



Chartered
Institute of
Environmental
Health



Sustainable Development Commission

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1.0 Summary

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- 1.1** The coalition government states it intends being the greenest government ever [1]. To be successful in meeting this ambition, the government needs a critical friend with the expertise and the authority to speak candidly about successes and failures and about the right approach for the future development of public policy relating to sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) is that critical friend.
- 1.2** The coalition government believes that climate change is one of the gravest threats we face and therefore intends, rightly, to embed sustainability in every aspect of the work of Government Departments and Whitehall as well as the wider public sector [2]. The SDC has a track record of assisting the government in this work. The running costs of the Commission are much lower than the savings that have been made in the public finances by following the Commission's advice and guidance. [3]
- 1.3** A single Government Department (Defra) has announced that it will cease funding for the SDC [4]. This will have the effect of abolishing the SDC in England but will also put in doubt the continued operations of the SDC across the devolved regions of the UK. The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) believes that the UK government should value the ongoing and important contribution made by the Commission and retain this critical friend function.

2.0 Introduction

On 22nd July, the UK Government Department Defra (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) announced that it intends to cease funding the SDC from April 2011

2.1 On 22nd July, the UK Government Department Defra (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) announced that it intends to cease funding the SDC from April 2011 [4].

2.2 The Defra's Secretary of State Caroline Spelman said:

"This Government is committed to being the greenest Government ever and the Structural Reform Plan published last week sets out how Defra will play its part in achieving this. Reducing the deficit is the priority for the Government and all departments are playing their part in making efficiency savings.

"Together with Chris Huhne I am determined to play the lead role in driving the sustainability agenda across the whole of government and I am not willing to delegate this responsibility to an external body.

"The effective delivery of public services is essential and I am committed to increasing the transparency and accountability of Defra's public bodies and to reducing their numbers and costs. Times have changed since many of these bodies were set up and much of what they do is now everyday Government business." [5].

2.3 The decision to cease funding for the SDC applies to England but the position in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales is different. However, this decision has significant implications for the devolved administrations who are in turn partners within the SDC (the SDC is legally constituted as a company limited by guarantee).

3.0 Discussion

The CIEH believes that the loss of the input the SDC currently provides would be a significant retrograde step to a sustainable economic recovery

- 3.1** The CIEH is disappointed by Defra's funding decision in relation to the SDC and believes that the loss of the input the SDC currently provides would be a significant retrograde step to a sustainable economic recovery.
- 3.2** The future economic development and regeneration throughout the UK is going to be founded on sustainable development principles. Given that the coalition government's top priority is to secure the recovery and return the UK economy to sustainable growth, this is clearly a crucial objective. It is, however, important to bear in mind that sustainable development requires a delicate balance of three considerations – economic, environmental and social – not just the single issue of economic growth.
- 3.3** Simply stating these points demonstrates the tensions facing the coalition government as it seeks to secure the recovery, mend the economy and meet its national and international obligations with regard to fighting climate change. The SDC is an expert adviser to the central and devolved governments, able to rely on its independence from government in order to deliver expert input and advice to all Government Departments, Whitehall and the wider public sector.
- 3.4** The track record of the SDC to date demonstrates that, in addition to providing objective, authoritative advice and guidance, the SDC has also delivered substantial financial savings in terms of central government expenditure through the level and quality of advice that it provides [6]. The loss of the SDC at this critical time would, the CIEH believes, be counter-productive. In terms of the UK's economy, our environment, and our society, the relatively modest savings that will be made in the short term through disbanding the SDC will rapidly be outstripped by the costs incurred as a consequence of no longer having access to this valuable resource.
- 3.5** Defra's announcement gives no indication of how a different arrangement in the future will secure the ongoing work that currently the SDC does to such good effect. It is not clear whether, and if so to what extent, the UK government will retain the same high level of independent expert advice that the SDC offers.
- 3.6** The devolution aspects of this announcement appear not to have been worked through before the announcement was made. Whilst it will be for the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to decide on the future of the SDC in each of their respective territories, this decision for England will have significant implications for the work of the SDC in the devolved regions. Two critical impacts in particular need to be considered:
- 3.6.1** The loss of the central research capacity currently hosted and delivered through the central SDC office in London which benefits the entire organisation.
- 3.6.2** The loss of the Commission itself, threatening the continuance of the invaluable contribution made by the collective thinking of the individual Commissioners.
- Through its offices in Northern Ireland and Wales the CIEH is aware that consideration is being given to retaining the essential services of the SDC in the devolved regions even if England foregoes them after April 2011. It is difficult to see how this can be achieved unless the UK government acts to assist the devolved regions to continue to have access to these two functions of the SDC's services.
- 3.7** In Northern Ireland, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has stated that, notwithstanding the Defra announcement, options for the delivery of the SDC's functions are under consideration. The CIEH supports the continuation of the input currently provided by the SDC staff in Northern Ireland, regardless of what happens

within England. Their work provides essential support and capacity to OFMDFM as it seeks to progress the sustainable development agenda in Northern Ireland. The loss of that input and expertise could be detrimental to Northern Ireland's efforts to get back to economic growth through encompassing sustainable development at every stage of the recovery.

3.8 The Welsh Assembly Government has similarly expressed an intention to retain the services of the SDC in Wales. The Assembly Government has a statutory duty to have a scheme setting out how it will promote sustainable development and has stated its intention to fund the SDC in Wales until at least the end of March 2011.

3.9 Commenting on the Welsh Assembly Government's response, the SDC Commissioner for Wales Peter Davies OBE said:

"Some of the choices the Assembly Government needs to make will be hard. Government cannot solve these problems alone: it needs challenge and support. Sustainable development is the only approach that can manage the sometimes competing demands of communities, the economy and our environment. Wales now has the opportunity to consider what arrangements are needed." [7].

The CIEH endorses these comments. According to the Defra's announcement, the UK government intends to do without independent expert advice when making decisions in the future about sustainable development and how best to make this the UK's greenest government ever. The conflicts of interest that the UK government must confront as it seeks to steer the country away from recession and towards sustainable development will not be easily overcome. A critical friend like the SDC is precisely what is needed when "crunch" decisions have to be taken and there are several plausible options but some are contradictory.

3.10 At the CIEH we were alarmed to note Defra's further decision to bring in-house the function until now carried out by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution [5]. This is the loss of another important independent voice. These two decisions together, the loss of independent voices and the additional strain on Defra's own staff resources, gives us major cause for concern particularly when coupled with the fact that Defra's draft Strategic Reform Plan [4] appears not to contain a single action in respect of tackling pollution.

3.11 As a company limited by guarantee, the SDC is "owned" by its members drawn from across the four component areas of the UK; England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Defra's decision to cease its funding for the SDC's work certainly applies to England, but it is less clear if this is the final word in respect of the areas of the three devolved administrations.

3.12 Within the UK government, Defra currently provides the majority of the funding for the SDC as a whole even though the benefit of the SDC's input, including the financial savings that have been achieved to date by following its advice, accrues to the central and devolved governments. This in itself is arguably flawed given that sustainable development is equally applicable and relevant to all aspects of government.

3.13 The CIEH therefore believes that there is a strong and logical argument for moving the policy responsibility for sustainable development, and with it the responsibility for the SDC, to the Cabinet Office. By this move, the UK government would be acknowledging the cross-government application of the SDC's input and spreading the costs of maintaining the SDC much more equitably.

4.0 Conclusions

The CIEH is independent of the central and devolved governments and independent of the SDC.

- 4.1** The CIEH is independent of the central and devolved governments and independent of the SDC. Our argument concerns the pressing need for the UK to secure its recovery and to move forward with proper respect for the principles of sustainable development. Today's UK population has obligations to our fellow citizens, to the citizens of all other countries around the world and, crucially, to generations of citizens who will succeed us.
- 4.2** The role the SDC fulfils is invaluable and the SDC or some other arrangement for independent, expert advice to the central and devolved governments is necessary if the UK is to achieve its ambitions and meet its obligations with regard to sustainable development.
- 4.3** The CIEH cannot envisage a better model for performing this role than the one that the SDC currently provides. It is efficient in that it provides a single mechanism and source of expertise in the SDC for the whole of the UK. The expertise currently residing in the SDC through both its Commissioners and staff is, we believe, considerable and valuable.

References

- [1]. Cameron, D. (14th July 2010). [Speech] presented at the Department of Energy and Climate Change, Whitehall, London.
- [2]. Coalition Programme Section 10: ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE
“The Government believes that climate change is one of the gravest threats we face, and that urgent action at home and abroad is required. We need to use a wide range of levers to cut carbon emissions, decarbonise the economy and support the creation of new green jobs and technologies. We will implement a full programme of measures to fulfil our joint ambitions for a low carbon and eco-friendly economy.”
- [3]. Blakeley-Glover, J. and Clench, C., (2010). Becoming the “Greenest Government Ever”, Sustainable Development Commission [online] Available at: http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/SDC_SDiG09_webFINAL.pdf [Accessed 9th August 2010].
- [4]. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, (16th July 2010). Draft Structure Reform Plan [online] Available at: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/about/what/documents/defra-srp-100716.pdf> [Accessed 9th August 2010].
- [5]. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, (22nd July 2010). News Press Release: Defra announces changes to arm’s length bodies [online] Available at: <http://ww2.defra.gov.uk/2010/07/22/arms-length-bodies/> [Accessed 9th August 2010].
- [6]. Sustainable Practice Savings (extract from Becoming the Greenest Government Ever) Between 2006 and 2009, the watchdog work carried out by the SDC found that government:
- Achieved carbon emissions reductions from offices and administrative road travel totalling over 600,000 tonnes – the equivalent of over 22,000 average UK households over the same period.
 - Saved 18 million cubic metres of water – the equivalent of 7,200 Olympic swimming pools and £25.5M worth of water bills between 2006 and 2009. Savings totalled £13M in 2008-2009.
 - Reduced its waste by 126,000 tonnes – equivalent to the total waste produced in a year by over 250,000 UK individuals.
- Altogether, the benefits of more sustainable management in 2008-09 alone amounted to some £60-70M from a combination of annual cost savings and equivalent benefit to society. Given that the efficiencies are likely to be felt for a number of years, this could lead to a benefit to society and cost savings equivalent to £300-350M over the course of the next parliament even if no further improvements were made.
- [7]. Sustainable Development Commission, (2010). SDC Wales response to Defra funding announcement [online] Available at: <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/news.php/366/wales/sdc-wales-response-to-defra-funding-announcement> [Accessed 9th August 2010].

About the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health is a registered charity and a professional and educational body.

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health is a registered charity and a professional and educational body. We are dedicated to promoting environmental health and encouraging the highest possible standards in the work and training of environmental health practitioners.

The Institute has a history and heritage that gives us an authority, a wealth of knowledge and a keen commitment when it comes to environmental and public health issues. We have strength in depth thanks to the 10,000 or so members and the many partners we work with.

The Institute has long argued that reducing health inequalities calls for prevention as well as cure. We believe our society benefits when there is an enhanced role for environmental health practitioners.

We have previously issued two publications in 2008 on the health impacts of climate change. One charts the changes to our environment and the new health risks that we can expect because of climate change that is already taking effect. The second is designed to be a working document for Environmental Health Practitioners who will be in the front line of our society's action to confront these changes.

The two documents can be found at:



www.cieh.org/uploadedFiles/Core/Policy/Publications_and_information_services/Policy_publications/Publications/Climate_Change_Public_Health_Health_Inequalities.pdf

We are dedicated to promoting environmental health and encouraging the highest possible standards in the work and training of environmental health practitioners.

Our vision is leading, inspiring and delivering a safe, clean and healthy world. We work towards this by promoting effective environmental practice.

We set ourselves demanding goals to:

- Set and maintain high standards in education, training and professional behaviour;
- Promote excellence in environmental health delivery and practice;
- Be the voice of the profession in the promotion of good public health, sustainable development and climate change solutions;
- Increase the knowledge of environmental health practice;
- Provide products and services to support environmental health gains; and
- Be an inclusive membership body.

The Institute supports the Associate Parliamentary Group for Environmental Health.

At the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health we try hard to practice what we preach.

Our conference centre at 15 Hatfields is one of the most sustainable conference venues in the UK. Recovered and recycled materials were used in its construction, and furnishings and equipment supplies demonstrate best green practice. The electrical supply is 100% renewable energy and all electrical equipment is Triple A rated. We also have energy efficient light bulbs, reusable water bottles and composting of food waste. We have an ethical and sustainable procurement policy, so catering products are locally sourced, the tea and coffee are Fairtrade and all the crockery and cutlery is manufactured in the UK - the cutlery has a 90% average content of recycled material.





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