



Commentary on the extent to which the Sustainability Appraisal recommendations have been integrated into the finalised Regional Economic Strategy

Will the Regional Economic Strategy help the South West meet its sustainability challenge?

Sustainability South West (SSW), the region's independent champion of sustainable development, prepared a sustainability appraisal (SA) of the draft Regional Economic Strategy (RES). The assessment was based on the South West Regional Sustainable Development Framework, taking into account *Securing the Future*, the National Sustainable Development Strategy.

What is the sustainability challenge for the South West?

The South West's 'eco-footprint' shows that if the region's consumption patterns were the worldwide norm we'd need **two** extra planets to sustain us!

Our sustainability challenge is to reduce inequalities (in education, health, income and access) and manage our growing and ageing population and economy in ways that use natural resources efficiently, minimise the emissions that are increasing climate change and protect the diversity of our unique environment.

What role does the RES have in achieving sustainable development?

Government guidance states that:

'The RES is a primary mechanism for the delivery of sustainable economic development. Sustainable development should underpin the actions and decisions taken in pursuance of its objectives. RDAs should work towards the objectives in the UK sustainable development strategy in terms that reflect regional distinctiveness or specific regional issues.'

Overarching summary

The final RES offers truly exciting potential to deliver Sustainable Development (SD). Its new statement of intent to: 'demonstrate that economic growth can be secured within environmental limits to bring prosperity to the region' is very much in line with latest SD national policy. It also offers positive activities including some support for the development of renewable energy, the promotion of sustainable construction and the integration of resource efficiency advice into business support. However, it also includes negatives activities including the expansion of airports and a lack of understanding about genuinely 'sustainable communities' in its approach to new development in the region.

To be effective in achieving its objectives and applying its statement of intent, the RES Delivery Plan needs to adopt a clear, consistent and comprehensive approach to sustainability. Overall it now has the opportunity to build on its strongest sustainability elements and minimise any sustainability incompatibilities by applying SD principles to the delivery of **all** activities.

SSW endorses the RES's aspiration to 'develop the South West as the leading region for sustainable development'. In order to achieve this aspiration SD needs to be integrated into all delivery activities.

SSW would be particularly keen to support progress on the proposal to establish a Regional Procurement Executive to boost local economies through increased local sourcing.

Commentary on the extent to which the SA's key recommendations (numbered below) have been incorporated into the revised RES

- 1. To be effective, the RES strategic objectives, regional priorities and in particular delivery activities must all demonstrate how they take account 'the statement of intent'.**

The inclusion of the statement of intent offers an improved understanding of genuine sustainable development and it was important for this to be retained as the RES evolved. However, the revised RES does not make clear how the statement of intent will drive forward all delivery activity. Whilst some proposals have been strengthened to try and ensure they are more in line with the concept of 'environmental limits', others are clearly in contrast to this principle i.e. airport expansion which is likely to significantly increase CO2 emissions.

- 2. Make a commitment to support reductions in CO₂ emissions in line with government policy**

An explicit commitment to supporting CO2 reductions in line with national policy does not appear to have been integrated into the revised RES. A clear commitment would be consistent with other emerging regional strategy such as the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). This would also be compatible with the national SD strategy which identifies climate change as a priority area for immediate action. In line with the RDA's wish for the next RES to be 'revolutionary', we look forward to the inclusion of a specific commitment, followed by objectives and targets to reduce CO2 emissions.

- 3. Incorporate delivery activities within the RES to enable the region to lay the foundations of a low carbon economy**

The commitment (identified in recommendation 2 above) needed to be supported by definitive action to address climate change, with an emphasis on reducing current and mitigating against future CO₂ emissions. The SA proposed a range of measures to help lay the foundations of a low carbon economy.

Renewables

The draft RES contained proposed activity to 'ensure a regional commitment to meeting renewable energy targets'. This has now been enhanced by the commitment to develop a Regional Sustainable Energy Strategy by April 2007. There is potential for this strategy to be very influential by also incorporating definitive action on increasing energy efficiency and the use of locally sourced renewables.

Support for the large scale demonstrator project WaveHub continues. However, it is unclear whether the SA's recommendations on mainstreaming and incentivising the increased use of renewables will be taken forward.

Transport

The SA highlighted the potential role the RES could play in promoting sustainable modes of transport. Certain measures included within the SA are now to be taken forward including the wider use of ICT and homeworking. In addition, the SSW proposal to pilot congestion charges are to be discussed under proposed activity. However, the revised RES continues to support high carbon modes of transport, in particular the expansion of airports which goes against the new UK SD strategy priority to tackle climate change.

- 4. Promote strong regional leadership which takes a long term approach**

The revised RES continues to include some high level aspirations – specifically the statement of intent – as highlighted above. It also seeks to 'develop the South West as the leading region for sustainable development'. As with the statement of intent, this aspiration needs to be integrated into delivery activity if it is to be achieved. Leadership is provided in part by hosting a series of regional events, the first of which is debating economic growth within environmental limits. Support has also been continued for flagship projects including Wavehub and *Future Foundations* the regions' sustainable construction Charter.

Government guidance makes it clear that the RES should show commitment to supporting the Regional Sustainable Development Framework (RSDF) and include examples of where it is taking the lead in making this framework more effective. Support for revising the RSDF is now enshrined within the revised RES.

5. Include proactive measures to incentivise businesses to achieve higher standards of resource efficiency

The original RES proposal to co-ordinate business advice on resource efficiency has been strengthened to integrating (basic) advice into all business support provision. This is a welcome improvement, however, this could go further by actively incentivising businesses to achieve higher standards of resource efficiency. For example, make it a condition of funding that higher resource efficiency standards are delivered.

6. Promote actions to prevent poor health including workforce well-being

The SA recommended that business advice/support schemes are also linked to promoting measures which help safeguard employee physical and mental well-being. SSW supports the aspiration to encourage the adoption of the Investors in People Standards by employers. The recently released DWP/HSE 'Health, Work & Wellbeing' Strategy should be adopted as a key reference point in delivering relevant outcomes of the RES.

7. Expand the provision of skills to fully embrace sustainability including those that facilitate industry adopting a low carbon approach

The proposal to 'develop and deliver appropriate SD modules within vocational and academic courses' (citing the LSC as the key delivery partner) is strongly supported.

Disappointingly the RES does not contain reference to supporting the 'South West Education for Sustainable Development Coalition' or aspirations to develop a plan for auditing and plugging gaps in learning & skills for sustainability in the region. This would include addressing the role of all learning providers/agencies including workplace training providers, sector skills councils, FE, HE, community/charitable learning organisations etc.

However, plans are being made to help facilitate industry adopting a low carbon approach in certain areas. For example, the integration of basic resource efficiency advice (– see recommendation 4) and support for environmental technology sector is provided eg through the Environment Driver Implementation Plan. This represents a positive step forward.

8. Incorporate action to ensure that the needs of our increasingly ageing population are catered for using a low carbon approach

The SA highlighted the increasing need for locally based, integrated service centres, (alongside mobile services) in remote areas, to help promote a low carbon approach in catering for our aging population. In addition, as employee work life is extended, the needs of an ageing workforce need considering. Although elements such as home working to help support flexible working conditions have been integrated, it is unclear to what extent these have been specifically tailored to help meet the requirements of an ageing population. Opportunities to promote locally based service centres could potentially be supported through specialist support for rural programmes and in regeneration programmes.

9. Promote specific actions that will help protect and enhance biodiversity

The SA recommended that measures be taken to encourage businesses – particularly when they own substantial amounts of land – to ensure that biodiversity is protected and ideally enhanced. Specific measures to achieve this do not appear to have been integrated.

10. Support processes that will address identified specific local needs

The RES delivery plan should be taken forward in a way which enables the resulting activities to be compatible with local delivery agents such as local authorities and local strategic partnerships. Delivery activities must also be responsive to the diverse characteristics of the South West, rather than applying a blanket approach which does not take into account specific and/or local challenges. An integrated approach that supports

delivery of sustainable economic development within evolving sustainable community strategies should be adopted.

11. Ensure all tourism marketing incorporates sustainable tourism principles

The SA recommendation to embed the messages of *Future Footprints* (the regional campaign targeting the visitor) within activity to market regional icons remains.

12. Adopt a commitment to mainstream sustainable construction

The RES contains a commitment to promote sustainable construction techniques for new developments and 'to use the planning system to encourage innovative approaches to development that deliver more sustainable patterns of development' (2C.1). The RES must ensure that the definition of 'sustainable patterns of development' is consistent with SD principles. This commitment to mainstreaming sustainable construction should be embedded within key developments including the Science Park at Emerson's Green.

The evolving Regional Spatial Strategy now contains ambitious plans for large-scale development to be carbon neutral. This offers a major opportunity for the RES and delivery partners to share best practice and actively encourage innovative, sustainable approaches to new development.

13. Promote and enhance the local diversity of the region more explicitly

One of the key SSW board recommendations for improving the sustainability of the RES is to establish a regional procurement consortium to help support and enhance the diversity of local economies and communities. The proposal has been identified as a 'proposed activity' within the revised RES and SSW looks forward to discussing how this can be driven forward with key regional partners as a top priority.

14. Deliver the Way Ahead initiative in a way which fully integrates genuine sustainable development and mainstreams sustainable construction

'The Way Ahead' as referenced within the revised RES, continues to offer no definition of sustainable development or of sustainable communities. As adopted within the draft RES, a sustainable community is one which is healthy, socially just, productive and living within environmental limits. This definition has been amended within the revised RES so it reads sustainable communities are healthy, socially just, productive and respect environmental limits. This definition is not in line with one of the key UK SD strategy principles of living within environmental limits or with the RES's statement of intent.

The SA recommended that a set of sustainability operating principles be adopted to inform delivery of the Way Ahead. These appear to have been omitted. More positively, the Way Ahead does refer to sustainable construction and we hope that the highest possible standards of this will be delivered. Currently, the Way Ahead fails to take a genuinely sustainable approach to delivering sustainable communities. However, there is lots of emerging good practice available and SSW will be pleased to assist with developing a truly sustainable approach to the region's development agenda.

15. Integrate the RSS Greening Infrastructure initiative within urban regeneration

The RES has been strengthened by encouraging physical regeneration activity (as identified in Strategic Objective 2B Regenerate the Most disadvantaged areas) to 'meet highest design and sustainability standards' eg, the Greening Infrastructure Initiative. This represents a more integrated approach and one which was recommended in the SA. It is important that this approach is applied throughout the RES including activity taken forward under Strategic Objective 2C – 'Plan Sustainable & Successful Communities'.

For further information on SSW please visit: www.sustainabilitysouthwest.org.uk