

Improvement Study -
Sustainable Development
**Bridgend County
Borough Council**

INSIDE THIS REPORT

PAGES 3-11

Summary Report

- Introduction
- Background
- The journey so far
- Improving integration and achieving sustainable development

PAGES 12-14

Appendices

- Sustainable development: the statutory and policy framework

Reference:	928A2004 Final
Author:	Andy Phillips
Date:	November 2004

Status of our reports to the Council

This report has been prepared for the internal use of the named body. Our reports are prepared:

- *In relation to performance audit, under the Audit Commission Act 1998, in the context of the Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission.*
- *In relation to inspection, following inspection work carried out under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and in accordance with the guidance issued by the National Assembly for Wales in Circulars 14/2000 and 18/2002. The inspection report is issued in accordance with the duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.*

Reports are prepared by appointed auditors and inspectors, and addressed to members or officers. They are prepared for the sole use of the named body, and no responsibility is taken by auditors or inspectors to any director / member or officer in their individual capacity, or to any third party.

Introduction

1. As part of the Wales Programme for Improvement, the Audit Commission in Wales (ACiW) carried out a joint risk assessment with each local authority in early 2003. One of the outcomes of this was to identify common themes which arose at many or all local authorities.
2. Sustainable development was one of the common themes identified and, subsequently, this improvement study is being carried out at all 22 local authorities in Wales as part of the 2003/2004 Regulatory Plans. Each council will receive an individual report and a national report will also be produced summarising the key findings and highlighting good practice.

Background

3. Bridgend County Borough has a population of 128,645. Former mining valley communities such as Maesteg and Caerau contrast with the more prosperous coastal plain with its good communication links and high demand for housing and employment sites.
4. Historically, the Council has been controlled by a large Labour majority. In the local elections held in June 2004 this control was lost, and the balance of power is now narrowly held by an alliance of Liberal Democrat, Conservative and some of the Independent members. The Council comprises a total of 54 members and in the recent elections a total of 27 new members were elected. This has led to a rolling programme of member awareness and skills training that will extend over the next 12 months.
5. Member portfolios are currently aligned with Directorates but there are proposals to change these to reflect cross-cutting issues including the themes of the developing community strategy.
6. One of the most widely used of the many definitions of Sustainable Development came from the World Commission on Environment and Development:
*'Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their needs.'*¹
7. Local Government is a key strategic partner in supporting the National Assembly for Wales (the Assembly) in the realisation of its vision of a sustainable Wales. Previous studies have identified that sustainability is not being integrated into 'day to day' operations. This work will focus upon integration and identify drivers and barriers to improvement.

¹ See Appendix 2 for background information on sustainable development in Wales.

The journey so far

Recognising the need for change

8. The Council has made little progress so far to introduce sustainable development into its activities. We found that sustainable development has not been actively driven by either members or senior managers and that key policy drivers are absent and strategies are redundant and overlooked. The result is that only very limited integration of sustainable development is occurring, and this is a passive process led by enthusiasts rather than as a driven and managed process of change.
9. This must therefore cast doubt that the Council has fully appreciated the benefits of promoting sustainable development or recognised the need to change. However, the current position is more enlightened and it is encouraging with both officer and members prepared to invest more to secure the benefits that sustainable development can bring.
10. The potential role of the community strategy as a vehicle for mainstreaming sustainable development is not fully understood. The Council does not widely appreciate that this strategy is the major vehicle for achieving this aim, or that there are real benefits to be gained from integrating the regeneration, community strategy and sustainable development agendas.

Ownership and willingness to change

11. The Council's vision is to 'promote and develop prosperous and vibrant communities within the County Borough in which all the inhabitants of the County Borough can have a stake and to which every resident can and will wish to make a contribution.' This vision is supported by five corporate objectives including to 'enhance the environment, the economy and its infrastructure'. Although there is no explicit reference to it in the vision and objectives, the principles coincide with and, in general support, sustainable development.
12. The Council's strategic priorities reflect these corporate objectives and provide close links between the Corporate and Improvement Plan 2004/2005 and developing community strategy themes. This was encouraging to find and is reinforced by the strategic alignment of plans under the overarching community strategy.
13. A detailed corporate risk assessment was undertaken in March 2004 and 'regeneration and sustainability' was recognised as a risk. We found that the Corporate and Improvement Plan 2004/2005 picks up and develops action plans for the regeneration element of this risk, but that sustainability is lost at the point of translation into identifiable actions. Interviews confirmed that it was assumed that integrating sustainable development within the work of the Council would be achieved through the regeneration process. This is an indication that sustainable development is poorly understood and has so far not been considered a priority for the Council.
14. Our interviews confirm that although there is an understanding that sustainable development is an integration of social, economic and environmental issues, the focus of activity so far has centred on environmental sustainability. This is understandable, and reflects the transition from good environmental stewardship towards a more holistic view of sustainability interwoven within the delivery of the community strategy.

15. We found from our interviews that definitions continue to cloud the understanding of sustainable development. We offer the following alternative definition, developed by Forum for the Future²:

Sustainable development is the process by which we move towards sustainability, with sustainability being the destination.

Sustainable development can be defined as; ‘a dynamic approach which enables all people to realise their potential and to improve their quality of life in ways which simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth’s life support systems’.

Sustainable development policy should include long-term planning, consideration of impacts beyond the local area and the integration of social, economic and environmental issues.

16. Evidence from the officers we spoke to, confirmed that sustainable development is still viewed as a burden rather than as a different way of working for the future that will bring benefits.
17. This leads us to conclude that the Council has so far demonstrated limited ownership of the duty to promote sustainable development. Although it is recognised as a corporate risk, sustainable development is not regarded as a priority.
18. There are however indications of change and a far more open and positive approach towards mainstreaming sustainable development from both elected members and senior managers. This is encouraging but will need to be strongly led and supported by policy if the Council is to make the required progress and take advantage of the real benefits of sustainable development.

Delivering the change

19. The Council has had a Local Agenda 21 function since April 1996 and a Local Agenda 21 strategy called ‘Building a better Bridgend County Borough’ since December 2000. This remains a key strategic document and is listed in the Council’s Constitution, but is not effectively supported by policy. As a result, little regard is paid to the Local Agenda 21 strategy although it contains much that would help to mainstream sustainable development including basic checklists to help gauge progress and build awareness.
20. Senior managers were also unsure if policies are currently in place to support the mainstreaming of sustainable development. Reinforcing and clarifying this supporting framework must be a priority action if the necessary changes are to occur.

² Forum for the Future is a UK based sustainable development charity working with partners to accelerate the transition to a sustainable way of life.

21. In 1999 the Council approved a 'Framework for Action – 21 Steps towards development of Local Agenda 21 for Bridgend County Borough 1998-2000'. This is an action plan based on Local Agenda 21 and includes both specific targets and measures of success. The activities of the Local Agenda 21 function and the progress of the strategy and action plan have recently been the subject of an Internal Audit. The outcome of this audit was still in draft but was not made available for this review.
22. The lack of effective links with performance management has meant that progress has not been driven and little has been achieved as a result of this strategy and action plan.
23. The community strategy is not viewed as the primary vehicle for mainstreaming sustainable development, even by those officers directly involved in its development. This is a concern, and reflects the low level of input from sustainable development professionals during the scoping and development of the community strategy. Officers confirmed that communications between departments remains poor and that the limited success achieved so far in integrating sustainable development has relied on the impact of enlightened enthusiasts rather than as a result of any corporate process.

Achieving the change - the corporate approach

Strategic framework and key drivers

24. The sustainable development professionals within the Council demonstrate a good understanding of the key drivers at UK and Wales levels, but this understanding is not currently shared by corporate managers and by members.
25. We were very encouraged to find that steps are being taken to translate the UK and Wales frameworks, in particular the Assembly's 'Starting to Live Differently', in readiness to apply them at the local authority level. A pre-consultation document, 'Starting to Act Differently – a framework for action on sustainability within Bridgend County Borough Council', has been developed since this initiative was launched by the Assembly in March 2004. This is a key framework document and sets out a path for progress in three stages. Importantly, stage two; 'Integrating sustainability issues into the Authority's policies and activities', sets out to tie sustainable development more closely with the community strategy.
26. This is an improvement area for the Council as sustainable development, although referenced in both documents, is currently not integral to the community strategy or the Corporate and Improvement Plan. The framework includes an action plan linked to a performance management system to ensure effective monitoring and delivery of objectives.
27. Senior managers we spoke to were enthusiastic about 'Starting to Act Differently'. Members have yet to be consulted on the framework, but were encouraged that officers are striving to progress sustainable development through a more formal route once again. If this is to succeed, members will need to support and champion this framework and monitor its uptake closely.

28. Corporate objectives currently provide a basis for decision making within the Council. However, we could not identify a well developed framework to guide decision making, indicating that a considerable subjective element was still present. Sustainability criteria are not routinely used as part of the decision making process, however work is currently underway to develop these.
29. Protecting and enhancing the environment is an aim of the draft community strategy and 'sustainability' is a principle used in the development of this strategy. We could not identify a process for monitoring either the uptake or impact of sustainable development meaning that the success of this principle remains untested.
30. At present, Cabinet members do not provide an effective lead to promote an integrated approach to sustainable development. Members advised us that portfolios were being developed, but that the emphasis was currently on developing the awareness and skills of new members. All members will receive some awareness training on sustainable development, with selected members receiving more advanced skills development training to enable them to champion portfolios. Draft proposals for new portfolios suggest that they will be cross-cutting and linked to the community strategy. It is proposed that sustainable development will feature as a major part of the 'sustainable and active communities' portfolio, but this has yet to be confirmed by the Council.
31. We found that the Chief Executive has a good level of understanding of sustainable development issues and is committed to supporting an enhanced and more visible corporate approach to sustainable development through the management team. The Chief Executive is realistic about the current low level of integration and corporate priority given to sustainable development, but is keen to "re-energise" the process and sees the need to link this with the development of community strategy. The appointment of key personnel to champion regeneration and the development of a Regeneration Enterprise Board were cited as catalysts that will re-launch sustainable development.

Integration at strategic and service delivery levels

32. The Council advised us that the improvement planning process provides a mechanism to achieve the integration of sustainable development across corporate policy and in service delivery. We found this was not the case, although many service areas can highlight some examples of sustainable development, these were not driven by the improvement planning process. In summary, we did not find evidence of an effective mechanism for the advancement of or for monitoring sustainable development.
33. Sustainability appraisal was a part of the 'Framework for action' (see paragraph 21) document approved in 1999, but its use was not mandatory. The Council's best value review toolkit also included a requirement to complete an environmental and sustainability checklist. These checklists are now not used and do not form part of the processes undertaken during scrutiny, policy and project development, monitoring and appraisal, budget setting and allocation, service and financial planning, the selection of partners, performance management or for procurement.
34. Part two of 'Starting to Act Differently' proposes to reintroduce sustainability appraisal.

35. The Council has also made commitments to integrate sustainable development more widely, including;
 - to review business plans for sustainability;
 - to 'ensure that sustainability is integrated into the Bridgend Community Plan by April 2004' as a specific recommendation of the Planning Services review 2003/2004; and
 - to 'ensure that the Environmental and Sustainable Development Policy for Bridgend is integrated and co-ordinated across all directorates by December 2005'.
36. We were however, unable to identify significant progress with these initiatives.
37. There is vertical alignment of service and business plans and we found that the Corporate and Improvement Plan 2004/2005 shows the links between the overarching community strategies through to personal objectives. Links between service delivery plans are far more poorly developed reflecting very little corporate working or horizontal communication between services. It is acknowledged by service managers that more need to be done to clarify these linkages and further develop corporate working so as to improve the delivery of cross cutting initiatives. This is also a priority of the Chief Executive.
38. The Council has yet to make sustainable development an integral part of its Asset Management Plan, although systems are developing that will allow property issues to be viewed against sustainable rather than just environmental considerations.
39. A corporate procurement strategy is in place but this does not include the mandatory use of an assessment for sustainable development. If sustainable development checks are made it is because the individual manager believes that they are necessary, rather than because of a corporate policy to undergo this process. An 'environmental' audit of the procurement function is currently underway as part of a waste management audit, but no findings was available for us to view.
40. The Council has adopted the Green Dragon Environmental Standards as part of policy agreement with the Assembly in March 2004. This is commendable and has the potential to accelerate the mainstreaming of sustainable development principles across the Council. However, this together with the procurement and asset management strategies is a further example of sustainable development currently meaning little more to the Council than environmental sustainability.

Community involvement and leadership

41. The Council has recently produced a consultation draft of the community strategy, following delays resulting from a lack of resources. We found that consultation on this strategy has been poor across the Council, and the community strategy is not emerging as the main vehicle for the integration of sustainable development.

42. We found that the dissemination of the sustainable development message within the Council has been weak and understanding of the opportunity to use the community strategy as a potential vehicle to mainstream sustainable development was currently very limited. More so, the use of the strategy for this purpose was questioned by officers from the community strategy team. We consider that this is further evidence of poor corporate working. There is clearly much work to do if the strategy is to fulfil the role as the main link with communities for sustainable development.
43. The community is represented on the Bridgend Local Strategic Partnership which was formed in October 2003. This partnership involves public services including the Council, Community Councils, the Police, health and environmental bodies and representatives from the voluntary, business and community sectors. One of the five aims of the Bridgend Local Strategic Partnership is to 'protect and enhance the environment, through a more sustainable pattern of development, securing a higher quality of life and respect for the environment.' This reflects the aims of the draft community strategy. Part two of 'Starting to Act Differently' includes the integration of sustainable development into the community strategy and if the Council adopts this quality of life indicators will also be included. The use of a sustainable development appraisal tool is not currently proposed for the activities of the Bridgend Local Strategic Partnership or community strategy.
44. The Council admits that there is currently no evidence that the results of consultation and participation influence decision makers. For meaningful community participation to grow in the future this must be shown to be a way in which local views influence and inform local decisions. There is a limited awareness of global sustainable development commitments amongst local stakeholders and communities. Through participation they can gain a better understanding of how local actions contribute to global issues.

Achieving the change - the service approach

Sustainable development function

45. The Council has two part-time officers dedicated to the promotion of Local Agenda 21. This resource has had very limited corporate impact and it was described as being 'in a box' within the Environment and Planning Services Directorate.
46. Our interviews identified many isolated examples of sustainable development practice within the service areas of the Council, but the feeling from officers was that a 'critical mass' of dedicated resource does not exist. We consider that initiating the necessary cultural change required to embed sustainable development across the Council will not occur without dedicating sufficient resource.
47. We also consider that mainstreaming is best achieved when closely allied to corporate policy generation and performance management. The current organisational structure may make the integration of sustainable development even harder.

Improving integration and achieving sustainable development

What remains to be done?

48. The Audit Commission in Wales assessment of the degree of maturity of a council's approach to sustainable development has been informed by a wide range of sources. In developing the approach used for this study we have, in particular, drawn upon material developed by Forum for the Future in conjunction with local authorities.
49. The Council clearly has much to do to ensure that sustainable development becomes an integral part of all activities. Although identified as a corporate risk, there is little evidence that it is regarded as a corporate priority or of effective action to mainstream this across the Council.
50. Recent indications are more positive that sustainable development will take a higher profile, but this will need to be strongly led and supported by policy if the Council is to make progress and take advantage of the real benefits that sustainable development can bring. 'Starting to Act Differently' provides the Council with a framework to follow and points the way towards the integration of sustainable development through the community strategy.
51. The Council can continue to deliver sustainability through the regeneration function, but it needs to understand that sustainable development must be a part of many corporate cross-cutting initiatives, and that these initiatives overlap significantly. Progress requires a co-ordinated approach into which sustainable development is interwoven.

Issues for the Council to consider

52. As a result of our study we recommend that the Council does the following:

Recommendations
R1 Clearly identify sustainable development as a corporate priority and a way in which the Council will integrate and balance the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the area.
R2 Ensure that members, staff and citizens understand that the community strategy will be the key strategy for delivering sustainable development. The management of community strategy, regeneration and sustainable development should be closely linked to facilitate this change.
R3 Consider aligning the Sustainable Development resource more closely with policy development and implementation. This will promote the mainstreaming of sustainable development from a corporate nucleus.

Recommendations

R4 Ensure that key strategies and policies support and promote a sustainable development way of working. For instance:

- adopt 'Starting to Act Differently - a framework for action on sustainability within Bridgend County Borough Council' as the blueprint for integrating sustainable development across the Council;
- ensure that the procurement strategy is based upon sustainable development criteria and includes a requirement to undertake a sustainability appraisal; and
- that policy supports the use of mechanisms, such as a sustainability appraisal tool, to promote the effective and consistent integration of sustainable development.

R5 Continue building the capacity of members, officers and the community in sustainable development, and in particular so that:

- The Council is more active in its role as a community leader. In achieving this the Council needs to demonstrate the relevance of national and international issues to locally driven agendas and how local actions can contribute to global improvements.
- The benefits that a sustainable development approach can make to corporate decision-making and service provision are recognised.

R6 Clarify the responsibility and method for mainstreaming sustainable development into the work of the Council. Achieve this by:

- formally assigning the lead responsibility at both member and officer level to promote sustainable development across the Council;
- dedicate existing resource to embed sustainable development as a new way of working for the Council; and,
- create a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timebound) action plan, to bring about the mainstreaming of sustainable development.

53. Our work was carried out on 26 August 2004, and by reviewing a range of key documents. The following personnel were interviewed:

Officer	Position
Keri Lewis	Chief Executive
Cllr Cheryl Green	Council Leader
Cllr David Anderson	Deputy Leader
Rhodri-Gwyn Jones	Director of Environment and Planning Services
Staff focus group	Various – a cross section from within the Council

Sustainable development: the statutory and policy framework

There is a range of legislation and policies that relate specifically to sustainable development at both the UK and Welsh Assembly Government levels.

'A Better Quality of Life', the UK sustainability strategy was published in 1999. It lists four key themes:

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone;
- effective protection of the environment;
- prudent use of natural resources; and
- maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment.

Welsh Assembly Government sustainable development action plan: 2004-2007

The Assembly is required by law to make a scheme stating how it will promote sustainable development in the exercise of its functions. The Assembly is required to publish annual reports on progress in implementing the Scheme, and every four years following each Assembly election an additional report must be published on the effectiveness of what has been done and a decision must be taken – after consultation – on whether the Scheme should be remade or revised.

The Assembly's first scheme, 'Learning to live differently', was adopted in November 2000. In October 2003, following an independent report on the effectiveness of the original scheme and a consultation paper on how it should be revised, the Assembly adopted a revised Sustainable Development Scheme 'Starting to Live Differently' on 16 March 2004.

The Scheme says what commitments the whole Assembly is making towards sustainable development, the principles it will observe, and some of the processes it will apply to promoting sustainable development in all its work.

A draft action plan is now being consulted upon that states how the Welsh Assembly Government will implement the commitments in the new scheme. The plan seeks to address issues identified in the effectiveness report. Chiefly these relate to the way the Assembly works and the relative lack of real world change to date. It draws on responses to the consultation on revising the Scheme and is intended to:

- implement the new Sustainable Development Scheme;
- stand as a formal addition to the Welsh Assembly Government's strategic agenda Wales: A Better Country;
- fulfil commitments that the Welsh Assembly Government has made internationally through membership of sustainable development networks;
- complement the first Wales Spatial Plan which is expected to be published later this year; and
- ensure that progress is kept under review.

The Welsh Assembly Government has identified four areas for new action where it considers that it can make the most difference:

- **Living differently:** addressing the major structural issues for sustainable development - energy, settlements, natural resources, and production and consumption.
- **Leadership and delivery:** creating governance structures and a civil society that can deliver sustainable development.
- **Making our money talk:** making sure the Assembly and other public sector spending is focused on delivering sustainable development.
- **Measuring progress:** making sure the Assembly and other public sector spending is focused on delivering sustainable development.

The Welsh Assembly Government makes specific reference to the close relationship between the Sustainable Development Action Plan, its strategic agenda – Wales: a better country and other planning and delivery mechanisms.

This action plan is not intended to replicate action or commitments already contained in Wales: A Better Country, but sustainable development as a whole depends on the actions we are taking as a Government to promote healthy living, to tackle inequality for reasons of race, gender and disability and to address poverty and lack of opportunity through our Social Justice agenda. Sustainable development has people at its heart.

Sustainable development is also about governance and the ability to tailor our approach to different needs in different areas. So the Wales Spatial Plan, the corporate planning cycle for our agencies and our work with delivery in local government are central to making our sustainable vision for Wales a reality.

There is a range of other legislation which also needs to be taken into account when considering sustainable development.

Local Government Act 2000

The Local Government Act 2000 is relevant in three key areas, best value, community strategies and the power to promote well-being.

Best value

Circular 10/99 Paragraph 17 states that:

Best value reviews will need to give effect to the principles of sustainable development. New performance targets generated by Reviews need to reflect the principles of sustainable development, set out in A Better Quality of Life – a strategy for sustainable development for the UK, and summarised in The Government's sustainable development strategy: What does it mean for local authorities? Where authorities have LA21 and any community strategies in place, Reviews will provide an opportunity to give such principles practical effect through the setting of consistent performance targets.

Circular 14/2000 from the National Assembly of Wales (paragraph 52) advises that:

Questions that need to be asked (for Challenge) include... Does the service meet authorities' statutory obligations under legislation relating to sustainable development, health and safety, equal opportunities and race relations?

It also contains a section 'Principles of Sustainable Development,' (paragraph 89) which notes that:

Performance targets contained in the Action Plans...need to reflect the principles of sustainable development.

Community strategies

The Local Government Act 2000 gave local authorities a duty to prepare, with their partners, a long-term community strategy to improve the quality of life in their local area.

Community strategies are the overarching strategic framework for the area and should set the overall objectives for individual strategies and for the council's corporate strategy. These objectives should be based on local priorities, and according to the government guidance should:

- have a long-term vision;
- integrate social, economic and environmental concerns (ie, ensure that policy actions in one area support those in another);
- have regard to the National Sustainability Strategy and regional sustainability frameworks;
- consider how global and national concerns such as climate change and biodiversity can be addressed through local action; and
- build on the work already done in developing Local Agenda 21 Plans.

The power to promote wellbeing

54. The Local Government Act 2000 gave local authorities the power to promote the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of their local community. However the Act says that in exercising the wellbeing power a local authority must have regard to its Community Strategy.
55. A fundamental issue, therefore, is effective integration at both strategic and operational levels. Policy integration at the strategic level and joined-up service delivery are also crucial to improving user outcomes.
56. ACiW is responding to this key driver by undertaking a short study of the ways in which Local Government is responding to the vision of the Assembly.