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Joint UNECE/OECD/Eurostat Working Group on Statistics for Sustainable Development
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Item 5 of the Provisional Agenda

UNITED KINGDOM WORK ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS
Submitted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs¹

This meeting is organised jointly with Eurostat and OECD

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In 2005 the UK established a third generation of indicators of sustainable development, building on the experience of a preliminary set produced in 1996, and a set of headline and core indicators established in 1999.

Each of these indicator sets has been strongly linked to a sustainable development strategy, with the policy framework dictating to a great extent the structure and coverage of the indicators.

For both the 1999 and 2005 set of indicators, their development was an integral part of the development of the strategy - with the strategy influencing the choice of indicators, and in some cases the indicators influencing the strategy.

The preparation of all three sets of indicators involved stakeholders in workshops and / or public consultation.

Headline indicators and communication

The indicators published in 1999, included 15 headline indicators and 132 core indicators. The headline indicators were described as a 'quality of life barometer' – 'to provide a high level overview of progress, and be a powerful tool for simplifying and communicating the main messages for the public'. They were subsequently to play a key role in the communication and promotion of sustainable development.

However, the headline indicators themselves were only a partial communication success. It was how they were presented that made the difference. For the first couple of years, the headline indicators were updated on the Government's sustainable development website, and were reported in the Government's annual report on sustainable development. Neither the indicators nor the annual report elicited much media interest and awareness was limited, even within Government.

A leaflet was developed, the "Quality of life barometer", that attempted to present the indicators in simplified form – stripping out unnecessary detail and providing very short commentary and 'traffic light' assessments of progress. Information on all 15 headline indicators was condensed on to two sides of A4 paper.

The leaflet proved to be extremely effective in promoting the headline indicators to wider audiences, not least as it could be regularly updated, produced in bulk and easily distributed. At media briefings, it was often the "Quality of Life Barometer" leaflet that the journalists turned to rather than the weighty tome that was the main focus of the event. Many of the questions directed at Ministers were then based on the headline indicators and traffic light assessments shown in the leaflet.

The leaflet was particularly successful at one media briefing. It resulted in a healthy debate in newspapers and television news programmes on what quality of life means, how it should be measured and whether the Government's assessments of progress were the right ones.

The new UK sustainable development indicators

The 1999 strategy included a commitment to review the strategy after five years, and the UK Government launched a public consultation document, which sought views on the direction of sustainable development strategy and future monitoring of progress through indicators.

A new strategy was published in 2005 and outlined a set of 68 sustainable development indicators (less than half the number in the previous set). Baseline assessments (charts, commentary and ‘traffic lights’²) for the new indicators were published in a pocket-sized booklet “Sustainable Development Indicators in Your Pocket”, a trial version of which having been produced in 2004 using a selection of 50 indicators from earlier indicators.

Aside from on the sustainable development website, the ‘pocket booklet’ is the only detailed reporting of the indicators – no large statistical volume is now produced. The booklet has proved to be very successful and has been popular with Ministers, policy colleagues, stakeholders, and in particular schools and colleges, who order them in bulk.

In December 2005, new regional versions of 44 of the 68 national indicators were published (there are nine regions in England). They generated quite possibly the best ever media coverage of sustainable development and indicators. Articles featured in both the national and regional press, and in particular regional newspapers produced analyses of the indicators for their region and highlighted the successes and the challenges.

Institutional structure

Coordination and oversight of sustainable development policy is the responsibility of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), but with all Ministries sharing the responsibility to make progress.

The UK statistical system is decentralised, so statisticians in Defra have had responsibility for establishing the indicators in consultation with other Ministries. It is then Defra statisticians who collate the data for the indicators and who are responsible for all reporting.

The new strategy strengthens the institutional structure to oversee sustainable development commitments. Summaries of the ‘traffic light’ assessments, particularly highlighting those indicators showing deterioration, are presented regularly to a high-level inter-departmental management board. The role of the UK Sustainable Development Commission has also been strengthened to review and audit progress. The indicators are also subject to Parliamentary scrutiny and reviews by the National Audit Office and the UK Statistics Commission.

For more information see website www.sustainable-development.gov.uk.

²  improvement;  little or no change;  deterioration; since baseline years