis" (Department of
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3 Environment Northern Ireland, p.8), noting on-going work to develop an all-
4 island ecological footprint study and an all-island energy market framework.
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10 ***Ireland's Sustainable Development Strategy***

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12 The sustainable development strategy for the Republic of Ireland (Department
13 of the Environment 1997) reflects the political mood of when it was produced,
14 adopting an approach focused on integrating environmental considerations
15 into other policy sectors such as agriculture, forestry, industry and trade. The
16 overall objective reflects the dominance of environmental issues within
17 sustainable development debates at the time:
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29 To ensure that economy and society in Ireland can develop to their full
30 potential within a well protected environment, without compromising the
31 quality of that environment, and with responsibility towards present and
32 future generations and the wider international community (Department
33 of the Environment 1997 p.25).
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43 Subsequently the document '*Making Ireland's Development Sustainable*'
44 (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government 2002) was
45 produced for the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in
46 2002. This in effect provides a new definition of sustainable development for
47 the Irish government, reflecting an evolution in thinking, moving towards an
48 emphasis on 'quality of life' and an integrative approach:
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3 Sustainable development is about getting the balance right between the
4 economy, social issues and the environment so that we, as well as
5 people in other parts of the world, are able to enjoy economic prosperity,
6 social progress and a high quality of life – both now and in the future. It is
7 about getting these 3 elements working together for a better quality of life,
8 instead of gains in one area being offset by losses in another (ibid, p.3)
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20 This integrative approach to sustainable development is reflected in the
21 National Spatial Strategy (NSS) (Department of the Environment, Heritage
22 and Local Government 2002), which makes much play of the need to address
23 sustainable development concerns. There is a strong link too with the National
24 Development Plan (NDP) for 2000-2006, which outlined the investment
25 priorities of the government and called for the production of the NSS. The
26 NDP referred to the need to reconcile economic growth with environmental
27 concerns, but economic issues were nevertheless very much to the fore.
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41 Irish regional policy is a relatively recent phenomenon, largely emerging out of
42 different generations of compromise in order to ensure maximum access to
43 European Structural Funds. A key driver in the regionalization of Irish
44 governance was the need to prove to the European Commission some layer
45 of regional partnership existed to guide allocation of regional funding. The
46 strong environmental theme within European structural funding also exerted
47 an influence on how national government and regional partners were forced to
48 present their strategies. With a requirement to assess submitted strategies
49 against the Commission's expectations on sustainability, this suggests the
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3 importance of the EU dimension to metagovernance, evidence in both Ireland
4 and the UK. In the Irish case, the importance of the EU role is such that
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6 Mullally (2004 p.38) argues that:
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12 It is perhaps incontrovertible to assert that the Irish response to
13 regional sustainable development has been more concerned with
14
15 Structural Funds than sustainable development.
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22 Despite such well-founded skepticism about the initial motives of the
23 government, sustainable development has become an increasingly important
24 issue at regional level, as a component of Regional Planning Guidelines for
25 instance. Whilst there is not a national coverage of regional sustainability
26 strategies, as in England for instance (see below), local authorities in some
27 regions have cooperated to prepare regional Local Agenda 21 statements.
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39 There has also been a major study commissioned to look at progress towards
40 sustainable development on an All-Island basis (Ellis et al. 2004). This argued
41 that the existing institutional frameworks to promote sustainable development
42 in the Republic of Ireland worked well and did not need changing, but a
43 greater emphasis on implementation was needed. Northern Ireland however
44 was felt to be lagging in its institutional fabric, lacking a national strategy at
45 that time and without its own guidelines for Local Agenda 21 for instance.
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Sustainable development frameworks in London and the English regions

Because of the creation of the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the unique delegated powers of the London mayor for aspects of planning, economic development and transport, London has a greater capacity to address sustainable development than the other English regions. The Act setting up the GLA requires it to have regard to the effect of all its activities on the achievement of sustainable development in the UK. Given the degree of political devolution relative to other English regions our expectation was that the London approach would be fairly distinctive. In governance terms it is. The London Sustainable Development Commission is appointed by the Mayor and scrutinizes and formally publishes reports on various strategies. The Commission has strong representation from a variety of 'social' interests, which manifests itself in a commitment to diversity and equality objectives throughout its work. The Commission was responsible for producing the Regional Sustainable Development Framework (RSDF) for London, whose main distinctive feature is perhaps its length: just four pages, with the main content contained in just two pages. This is in stark contrast to the Northern Ireland strategy at 173 pages. In terms of content, whilst much of the London approach resembles that found elsewhere, it is very strong on issues around respect (covering diversity and community safety), and quite distinctive in tone in its commitment to 'fairness' in various forms, including an expectation of ethical business behaviour.

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3 It is at the level of sectoral strategies and individual policies where the
4 stronger powers of London mean that distinctive and innovative policies have
5 been developed, for instance in advice on urban design and the Congestion
6 Charge. In each of these areas London has been able to take a fairly strong
7 approach, even though sustainable development is just one of the
8 justifications involved. It is perhaps worth noting that differences in political
9 devolution and fiscal powers alone are not enough to set London apart: it is
10 the combination of these with the capital's stronger economic position that
11 gives local politicians and policy makers greater scope to pursue distinctive
12 policies.
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29 For the other English regions, plans to create elected regional assemblies
30 were shelved after the referendum in the North East failed by a significant
31 margin. In consequence responsibilities for sustainable development remain
32 divided. Government Offices for the Regions established in 1994 to coordinate
33 the activities of central government departments, exercise a policy overview,
34 Regional Development Agencies are expected to contribute towards the
35 achievement of sustainable development whilst unelected Regional
36 Assemblies have led on the preparation of RSDFs. These strategies have
37 been promoted by central government as a mechanism for promoting greater
38 coherence and integration across different regional sectoral strategies. They
39 are intended to provide a 'high level vision' and sustainable development
40 objectives for each region, which should in turn inform all other regional
41 strategies. To assist the process central government issued advice (DETR
42 2000) setting out what should be included in each RSDF. The guidance
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3 makes it clear that whilst regionally specific objectives could be developed
4 that they must address the agreed national objectives for sustainable
5 development. The result is that RSDFs had to reflect “regional distinctiveness
6 or specific regional issues” (ibid, para 3.2.1), but conform to the broad national
7 blueprint. Most English regions have now produced two rounds of frameworks
8 (Figure 4).
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Figure 4 around here

There appears to be a considerable uniformity in interpreting sustainable development in the English regions, with little sign of innovation emerging in broad strategic direction. This concern was picked up by a recent study of objectives in regional sustainable development frameworks in England (including London) (Regional Futures 2004):

The English regions have a very similar interpretation of ‘sustainable development’ in terms of economic, social and environmental objectives. This is not surprising given central guidance and the aspirations of people for quality of life (p.1)

In addition five English regions have now gone further than simply preparing regional frameworks for sustainable development, instead developing Integrated Regional Strategies (IRSs). Some regions also produced bespoke appraisal toolkits for those using the sustainability principles outlined in RSDFs or IRSs to appraise other plans and strategies. These include step-by-

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3 step guides to sustainability appraisal in the East Midlands and Yorkshire and
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5 Humber and the Integrated Appraisal Toolkit in the North West.
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10 Despite such efforts, in a strongly-worded critique of progress on sustainable
11 development in the English regions, the Sustainable Development
12 Commission (SDC) argues that policies lacked coherence and regional
13 ownership, in spite of the apparent progress in producing paper strategies:
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22 UK Government guidance envisages that RSDFs should provide a
23 shared vision and shared objectives for sustainable development in the
24 region and inform other regional strategies. Our research, however,
25 produced little evidence to suggest that RSDFs are either overarching
26 or influential (Sustainable Development Commission 2006, p.33).
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36 Nonetheless, when it comes to how sustainable development issues are
37 subsequently translated into other strategies, we are seeing some variety. For
38 instance, RDAs can differ widely in how they interpret the requirement to
39 address sustainable development in their work, whilst claiming legitimacy
40 through their conformity with the fairly bland RSDFs. In regional spatial
41 strategies too, regional differences in interpretation of sustainable
42 development concerns emerge despite broadly similar RSDFs (Counsell and
43 Haughton 2003, Haughton and Counsell 2004). Lack of distinctiveness in
44 regional sustainability frameworks then does not necessarily constrain
45 regional distinctiveness in treatment of sustainability issues elsewhere within
46 the governance system.
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8 **Overview: some structural and strategic dilemmas for sustainable**
9 **development strategy work as metagovernance**
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15 Two issues dominate this summary, to what extent did we see strategies for
16 sustainable development display distinctiveness as a result of recent
17 devolution initiatives in the UK and Ireland, and what do the results have to
18 say about the structural contradictions and strategic challenges of
19 metagovernance?
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29 In broad terms it is possible to see how the UK government has engaged in a
30 series of controlled experiments in devolution, with different forms of
31 settlement in different territories. This is not a straightforward tactic of divide
32 and rule - as the regional elections in North East England revealed, it also
33 reflects in some part the very different aspirations and histories in different
34 parts of the UK. In terms of sustainable development strategies, in its recent
35 iterations the UK has moved to a much clearer hierarchy of national and sub-
36 national strategies. By first brokering agreement around a new national
37 framework in 2005, the government was able to establish a broad agreement
38 on sustainable development issues which necessarily framed subsequent
39 strategies in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Politics also played a role
40 - Labour administrations were initially returned to power in Scotland and
41 Wales, reducing the likelihood of major disagreements emerging with the
42 national UK Labour government. In Northern Ireland, the power-sharing
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3 arrangements quickly broke down after devolution, with a return to
4 administration from Whitehall, having a similar dampening effect on a search
5 for policy distinctiveness. Our results perhaps reflect this political background
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8 for policy distinctiveness. Our results perhaps reflect this political background
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10 - the emergence of new political administrations in Scotland, Wales and
11 Northern Ireland in 2007 do, however, suggest greater changes may now be
12 expected. Certainly the SNP-led Scottish Parliament appears to be committed
13 to greening issues, making them one of its five overarching aims. It is still too
14 early to judge whether this marks a move away from a strong prioritisation for
15 economic growth, however.
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27 In England, clear guidance notes on regional sustainable development
28 frameworks provided an overarching context which it would be difficult for
29 individual regions to break away from. London is an exception to this with its
30 elected mayor, and it is the scrutiny role there that most stands out. With no
31 progress now in prospect for regional political devolution in other English
32 regions, it is not promising that the government proposes dismantling regional
33 assemblies and giving greater powers to the RDAs, which are essentially
34 economy-led. In this context, evidence of innovation in regional sustainable
35 development work in the English regions is currently low and it is difficult to
36 see this changing, with the exception perhaps of London. In Ireland, the
37 national government has been less actively engaged in writing sustainable
38 development strategies and in requiring these of sub-national authorities,
39 creating a much more patchy coverage. Indeed, it is adherence to the formal
40 requirements of EU structural funds which appear to have most shaped the
41 Irish approach to sustainable development at sub-national level.
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6 Over time all the national and new territorial governments covered in this
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8 overview made explicit moves to adopt an integrated approach to sustainable
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10 development. This trend in part reflected the considerable degree of
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12 cooperation and consultation at each level of strategy production, involving
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14 the interchange of ideas from both bottom-up and top-down. Our work also
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16 suggests that a new pan-territorial policy network is emerging across the UK
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18 and Ireland, stretching beyond nation state boundaries, to debate what a
19
20 national sustainable development strategy might consist of. At times this is
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22 less a network and more a series of loosely linked groupings engaged in
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24 identifying and developing new policy approaches within the broad sphere of
25
26 sustainable development. This network is bolstered by links with areas outside
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28 the British Isles, especially with other EU regions. These evolving institutional
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30 mechanisms help explain how in practice a degree of similarity can be
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32 observed in the strategies of the devolved territories.
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41 Charting how this process works proved difficult to unpick however. Changes
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43 in the tone and content of the different strategies appear to work through the
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45 system incrementally rather than in leaps or in response to central diktat, in
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47 part because there is so much intergovernmental cooperation and learning.
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49 Explicit examples can be found with the report on All-Island Sustainable
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51 Development (Ellis *et al.* 2004), in the introduction to the Northern Ireland
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53 strategy which reviews other territorial sustainability strategies, and also the
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55 Scottish Parliament briefing paper on sustainable development which reviews
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57 progress elsewhere to inform Scottish politicians (Crook 2003). Another
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3 example of this sharing of experience is cited in the UK government's
4 response (DEFRA 2006) to the Sustainable Development Commission report
5 on sustainable development in the regions (see above), which points to the
6 considerable amount of joint working and learning going on within and across
7 the English regions. Our interviews additionally revealed the considerable
8 importance for some key actors of participation in various EU sustainability
9 and spatial planning initiatives in building a common knowledge base. This is
10 particularly evident in Wales, which has been active in building EU networks
11 for sharing experience (Flynn et al. 2003).
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27 Supporting this intergovernmental and international sharing of knowledge is
28 the insertion of new approaches to 'auditing' or 'scrutinising' progress towards
29 sustainable development, which can work variously to challenge or reinforce
30 conventional thinking about sustainable development. Examples might include
31 for instance the distinctive flavour which the London Sustainable Development
32 Commission brings to its reviews of various GLA strategies, the All-Island
33 report on sustainable development (see above), the role of the UK's national
34 Sustainable Development Commission in producing critical reports, and the
35 growing use of integrated policy assessment and sustainability appraisal.
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51 This article has started to identify some of the metagovernance issues
52 associated with producing sustainable development strategies in the context
53 of stronger devolution, including a series of structural and strategic dilemmas
54 which continue to shape its possibilities. We can identify some greater
55 distinctiveness emerging, but in truth it is early days yet for the devolution
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3 project and it will be some years yet before the true potential for regionally
4 distinctive approaches will be fulfilled, if it ever is. This caveat is added
5 because as we pointed out earlier, national governments seeking to unleash
6 the potential of devolution are also necessarily wary of letting go the strings of
7 power and possibly undermining the national project for economic growth.
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17 In this respect it is worth remembering that sustainable development
18 strategies are just one part of how processes of metagovernance work, with
19 many of them difficult to identify and analyse. With widespread consultation
20 common, sustainable development strategy preparations are relatively
21 transparent and wide-ranging in how they work and therefore yield useful
22 insights to the tensions involved in resolving some of the strategic dilemmas
23 and structural contradictions we noted earlier. Framing analysis of sustainable
24 development strategy work in the context of metagovernance helps reveal two
25 things. First, the imposition of clear frameworks within which territorial
26 administrations must prepare their own strategic documents, and second the
27 way in which various interlocking networks emerge, with varying geographies
28 and memberships, which serve to broker consensus and share innovative
29 practices. Metagovernance then is a sometimes subtle and still little
30 understood process. Through administrative routines, practices and norms it
31 smooths difference as it works through both hierarchical and networked forms
32 of governance. It reinforces path dependencies as it brokers formal rules and
33 less formal understandings of what is politically, administratively and
34 scientifically accurate, acceptable and appropriate. In the case of preparing
35 sustainable development strategies it appears to have involved the
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3 construction of a new policy network and the creation of new spaces of
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UK-wide	
Sustainable development: the UK Strategy	1994
A Better Quality of Life: Strategy for Sustainable Development for the UK	1999
Securing the future: UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy	2005
Northern Ireland	
First Steps Towards Sustainability	2006
Scotland	
Meeting the Needs... priorities actions and targets for sustainable development	2002
Choosing our future: Scotland's Sustainable Development Strategy	2005
Wales	
Learning to live differently: the Sustainable Development Scheme of the National Assembly for Wales	2000
Starting to live differently: the Sustainable Development Scheme of the National Assembly for Wales	2004
The Sustainable Development Action Plan 2004-2007	2004
Republic of Ireland	
Sustainable development: a Strategy for Ireland	1997
Making Ireland's Development Sustainable	2002

Figure 1: National sustainable development strategies and frameworks in the UK and Ireland

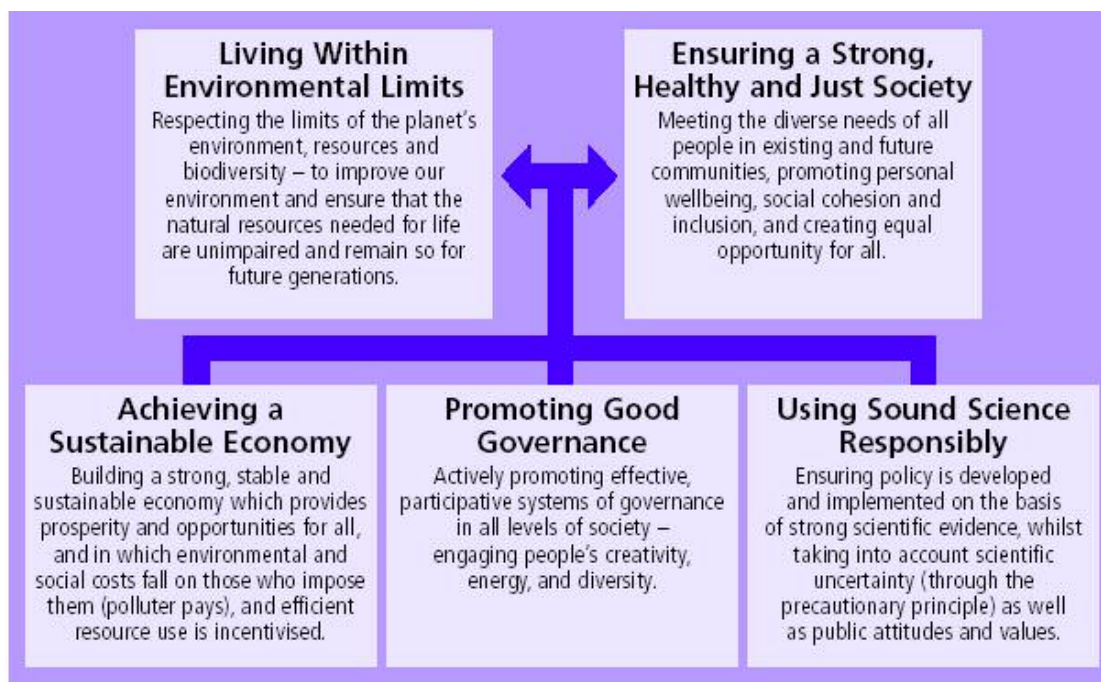
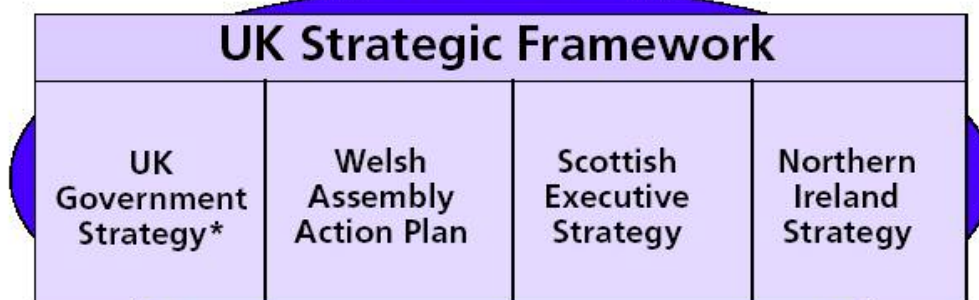


Figure 2: Key principles (DEFRA, 2005, p.7)

Figure 3: UK Strategic Framework (DEFRA 2005a)



*Covers England and all non-devolved issues, including international relations

Sustainable development framework	Publication dates
London	
A Sustainable Development Framework for London	2003
English Regions: North East	
Quality of Life in the North East: towards a regional framework	2002
Achieving a better quality of life: The Integrated Regional Framework for the North East	2004
North West	
Action for Sustainability: the Regional Sustainable Development Framework for the North West	2000
Action for Sustainability: the Regional Sustainable Development Framework for the North West (revised)	2004
Yorkshire and Humber	
Advancing Together: towards a sustainable region. The Regional Sustainable Development Framework for Yorkshire and Humberside	2001
Building the benefits: Yorkshire and Humber Regional Sustainable Development Framework Update – 2003-2005	2003
East Midlands	
England's East Midlands Integrated Regional Strategy: Our Sustainable Development Framework	2000
England's East Midlands Integrated Regional Strategy: Our Sustainable Development Framework	2005
West Midlands	
Quality of Life: the future starts here – A Sustainability Strategy for the West Midlands	2000
A sustainable future for the West Midlands: A Regional Sustainable Development Framework – version 1	2005
East of England	
A Sustainable Development Framework for the East of England	2001
Sustainable Futures: The Integrated Regional Strategy for the East of England	2005
South East	
A better quality of life in the South East	2001
A better quality of life for the South East: Integrated Regional Framework 2004	2004
South West	
A Sustainable Future for the South West	2000
Just connect: An Integrated Regional Strategy for the South West 2004-2026	2004

Figure 4: Sustainable development frameworks – London and the English regions