



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

SPICe

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Scottish Parliament Sustainable Development Impact Assessment Tool

Version 2.1: July 2018



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1. Introduction: What is sustainable development?

In this case, 'development' refers to the way in which societies evolve and progress, and 'sustainable' is something which can continue in the long term. So 'sustainable development' is about a method of societal development which can continue in the long term. Sustainable development was born out of the realization that some human activity undermines our own ability to meet our needs.

For example, our increasing use of petroleum-fuelled transport increases the ease and convenience with which we can travel and access goods and services from around the world. But, burning fossil fuels in the engines of motor vehicles creates exhaust fumes, which contain air quality pollutants. Several of these pollutants are harmful to human health. In 2005, the World Health Organization found *'that transport-related air pollution affects a number of health outcomes, including mortality, nonallergic respiratory morbidity, allergic illness and symptoms (such as asthma), cardiovascular morbidity, cancer, pregnancy, birth outcomes and male fertility.'*¹

While the environment can cope and recover from the removal of a certain amount of natural resources or disposal of wastes into it, there is a limit to this ability. When ecological systems break down, the benefits that human derive from them, such as fresh water provision, can be reduced.

Sustainable development (SD) was formally defined by the UN's World Commission on Environment and Development as *'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'*² It means that the way in which societies evolve and go forward should improve the capability of all people to meet their needs. Also, this should not be done by reducing the capability of subsequent generations or those who live outwith Scotland to meet their needs.

In short SD is about trying to develop fair and just societies that can thrive in the very long term. In order for this to be possible, there are two essential conditions:

1. We cannot damage the environmental systems that make human and all other life possible and bearable.
2. Our economic, political and cultural systems cannot favour some people while harming others.

These conditions form the basis of the UK shared framework for sustainable development (figure 1), along with three supporting conditions:

1. An economy that doesn't damage the environment, and benefits all people.
2. Public policy that is based on sound evidence.
3. Governance systems that are open, democratic and participatory.

The SDIA tool is based on this framework. The UK and devolved administrations have all signed up to it.

¹ Krzyzanowski, M. et al (eds.) 2005: *Health Effects of Transport-Related Air Pollution*, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen.

² Brundtland, G.H. et al 1987: *Our Common Future*, World Commission on Environment and Development.

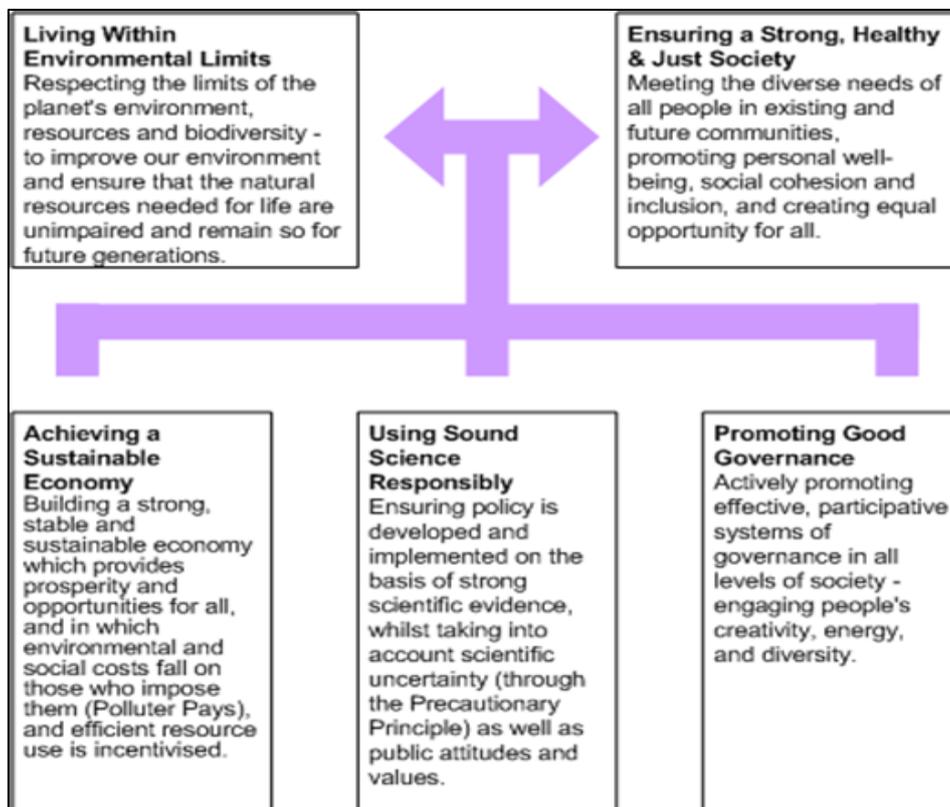


Figure 1: UK shared framework for sustainable development.

2. How to use the tool

The tool aims to help you to consider whether an issue – legislation, policy, activity, etc. – meets the two essential conditions detailed in the top half of the framework.

The tool includes a table for each essential and supporting condition. Theoretically, the first row of the two essential conditions tables could constitute a complete SD impact assessment (SDIA). However, SD requires holistic, systemic thinking, and in practice, it is often difficult to do this without some questions to prompt you.

You may therefore find that some of the answers to the questions are repetitions. In such cases, there is no need to write your analysis out all over again. **The tool should help you think, rather than be an exercise in form-filling, and you should use it as such.** If there are no new insights to add in a particular row, you could simply include a brief reference to the section of the table where the relevant information is, or leave it blank. You might even find that some rows are not relevant to the legislation or policy you are working on.

2.1 Sustainability thinking:

Because all areas of public policy can contribute to, or detract from, sustainable development, impact assessment can be complicated. According to Professor Jeffrey Sachs, *'A skilled sustainable development practitioner needs to be a complex-systems expert... acknowledging the complexity of issues and looking to make a specific diagnosis of each specific case.'*³

³ Sachs, J.: *The Age of Sustainable Development*, Columbia University.

However, pretty much anyone can learn use sustainability thinking – most of us already do to some extent. Although it is strongly recommended that you get some technical support from SPICe, learning to think in a new way is mainly about getting stuck in and learning through experience.

Below are some guidelines for sustainability thinking:

2.1.1 Remember the goal: The goal of sustainable development is a strong, healthy and just society, living within environmental limits. Think about what this means. It might help to try to envision it. SPICe can help you with this, either through a one-to-one discussion, or a more interactive session with a group of you.

Having a vision of what sustainable development might look like is very helpful for thinking about whether policy or legislation is likely to work towards or against that goal. There is more information about each of the SD criteria in the tool in the Explanatory Notes.

2.1.2 Work as a group: Group discussion is a really powerful way of understanding an issue. Articulating your thoughts and listening to other people's should help to make the issue clearer, and give you confidence in your analysis. It can also be a more efficient use of time.

For example, working through the sustainability impacts of a piece of legislation or policy at your team meeting is likely to be quicker and more effective than struggling with it on your own.

2.1.3 Think about the big picture: This is the most important aspect of sustainability thinking. To understand whether legislation or policy can lead us towards a society that has high wellbeing, is fair, and can remain so in the very long term, we have to think about:

- **Other policy areas:** how your issue relates to others. For example, at first glance, you might not think housing policy / legislation has anything to do with climate change, but in fact, how houses are built and maintained, and how settlements are laid out makes a big difference to how much energy is used to power them. Sustainability requires joined-up policy.
- **Time and space:** how your policy / legislation will affect people or the environment beyond its immediate scope, e.g. elsewhere in the world, or in the future.
- **Systems:** trying to understand how things work. A system is a collection of items that interact, leading to certain results. For example, the governance system in Scotland includes the Parliament, the Government, the judiciary, the public sector, civil society organizations, pressure groups, etc. The way in which all these interact determines the decisions and processes of governance. You can think of most things in terms of the system it is part of – the transport system, environmental systems, the welfare system, etc. Usually, for development to become sustainable, systemic solutions are required – that is policy or legislation that tries to address the root causes of a problem, rather than treating the symptoms.

- **Perverse outcomes:** sustainable solutions have minimal unwanted consequences on the same or other systems. For example, during the scrutiny of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, several witnesses argued that the proposed provision to make it easier for landlords to provide less secure accommodation to tenants with a history of antisocial behaviour, and to evict them more easily, would not address the root causes of the problem – rather it would simply shift the problem to another area.

2.1.4 There is no right answer – but there are lots of good solutions: The unsustainability of our development is what is known as a ‘wicked problem.’ It’s complex and involves lots of different systems. There is no consensus about how to tackle it, and no simple, obvious or established solutions. That said, most policy areas could make a huge contribution, especially if they are joined-up, systemic, long term, try to avoid any unwanted consequence and aim to meet peoples’ needs.

2.2 Guidance:

Explanatory notes are available in a separate document, which can be used alongside the tool. They aim to clarify some technical terms and concepts used in the tool.

2.3 Bill development

This SDIA tool should help you and the Member you are supporting to produce a better-thought-through bill which is more resilient to scrutiny. It should also help you to produce a high quality SD statement for your policy memorandum.

You should use the tool in whatever way you find useful. You might want to write out full paragraphs or short notes. The most important consideration is that the tool can help the proposer of the bill to think broadly about potential outcomes and any unintended consequences. The SDIA should also form the basis of what you write in the policy memorandum. You can treat the tool as a living document, which you can update as the bill evolves.

Involving the bill proposer or their staff as much as possible would also be beneficial.

2.3.1 When to use the tool:

You can use the tool at more or less any point from policy development to the writing of the policy memorandum.

However, the most effective way to use it as early as possible in the bill development process. Along with the proposer and/or their staff, you can use it to make an initial assessment of the policy proposal by filling in the ‘policy aims’ column. Here you should consider whether the policy objectives will support sustainable development. At this stage, the tool could help the proposer to think about what the outcomes of the policy objectives are likely to be, and whether this is what they want to see.

You can amend your table at any time as the bill evolves, updating your analysis as you feel necessary.

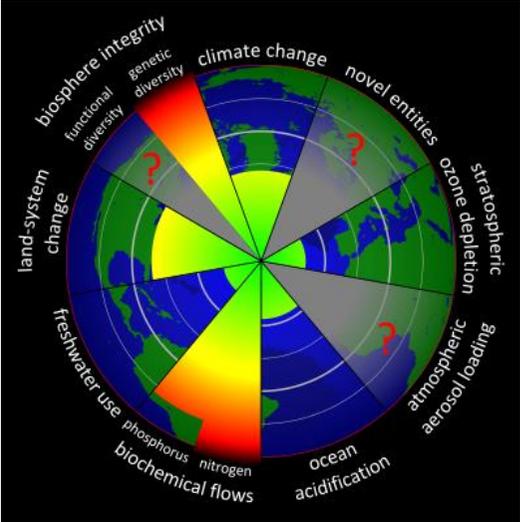
Once the actual provisions of the bill are being / have been drafted, you can use the tool to check whether the outcomes of the provisions are in keeping with SD, and with the policy objectives, by filling in the 'possible outcomes of provisions' column. This column can also be updated as necessary.

At the end of the bill development process, you should have the information you need to complete the sustainable development section of the policy memorandum.

3. The SDIA tool

3.1 Living within environmental limits

1	theme	questions	policy aims	possible outcomes of provisions
A	local environment	<p>Will the bill lead to any positive / negative changes in anyone's local environment?</p> <p>Will it affect anyone's access to green / blue space or local amenities?</p> <p>Will there be any impacts on the built environment? Would any changes affect the way people live, work, travel or interact?</p> <p>Has the mitigation of any negative impacts been considered, or the fair distribution of any positive impacts?</p>		
B	use of materials or energy	<p>Will this bill lead to an increase / decrease in the level of materials or energy used by people, either in Scotland or abroad? Is there anything that can be done to minimize this?</p> <p>Could the bill lead to the increase / decrease in the quantity or hazardousness of any solid, liquid or gaseous waste?</p>		

1	theme	questions	policy aims	possible outcomes of provisions
C	ecosystem services	<p>Is the bill likely to enhance or protect the environment's ability to provide people with benefits?</p> <p>Could this bill threaten or reduce any of the benefits that the environment provides for people and if so how? Is there anything that could be done to minimize or mitigate any negative impacts?</p>		
D	planetary boundaries	<p>Will the bill contribute to increased impact on any of the planetary systems currently marked red or yellow?</p> 		

3.2 Ensuring a strong, healthy and just society

2	theme	questions	policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
A	human needs and wellbeing	<p>Will this bill help to improve people’s capability to meet their fundamental human needs? Will it help particular groups only?</p> <p>Consider whether it will reduce anyone’s capability to meet their needs. If so, how? What might be needed to mitigate this?</p> <p>Are some needs prioritized over others?</p> <p>Will the bill help to improve anyone’s wellbeing?</p> <p>Could it adversely affect anyone’s wellbeing?</p>		

2	theme	questions	policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
B	equity	<p>Will this bill be fair?</p> <p>Will it address or prevent any injustices, unfairness or inequality?</p> <p>Could it affect any group adversely, now or in the future? Will it favour any particular group or confer any unfair advantages on it?</p> <p>Could the bill have any impacts on people outside Scotland?</p> <p>Could it impact future generations?</p>		
C	social capital – the relationships and networks that people can draw on, and the trust, reciprocity and mutual support they represent.	<p>Will this bill help to improve the connections between people, e.g. goodwill, friendship, trust, support, networks, etc.</p> <p>Could it strengthen communities, or have any adverse effects on them?</p> <p>Could the bill have any impacts on anyone’s culture or heritage?</p>		

3.3 Achieving a sustainable economy

3	theme	questions	policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
A	livelihoods	<p>Will the bill have any positive / negative effect on anyone's livelihood and its decency and security?</p> <p>Has the mitigation of any negative impacts been considered?</p>		
B	resilience	<p>Could the bill affect the ability of any household, community or country to withstand shocks and stresses?</p> <p>Could there be any impact on people abilities to adapt to environmental change, e.g. climate warming?</p>		
C	society	<p>Could the bill have any effect on inequality, including how wealth, income or both are distributed across society?</p> <p>Are there likely to be any costs to society?</p>		
D	environment	<p>Consider whether the bill will lead to any economic activity that cannot be sustained in the long term.</p> <p>Are environmental costs properly factored in to decision-making?</p>		

3.4 Promoting good governance

4	theme	questions	policy aims	Possible outcomes of provisions
A	participation in decision-making	<p>Could the bill have any impacts on anyone's ability to have their views heard and listened to, or otherwise engage in decision-making?</p> <p>Could the bill have any impact on the availability of data, or on transparency and accountability?</p>		
B	institutions	<p>Could the bill affect the way in which institutions make decisions? Could the bill improve or diminish institutions ability to gather and use evidence to support their decisions?</p> <p>Could it create any inconsistencies in public policy?</p>		
C	economy	<p>Could the bill have any impact of the governance of the economy? Will any vested economic interests be served by it?</p>		
D	environment	<p>Could the bill have any impacts on whether public bodies contribute to environmental harm or improvement?</p> <p>Could the bill affect the way in which natural resources or ecosystem services are governed?</p>		

3.5 Using sound science responsibly

5	theme	questions	policy aims	provisions
A	evidence for the bill/policy	<p>Has enough evidence been gathered to support the bill/policy?</p> <p>Is there any evidence that suggests that the policy aims or provisions need to be revised, for example if there are likely to be any unintended consequences or if any of the provisions could fail to achieve the policy aims? If so, how can the bill be improved?</p>		
B	improving knowledge and understanding	<p>Could the bill/policy improve our knowledge and understanding?</p> <p>Could it have any negative impacts on the way information is gathered or shared?</p>		
C	monitoring impacts	<p>Does the bill/policy include any ways to measure or review its impacts?</p> <p>If so, will this include any participatory elements?</p>		

3.6 Issues not covered:

Pet welfare: issues around pet welfare are not well-covered in the SD literature. A possible way to think about pet welfare could be in terms of:

- Biodiversity impacts – e.g. wild animals captured for pets.
- Social and environmental costs e.g. costs to society of pet welfare or of poorly-treated pets.
- Culture – this includes values e.g. how other species should be treated.
- Deeper questions around environmental impacts and social costs/benefits of pets, the rights of other species, co-evolution of humans with other species, etc.