Sustainable development in Wales

Understanding effective governance

Paul Williams and Alan Thomas

An exploration of the effectiveness of the system of governance for sustainable development in Wales

The system of governance for sustainable development requires collaboration from a plethora of public, private and voluntary agencies working with citizens and communities at many levels of organisation. This study focuses on how such individuals and organisations are attempting to manage sustainable development against a background of the increasing profile of this subject within UK government.

The report examines the position of sustainable development within public policy in general, and describes the organisational and institutional framework that exists in Wales to govern it. It deals in turn with the main components of the policy process
– framing, implementation, evaluation and co-ordination – and considers the effectiveness of different duties, frameworks, mechanisms and regimes.

The authors go on to review the role of individual actors, the determinants of effective organisational design, and the barriers and problems associated with implementing sustainable development strategies. An important section covers the methods of co-ordination being promoted by people and organisations working collectively between different levels of governance.

The study highlights the diversity that characterises the notion of sustainable development, and the influence this has on the approaches taken to its management. This report will be of interest to managers, practitioners and politicians concerned with the governance of sustainable development inside and outside Wales, and to other policy makers dealing with other complex cross-cutting issues.

Reconciling environmental and social concerns

Within the new agenda of sustainable development, the interface between environmental and social policies will not always be a comfortable one.

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The RESC series of publications will be of interest to policy makers, local authority officers, the voluntary sector and non-governmental organisations with an interest in social and environmental agendas and the quest to 'join up' the two spheres.

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Contents

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List of acronyms

ACiW Audit Commission in Wales

ASPB Assembly Sponsored Public Body

DETR Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions

EECW Environmental Education Council in Wales

EMAS Environmental Management and Audit Scheme

EOC Equal Opportunities Commission

ERDF European Regional Development Fund

ESD Education for Sustainable Development

IDeA Improvement and Development Agency

LA21 Local Agenda 21

NAfW National Assembly for Wales

NGO Non-government organisation

OECD Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

RSPB Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

SD Sustainable development

SDCC Sustainable Development Co-ordinators Cymru

WAG Welsh Assembly Government

WLGA Welsh Local Government Association

WPI Wales Programme for Improvement

WWF Worldwide Fund for Nature (formerly World Wildlife Fund)

Note: The National Assembly for Wales is the legal entity and title given to the devolved body in Wales. Welsh Assembly Government is the current term used by the present administration.

1 Background and policy context

Sustainable development as a wicked issue

In today's shared-power, no-one-in-charge, interdependent world, public problems and issues spill over organizational and institutional boundaries. Many people are affected by problems like global warming, AIDS, homelessness, drug abuse, crime, growing poverty among children, and teen pregnancy, but no one person, group or organization has the necessary power or authority to solve these problems. Instead, organizations and institutions must share objectives, resources, activities, power, or some of their authority in order to achieve collective gains or minimize losses.
(Bryson and Crosby, 1992, p. 323)

This quotation in many ways encapsulates the challenge of sustainable development (SD). It highlights the fact that SD is an example of a 'wicked issue' and that its governance requires collaborative endeavours from a plethora of public, private and voluntary agencies working in concert with citizens and communities at many levels of organisation. The metaphor of a 'wicked issue' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) is a helpful way of understanding SD, given the considerable conceptual diversity and confusion that this notion attracts.

- Wicked issues do not respect fixed and conventional boundaries – they bridge, permeate, weave, infect and infuse functional, sectoral, organisational, professional and jurisdictional boundaries. Especially in the case of SD, they span generational boundaries, and have local and global connections.

- Wicked issues are socially constructed in that the conceptualisation and analysis of problem structure, cause and resolution are a function of the 'gaze' of individual stakeholders. In the dense policy spaces occupied by SD, the number and range of stakeholders are extensive including different professionals and practitioners, citizens and customers, politicians, local and central government officers, and people employed in the private and independent sectors.

- Wicked issues are complex and non-linear in character. SD requires an understanding of highly interconnected social, economic, environmental and political systems; it is grounded within multi-organisational and stakeholder environments; and it is framed within a complicated web of administrative, statutory and legal frameworks.

- Wicked issues are not amenable to optimal solutions – they are inherently incapable of being 'tamed'. The implications are that such issues are never entirely resolved and remain intractable, and that real progress is dependent on systemic change as opposed to policy tinkering and 'quick fixes'. Some of the major issues embraced by an SD umbrella, such as climate change, world poverty and health inequalities, fall into this category. The timescales required to achieve discernible shifts in these policy areas can be measured only in decades and generations.

- Wicked issues are not capable of being managed by single agencies acting autonomously. Kooiman makes this point admirably with his assertion that:

No single actor, public or private, has the knowledge and information required to solve complex, dynamic, and diversified problems; no actor has an overview sufficient to make the needed instruments effective; no single actor has sufficient action potential to dominate unilaterally. (Kooiman, 2000, p. 142)

The characteristics of wicked issues have profound implications for modes of governance. In particular, network forms of governance as opposed to managing within markets or hierarchies appear to be more appropriate. Stoker (1998) summarises governance as involving a set of institutions and actors that are drawn from, but also beyond, government; that acknowledges the blurring of boundaries and responsibilities for tackling issues; that identifies the power dependence involved in the relationship between different agencies involved in collective action; that is built around autonomous self-governing networks of actors; and that recognises that government cannot depend on traditional command and control behaviours, but needs to invest in tools and techniques to steer and guide action.

Theories of governance (Kooiman, 2000; Rhodes, 1996; Stoker, 1998) suggest a pattern of organising occurring at different levels, involving multiple nodes or centres of activity, and incorporating a number of distinct orders or operating systems.

- The mantra of 'local to global' is reflected in the levels at which SD is tackled –

community, local, national, UK, European and global levels. SD issues do not respect boundaries and the interesting challenges often occur at the interface between the different levels of governance. The boundaries are also a source of tension, particularly in relation to the legislative and statutory relationships between governments at different levels.

- The governance of SD is multi-nodal. There are a host of different organisations, agencies and people impacting on this policy area.

- Governance is characterised by different orders, frameworks and operating systems. There are organisations based around hierarchies, interorganisational arrangements based on partnerships and other forms of collaboration, and networks of many different types.

This research study has been heavily influenced by the notion of SD as a 'wicked issue' and by theories of governance, which form an attractive conceptual and practical lens through which to view its management.

Sustainable development in context

SD is a comparatively recent public policy issue with a profile that has sporadically captured the attention of politicians, policy makers and citizens as a result of high profile World Summits at Rio (1992) and Johannesburg (2002), and a catalogue of social and environmental disasters – both real and forecasted – such as climate change, pollution, poverty, species eradication and major disease. The locus of SD

is truly global, but the levels at which it is manifested and tackled can be evidenced at other levels of governance – the European Union, nation states, devolved administrations and local government. Importantly, aspects of the SD agenda can be directly linked to individual behaviour and lifestyles that challenge deep-rooted assumptions and values around how people and societies are organised.

The European Union has been instrumental in converting some international commitments into positive action through various policy frameworks and directives such as on waste. UK government has also responded to the agenda with the preparation of overarching strategic documents (e.g. DETR, 1999), and expressions of policy direction in different policy areas, for example on waste management, energy, transport, the planning system and biodiversity. Following the first World Summit on SD, attention was focused on local authorities and the preparation of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) strategies.

However, with some notable exceptions, the response around the UK has proved to be generally ineffective. The permissive approach (it was not a statutory requirement) to the preparation of LA21 strategies, coupled with no dedicated resources, offered little incentive to local authorities to engage in effective action, especially in the context of competing agendas and the primacy of statutory responsibilities. The consequence has been relatively small and fragmented interventions, primarily around the traditional 'green' agenda, and the framework has failed to act as an integrative or cross-cutting mechanism (Jermier and Forbes, 2003).

Although local and national government interventions under the banner of SD are less

than impressive, there are some examples where aspects of this agenda have been pursued under different discourses and programmes. A wide variety of policy initiatives premised on interorganisational forms of working have been promoted by government in an effort to address pressing social and economic problems in health, crime and community safety, poverty and social inclusion, and urban regeneration.

The architecture of governance for sustainable development in Wales

Until the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) in 1998, the course of SD in Wales departed little from that in the rest of the UK. Unlike Scotland, the Government of Wales Act 1998 prescribes a form of devolution that prohibits the instigation of primary legislation and does not allow any variation in taxation. The Assembly has an annual block grant to distribute among policy areas in ways of its own determination, and it has financial freedoms mainly in the areas of health, housing, culture, education, agriculture and transport. Although the UK legislative and statutory context is limiting in many ways, Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has made significant progress in some aspects of policy, such as health and education, which create 'clear red water' between Wales and England.

In addition to devolved government, there are other institutional arrangements that differ significantly from elsewhere in the UK. Local government is organised around a single, all-purpose model of unitary authorities and, more recently, radical changes in the NHS in Wales have resulted in the replacement of five health authorities with 22 local health boards, with

boundaries coterminous with those of local authorities. Councillor representation on local health boards and a joint duty on local authorities and local health boards to prepare health, social care and well-being strategies are aimed at cementing an effective working relationship between health and local government.

Perhaps a significant defining factor in the governance of Wales is that of scale. There are comparatively few institutions and actors compared with England. Some relationships are closer and networks more established. Key individuals have a tendency to surface in many different arenas. According to one senior local government manager:

> *The beauty of Wales is its manageability in terms of scale – there is a real chance to take SD forward.*

Section 121 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 represents an important catalyst for the profile of SD in Wales. This places a statutory duty on the NAfW to promote SD in all of its business, including the preparation of a Sustainable Development Scheme (National Assembly for Wales, 2000a) to implement the duty and establish regular consultative arrangements to monitor and review progress. Only two other states or governments – Tasmania and Estonia – have duties of a comparable nature. The symbiotic relationship between the Assembly and its sponsored bodies, as evidenced through accountability and funding mechanisms, enables the spirit of the statutory duty to be embraced by delivery agencies whose activities have a profound impact on the quality of life of Welsh people.

WAG is intent on promoting a particular form of policy process characterised by inclusivity involving multiple stakeholders from both inside and outside government, with engagement at the formative stages of policy development. Formal partnership arrangements have been set up with different sectors including voluntary, private and local government. The Partnership Council, which brings together the Assembly with local government, is a particularly important body, as it attempts to mediate the interface between local and national government, and contribute to the development of complementary policy agendas.

In common with England, Welsh local government has been the subject of successive Local Government Acts that set out to modernise local government through a combination of measures including changes to the political management arrangements, in particular the introduction of cabinet systems of government; the duty on local authorities to produce community strategies for their areas; and the introduction of a new power of well-being to enable local authorities to undertake activities from which they were previously prohibited. The Audit Commission in Wales currently offers a regulatory focus particularly for health and local government, and a future amalgamation with the National Audit Office to create the Wales Audit Office will further promote the concept of a unified public service regulator for Wales.

There are other important building blocks in the emergent governing capacity for SD in Wales, including the following:

- Devolution has been the catalyst for the establishment of Welsh arms of national and international NGOs with SD interests. Organisations such as Oxfam and WWF, while acting locally, are ideally placed to promote global linkages that are a fundamental tenet of SD.

- A Sustainable Development Forum for Wales has been formed to offer an independent voice for Welsh civil society on SD matters, and a catalyst for change at a local and regional level.

- SD practitioners within local government (and the three National Parks) in Wales have formed a national organisation entitled Sustainable Development Co-ordinators Cymru (SDCC). Membership is similar to the previous Welsh Environmental Co-ordinators Forum, but the new title signals a concern with broader SD models as opposed to a narrower focus on the traditional 'green' agenda. This is essentially an example of a professional network (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992).

- WAG has been active at UK, European and global levels, and has been instrumental in setting up a number of networks. In the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg, Welsh political leaders took the opportunity to express their firm commitment to a sustainable future, and the First Minister was prominent in brokering the formation of a network of countries to explore best practice in this area. This is known as the Gauteng Declaration and involves 22 regional governments across the globe. Also, with EU financial support under DG Regio's Innovative Action Programme, Wales has been instrumental in establishing a Pan-European Regional Network for SD, and a number of projects looking at SD and regional innovation.

Wales is witness to the emergence of a particular institutional and governance framework to manage SD. This complex architecture was not deliberately designed as a coherent system of governance, but, nevertheless, it involves a panoply of duties, mechanisms, organisations, regimes and other arrangements operating at different levels, and implicating a diverse range of public, private and voluntary organisations acting unilaterally and collectively. It is legitimate to suggest that Wales is presented with a huge opportunity for making a significant impact in SD, and this research project sets out to assess the extent to which this is being, or might be, realised.

Research focus

This research project is designed to capture and assess the effectiveness of the system of governance for SD in Wales. The central question focuses on what can make the system effective – people, structures, duties or mechanisms – and what problems, barriers and issues inhibit the pursuit of successful outcomes?

The approach to the management of SD in Wales is attracting considerable research interest from a number of quarters. The Assembly itself, as part of its first formal review of the SD

Scheme, has instigated a number of pieces of evaluation (the Davidoff Report [Welsh Assembly Government, 2003d], Report of CAG Consultants [CAG Consultants, 2003]), WWF-Cymru has commissioned research work from Cardiff University (Flynn, 2003) and there has been a survey of SDCC members also by Cardiff University (Netherwood, 2003) (Appendices 2, 3, 4 and 5 summarise the main findings of these reports). This body of material, in addition to emerging evidence from the consultation exercise of the formal review of the SD Scheme, provides a very useful and contemporary source of literature. Care has been taken to avoid duplication with these other research projects wherever practicable, and to focus on the exploration of avenues and areas not addressed by them.

This research project has focused on two levels of governance – local and national. While recognising that the boundaries below and above these levels are very permeable, resources have precluded any significant examination of activity at community, UK-wide or international levels. However, the analysis does reflect interdependencies and connections at a number of points. In the present project, a case-study approach has been adopted, with Wales as the focus of the exercise. The key elements of the design involved an interrogation of documentary evidence coupled with in-depth interviews with individuals within and outside WAG; a similar approach with three local authorities; a prolonged engagement with a small number of SD practitioners; and an examination of SD within a selected policy area. The methodology was augmented by a group discussion at the start and end of the project. Details of the research design are outlined in Appendix 1.

The research team is conscious that there are substantial areas of the agenda that have not been covered. In addition, the effectiveness of the governance system cannot truly be tested at this early stage in terms of outcomes on the ground. However, as the study is rooted in the views and opinions of a wide variety of stakeholders in Wales, the team is confident that the findings make an important contribution to this complex area of public policy.

A framework for governance

The effectiveness of the governance of SD is discussed within an analytical framework, depicted in Figure 1. It consists of a number of components typically associated with the policy process. Although they are presented as separate elements, it needs to be stressed that, in reality, they are highly interdependent, and the policy process is far from a rational, ordered and linear sequence of decisions.

- *Policy framing*: concerns the ways in which the notion of SD is understood and conceptualised.

- *Policy implementation*: relates to the main approaches that are adopted to intervene in the management of SD, and the organisational, managerial and other arrangements (instruments, mechanisms and frameworks) that are constructed to realise objectives and purposes.

- *Policy evaluation*: focuses on the models and performance management regimes that are used to measure and evaluate progress towards SD outcomes, as well as the organisational learning and capacity building that ensues.

- *Policy co-ordination*: centres on working between organisations, and explores the ways in which the network of actors and organisations within the governing system attempts to co-ordinate its actions and interventions, and the tensions and contradictions that arise as a consequence.

Figure 1 A framework for governance

POLICY FRAMING

POLICY EVALUATION

POLICY CO-ORDINATION

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION
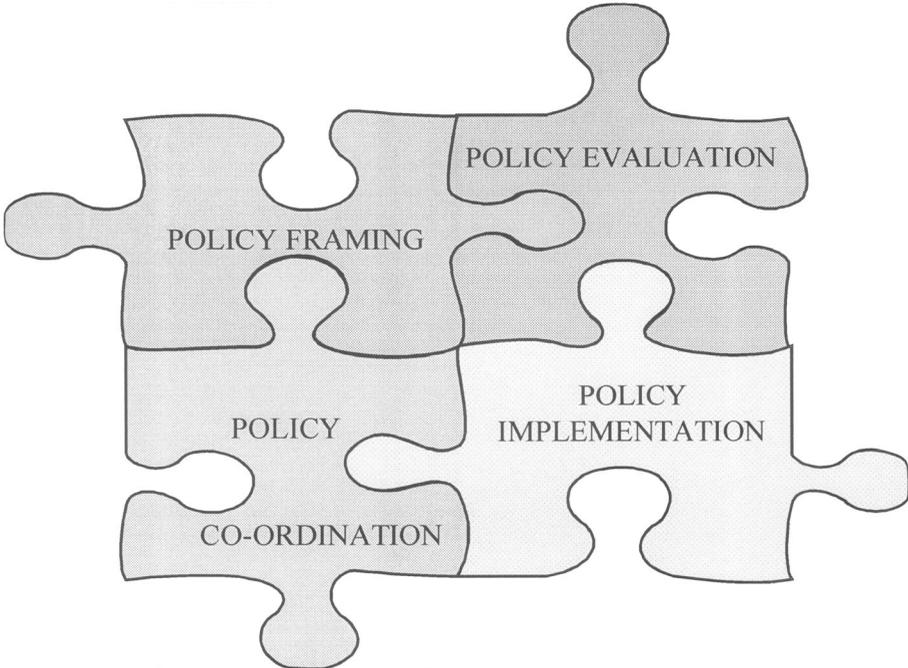
2 Policy framing: understanding sustainable development

Many problems and issues have no universally understood meaning. The analysis of problem structure, cause and resolution is a social construction, and a function of the 'gaze' of particular stakeholders. Stone argues that problem definition is influenced by competition over causal theories and 'the active manipulation of images or conditions by competing political actors' (Stone, 1989, p. 299). The ascendancy of particular causal stories both colours the type of reform required and empowers particular people who have the resources or skills to resolve them. Schon refers to this process as 'framing' and suggests that:

> Depending on our disciplinary backgrounds, organisational roles, past histories, interests, and political/economic perspectives, we frame problematic situations in different ways.
> (Schon, 1987, p. 4)

SD presents a prime example of this phenomenon. Many protagonists claim that there is now a general consensus over what is meant by SD and that the problem is about implementation. They invariably quote the Brundtland definition, and the idea of integrating social, economic and environmental considerations into all policy making. However, our research discovers that there is a huge variation in the meanings and understandings that are ascribed to the notion of SD. This diversity is apparent both within and between organisations, professions, sectors and policy areas (Table 1).

There is a view that it is 'everything and nothing' – a concept that is both nebulous and difficult to operationalise. It is universally considered to be 'a good thing', although people outside the SD community are put off by the

Table 1 Policy framing: meanings of sustainable development

Sustainable development as …	
Contested framework	Framework facilitating discussion around the process and content of sustainable development
Overarching principles or philosophy	Limited carrying capacity of the natural environment Local–global links Intergenerational equity Avoiding irreversibility
Policy integration	Integrating social, economic and environmental considerations/impacts Working in partnership Empowering people and communities Evidence-based and outcome-focused Medium-term time frames Sustainability
Policy area	Policy area concerned with the natural environment including energy, waste, biodiversity

almost quasi-religious fervour adopted by some advocates. The researchers were struck by the difficulty experienced by all but a few interviewees in articulating their understanding of SD. One interviewee described SD as 'a very confused agenda' and another, in a local authority corporate policy section, suggested interestingly that the difficulty of understanding the concept had prevented its discussion within her organisation, in marked contrast to equal opportunities and social inclusion where there is more clarity and, as a consequence, more commitment for action. One local authority chief executive explained the reason that SD had not yet 'found its place in local government' was because of the definitional difficulties.

A problem that recurred in a number of conversations and the focus groups was the difficulty of picturing SD solutions in practice. It often presents as a utopian concept and needs to be demonstrated in reality. This point is reinforced below in connection with SD as a kind of process model and the difficulty of promoting a set of principles in the absence of policy content. This faces the accusation of being too abstract unless there are clear links to practice. An additional problem articulated in most quarters alluded to the complexity and immensity of such an overarching notion, and the difficulty of determining an effective starting point.

We suggest it is useful to think of the kaleidoscope of understandings or frames (Triandafyllidou and Fotiou, 1998) as essentially ranging along a spectrum from views that conceive SD as a distinct policy area connected with 'green' or environmental issues, to ones that see it as a philosophy, central organising theme, framework or set of principles that

should underpin the way in which the activities of all policy sectors are conducted. Between these extremes is the view that SD is essentially about policy integration: combining economic, social and environmental considerations when formulating or evaluating policies in all areas (see Table 1).

The spectrum can also be viewed as one that conceives SD as either weak or strong, and resonates somewhat with the ladder of SD constructed by Baker *et al*. (1997).

Sustainable development as a policy area

There is still a very strong perception outside the SD fraternity of SD as a policy area that embraces the issues and threats faced by the natural environment. Recycling, energy efficiency and biodiversity exemplify it. A frank view expressed by one local authority politician was that 'we have so many councillors here – and, if you asked them what SD was, they would cite recycling and green issues'. The agenda is seen in protectionist and conservation terms as considerations that should be taken into account to alleviate the side effects of social and economic progress. This was expressed by one local authority manager as something that provided 'a brake and check on some of the things we do'.

Such views are reinforced by the inheritance of LA21 strategies in many local authorities, the location of SD capabilities within environmentally based service departments of organisations, and the championing of SD by environmental pressure groups and practitioners with environmental backgrounds.

The environmental perception of SD is the one held by the overwhelming proportion of the

general public (at least those who have ever heard of the notion) – a fact that a survey by the Welsh Consumer Council (2003) underlines.

Sustainable development as policy integration

The view that SD is not an environmental agenda, but one that attempts to articulate a process or set of principles which should guide decision making in all policy areas, is one that is beginning to take root. However, there is little consensus on what these principles might be.

A number of respondents, particularly within corporate and economic policy areas, use the term 'sustainability' – a term that is often confused with SD and used interchangeably. The meaning ascribed to sustainability is often simply something that is long lasting or financially viable.

Another common meaning implies that SD is a framework – 'a three-legged stool' – which allows the impacts of policy decisions to be considered from social, economic and environmental points of view, which then allows a 'balanced' decision to be taken. However, there are different versions of what is meant by combining social, economic and environmental considerations. WAG interprets the statutory duty towards SD as taking 'social, economic and environmental issues into account in everything that we do', whereas, for the Welsh Development Agency, SD is 'a model of development which aims to pursue, in a mutually compatible way, economic growth, social inclusion and improvement and environmental protection and enhancement, for both current and future generations'.

Other interpretations of SD as a set of principles, such as that by WAG, concentrate more on aspects of process such as partnership, empowerment, focus on outcomes and at least a medium-term time frame. These, in effect, equate SD with processes for good integrative policy making. This view is encouraged by Forum for the Future, which is retained by WAG as consultants on SD matters.

Sustainable development as a set of overarching principles

However, as a representative of an NGO argued, an integration model based on the above principles is not specifically about something termed 'SD'. Hence, a number of additional principles need to be added to the equation. One is about ensuring that connections are made between local and global perspectives – for instance, taking into account the effects that local decisions about energy and procurement have on other countries. Another is that intergenerational timescales need to be built into the policy process; and, related to this, there is the precautionary principle, which was expressed by one of our respondents as making sure the effects of decisions made now are not irreversible. As a bottom line, there is the realisation that the earth has a limited carrying capacity and that certain important resources are finite.

Understanding SD is not helped by its promotion as a 'cross-cutting theme or issue' in many organisations and the competition it often faces from a steady proliferation of other similarly viewed themes. WAG originally adopted equality, social inclusion and the Welsh

language, in addition to SD, as themes that provide principles considered to apply to all policy areas. Other agencies, particularly local authorities, include yet more cross-cutting themes, for example, health, older people and community safety. Constructing policy around these themes can help to break away from silo-based moulds, but constant fragmentation presents problems of integration.

A significant tension lies between understanding SD as an overarching framework – something 'that stands above the others' and seeks to make all these elements an integral part – and seeing it as one of a list of many other cross-cutting themes. The former view implies that social inclusion, equalities and the promotion of the Welsh language, in particular, can all be regarded as aspects of SD, with the attendant danger of losing the specificity of its future-orientation and global principles. The latter view risks reducing SD to one of a long list of general concerns. However, the main point is that different choices lead to different courses of action, and to different forms of management and organisation.

Sustainable development as a contested framework

Against a position that concludes that SD is 'cursed by endless definitions', it is appropriate to question whether it is necessary to seek clarity around the notion of SD. A very pragmatic viewpoint expressed by one corporate planning manager is that 'I don't care what SD is as long as we can agree on a definition which we can apply in a day-to-day context' – to operationalise the concept so that it can be translated from the lofty ideals of

strategy formulation to the realities of service delivery and implementation on the ground.

One argument is that it is possible to detect SD approaches and solutions in a number of areas, but they are not informed or badged under the umbrella of SD. Several of our respondents, particularly those directly tasked with managing SD, talked of introducing SD 'by the back door'. The discourse or language may be similar, but the drivers and policy culture emanate from different traditions and sources. For example, the notion of 'well-being' is one that has recently entered the policy lexicon in health and social care. It embraces the social as opposed to traditional medical model of health and in many ways resonates strongly with the notion of SD. Equally, the community development models underpinning urban regeneration initiatives such as Communities First have parallels with many SD principles. However, in neither of these cases are intergenerational equity or local–global considerations specifically embraced.

The challenge for SD specialists may be to act as managers of meaning or translators who can make the connections between approaches in different arenas – to look for hooks to hang SD on and, conversely, to provide a conceptual home for others to gain legitimacy for their agenda or access to resources. However, there is a danger in subsuming completely the language of SD within other discourses such as those of well-being or policy integration.

It is arguable whether full consensus on SD can be achieved. Even if there were a measure of agreement on principles, there would often be variations in interpretation, reflecting political differences and clashes of interests inherent in the policy process. Not only are there specific

interests affected, whether negatively or positively, when an SD agenda is pursued, but there are also important aspects of the general public interest, such as the needs of future generations, or of the global poor, or of the earth itself, which do not correspond to any interests represented locally or nationally. This explains why there is often very little political support for SD, particularly at local level.

Invoking SD principles cannot settle policy dilemmas, but it can offer an overarching framework to facilitate debate around areas of tension and disagreement. For example, the way the Welsh Development Agency interprets the combination of economic, social and environmental factors is to include economic growth as a principle of SD. However, others might see the principles about environmental carrying capacity as requiring a limit on economic growth.

One interviewee expressed the view that taking SD beyond policy integration to a set of overarching principles implies giving some precedence to environmental principles:

> At first I fell for the 'three-legged stool' (social, economic, environmental), but we shouldn't be ashamed to express this in terms of aiming for social and economic goals in a way which is environmentally sustainable so that the sustainability agenda is environment-driven. It's 'good stewardship' and also about relationships to each other and relates globally to reducing poverty.

However, it is important to realise that the principles advocated towards the top of Table 1 are not only environmental, but also, in the case of intergenerational equity, social in character.

Some advocates of SD are not comfortable with an approach that is less that prescriptive about the basic tenets of SD. The new Sustainable Development Forum for Wales, for instance, clearly sets out its understanding of SD and considers that this is non-negotiable:

> Sustainable development provides a framework for redefining progress and redirecting our economies to enable all people to meet their basic needs and improve their quality of life while ensuring that the natural systems, resources and diversity upon which we depend are maintained and enhanced for our benefit and for that of future generations.
> (Sustainable Development Commission, www.sd-commission.gov.uk/whatis.html)

Such a definition may provide a template against which SD practice can be judged. It can offer a basis on which initiatives across the board and in different guises can be tested. So, for instance, a particular approach might be judged to meet some of the principles, but not others. We suggest that, even if there were consensus on a clear definition of SD, it could not be translated into agreed prescriptions. In other words, the interpretation and the balance between the various principles contained in such a definition would still mean that the notion of SD should be considered as intrinsically contestable.

Finally, criticism is sometimes attracted and merited in areas that are paralysed by interminable debates about definitions. Although the forgoing discussion can appear at times to fall within this category, the researchers consider that SD will not prosper unless there are serious attempts made to clarify meanings.

Without being judgemental, the critical point is that the act of framing determines the manner in which SD is subsequently managed. Although consensus cannot be expected and, as one respondent concluded, 'you have to live with the ambiguity', clarity is particularly important in relation to operationalising the concept and translating it into different policy discourses. If you 'brush over the definition at the outset, then there is confusion at the implementation stage'.

Equating SD with an environmental agenda is likely to perpetuate a traditional approach to its governance. Regarding it in terms of policy integration is consistent with other cross-cutting approaches, but carries the danger of losing the specificity of the SD agenda. The view that the concept is one that comprises a set of overarching principles can involve stakeholders outside the SD fraternity, and also fits with an attempt to mainstream or integrate SD into all policy processes and stages.

3 Policy implementation: separation and integration

The second component of the governance framework centres on the implementation stage of the policy process. Having framed the problem, which approaches, strategies, mechanisms and frameworks do actors and organisations in Wales use to prosecute their interpretations of, and imperatives for, SD? How effective are these? What are the critical success factors? And what problems are associated with successful implementation? Figure 2 suggests that policy implementation generally flows along two separate, but not mutually exclusive, main tracks depending on how SD is interpreted.

Policy separation

The first track is the more familiar route of taking action within the parameters of individual policy streams. These are generally associated with the management of environmental issues where a coherent body of legislation, guidance and organisation is focused on making a difference in, for example, waste management, energy efficiency and biodiversity. Typically, this approach is managed vertically within specialist service departments, and key drivers for change relate to legislative mandate and the availability of

Figure 2 Policy implementation

Policy implementation

SEPARATION — INTEGRATION

Statutory duties

↕

Organisational design

↕

People and management

Integration frameworks
community strategy
Wales programme for improvement
procurement
spatial planning
scrutiny/well-being

Integration tools

DETERMINANTS OF EFFECTIVENESS
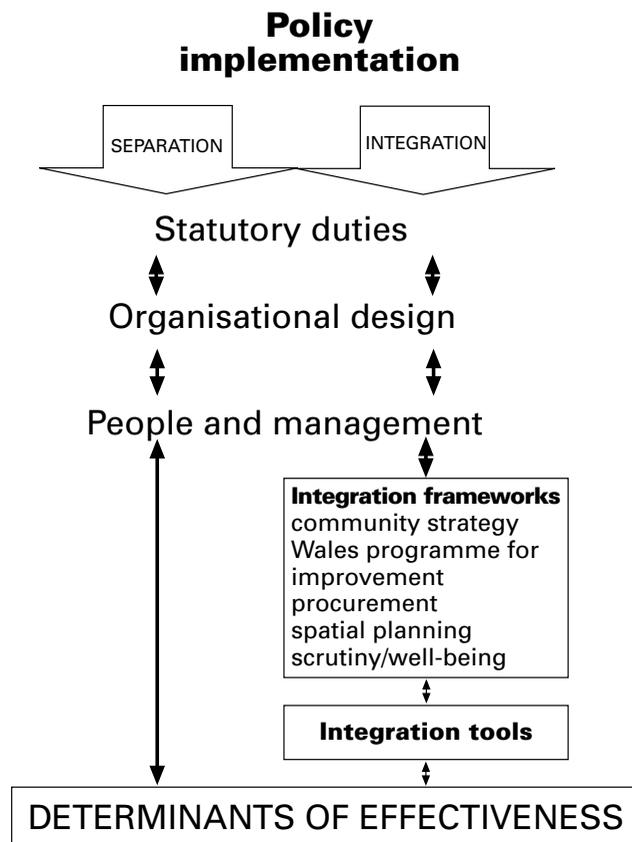
financial resources. Waste management was often cited as a prime example in Wales where finance has been able to effect real change. Professional specialists undertake policy development and implementation in these policy areas, and strategies for biodiversity, transport, waste management or energy refer tangentially to the importance of SD principles.

This approach also includes projects and policies that incorporate SD principles in any sector, not only those with obvious connections to environmental issues. For example, through the work of their dedicated SD practitioners, Welsh local authorities have developed a range of such projects around food, energy, schools, recycling and health (Netherwood, 2003). These projects are primarily environmental, small-scale and fragmented. Their instigation is essentially a product of opportunism and location. If an SD practitioner is employed within an environmental health department, it is likely that the projects will relate in some way to the functions of that particular department. Other projects may develop into cross-departmental initiatives or involve linkages between several organisations, but this often depends on alliances between like-minded and strategically located individuals. In the context of extremely limited, or, in some cases, non-existent budgets for SD, actions on the ground are dependent on creative bidding to programmes such as the New Opportunities Fund.

However, some projects may be justified as demonstration projects or 'exemplars'. This can work in two ways. Within a particular sector, a successful pilot project can demonstrate good practice. It may then be duplicated, modified as a result of learning from evaluating the original

and eventually used to build new policy for the whole sector. This is in line with thinking from Edwards and Hulme (1992) and Rondinelli (1993) on how development projects can be 'scaled up' or used as 'policy experiments'.

The other way is a general contribution to promoting a better understanding of SD solutions in practice, which may help to improve the public visibility of the issue and to make it less abstract. For example, making one of Wales' most prestigious rugby clubs carbon-neutral for one season was a project undertaken by a local authority SD practitioner, not with any expectation of it becoming a long-term policy beyond that season or of 'scaling up' to other rugby clubs, but to show what was possible, create opportunities for education and for political credit, and hence increase both organisational and public support for SD in the area.

WAG also refers to projects and programmes in particular areas that are both premised on and evidence of good SD practice. In rural affairs, for instance, projects embraced under this banner include Tir Gofal: an agri-environment scheme; Green Dragon Tourism Standard; Sustainable Development Fund: managed through the Countryside Commission for Wales; Farming for the Future Strategy; Woodland Strategy: managed by the Forestry Commission; and Farming Connect.

Some care needs to be taken in the interpretation of such lists, as creative packaging has often taken place to credit projects retrospectively with SD credentials when the reality is somewhat different. In the words of an ASPB (Assembly Sponsored Public Body) officer: 'civil servants are very good at repackaging'. However, this underlines an

important dilemma for SD in general in terms of, as one senior local authority director wondered: 'how can one legitimately badge what one does?'. Is it appropriate to refer to policy interventions and programmes in urban regeneration, social care, transport or other areas that have not been driven explicitly by SD thinking, but in fact do share certain principles, or is it only legitimate to acknowledge and refer to activities that have been guided by an SD discourse?

The single-track approach to SD has dominated thinking in this area for some time. However, the question now is whether this route is the most effective mechanism for embedding SD into all the parts of an organisation. The answer may be no, given the growing hegemony for advancing the cause of SD through integration approaches (Liberatore, 1997). It reflects a frustration by many that separated and fragmented policies are insufficient to achieve a systemic shift in the quality of life, and that mainstream policy development and implementation remain happily untouched by the imperatives of SD. According to one senior local government manager:

> The big debate is, are we talking about the cake or the icing? It can appear that SD is all about initiatives, external funding and so on, whereas what we are trying to affect is the essence of the cake. Although we need icing to help get people involved, if we don't affect the cake, we are just playing on the margins. The fundamental task is getting people to do it in their day to day jobs.

Hence, there is a recognition that another track needs to be laid to promote policy integration.

Policy integration

The second track has been a major preoccupation of this research study. WAG, local authorities and other organisations are looking to devise and implement policy integration strategies, as a means of promoting SD. The dimensions of integration that are prominent in this research are:

- *statutory*: which relates to the importance and effect of legislation and enforcement

- *organisational design*: including position, configuration and connectivity of the SD function

- *people and management*: including political and executive arrangements, and staffing capabilities and expertise

- *integration frameworks*: primarily community strategies, Wales Programme for Improvement, policy agreements, scrutiny, power of well-being, procurement and spatial planning

- *integration tools*: such as policy integration tools, impact assessment techniques and quality assurance.

In addition to these considerations, a number of common themes emerge that either contribute to or hinder effective implementation. These include the role of political and executive leadership, the effectiveness of training, awareness and communication strategies, and the problems of managing an integrated policy process linking formulation to implementation.

A statutory duty

The importance of a statutory duty on a public body cannot be underestimated. It gives government bodies specific direction, purpose and legitimacy in a specified activity, and crucially provides the framework through which it is ultimately held to public, legal and democratic account. Resource allocation processes and priorities tend to be driven by statutory responsibilities. Core budgets are invariably assembled, initially, on the basis of the resources calculated to be necessary to deliver statutory responsibilities. A major reason why LA21 strategies were often ineffective was that their preparation was not a statutory duty. In relation to another policy agenda, one local government director reinforced the importance of a statutory duty:

> *Having a duty placed on local government by the Crime and Disorder Act, and linking this with targets and funding streams, I have no doubt makes all the difference.*

Hence, it is potentially highly significant that Section 121 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 places a statutory duty on the NAfW to:

- consult on, make and then publish a Scheme stating how the Assembly proposes to promote sustainable development in the exercise of its functions

- report annually on what has been done to implement its proposals

- report after each Assembly election on the effectiveness of the Scheme

- make and publish a revised or remade Scheme.

The effect of this duty in practice is more difficult to judge. Most interviewees contacted emphasise its importance:

> *It establishes a clear mandate to intervene in the public and private sectors and is not diluted as elsewhere.*

> *It is a very important driver.*

> *Legislative impact is vital.*

> *It is fundamentally important to have specific responsibilities within the legislation to call the Assembly to account – they have no choice but are obliged to do it.*

> *Ministers and leaders have been quoted as saying the duty is the main reason they have engaged in SD.*

However, one WAG official considered that, irrespective of the duty, Wales was at the cusp of a commitment to SD, so that progress would have been made in any case. Alternatively: 'having a duty is fine, but it's what you do with it that really counts'. The strength of the duty lies not only in its application to the NAfW, but also in its relationship to, and effect on, other organisations and tiers of government. The Assembly's duty legitimates it in raising the profile of SD with both ASPBs and local government, which SD advocates in local and national government who were interviewed argue is necessary to counter political and executive indifference.

Should a similar statutory duty be placed on ASPBs, or more appropriately on local government? Currently, local authorities are statutorily obliged to prepare community strategies that 'contribute to SD in the UK'. In addition, they have a general power of well-

being allowing them to engage in activities previously prohibited to them. Thus, local authorities have the duty and power to engage in SD agendas, but the duty is more diluted than the one placed on the NAfW, and consequently its force is less apparent. However, a specific statutory duty for SD might not be welcomed. A senior local authority official suggested that:

> The effect would be simply to create a new industry, and local authorities would just play minimally to the guidance. Also, to be effective, it would need to be supported by a system of incentives and sanctions, and driven by cash.

Organisational design

The responsibility for SD is reflected in the political and executive structures of organisations in a number of ways. At a political level, the NAfW has given considerable prominence to this matter through the establishment of a cross-party sub-committee, and an Assembly Co-ordinating Group on Sustainable Development draws together the chairs of the subject committees and the spokespeople for each of the political parties. The office of the First Minister aims to convey the political importance of SD; the cross-party representation demonstrates consensus across the political divide; and the involvement of a number of cabinet ministers endeavours to promote the agenda across the policy spectrum. The SD portfolio resides with the Minister for Environment, Planning and Countryside. Interestingly, however, since the last Assembly election, the First Minister no longer chairs the sub-committee. One representative from an

NGO in Wales was sceptical about what was seen as 'a cosy, political cross-party consensus'. What was needed was more constructive conflict to challenge complacency and conventional approaches, leading to more radical thinking and action.

The situation at a local government level is more ambiguous. SD matters are generally subsumed within the portfolio of a cabinet member in whose departmental functions SD happens to be located – typically environment, planning, highways or environmental health departments. Consequently, SD is not dealt with in an integrated fashion across the authority, but through the ad hoc functional plans and programmes of service departments. Perversely, the changes in the political management arrangements of local authorities may have harmed rather than helped the cause of SD by reducing its profile previously maintained through dedicated sub-committees. The pattern of reporting in other organisations such as many ASPBs and the WLGA is similar.

However, not all organisations are like this. Several are innovating with their political structures in an effort to cope with the burgeoning number of cross-cutting issues. In one local authority interviewed:

> The approach taken has been to allocate points of political and managerial focus in order to promote the mainstreaming of SD across all policy areas. These points are senior positions who have the ability to influence policy development and set up project groups as needed.

At an executive level, SD is recognised as a function that needs to be addressed by most organisations. However, the organisational units created range from only one person to just five

or six. The larger units include staff engaged in specific demonstration projects or managing a particular service such as energy efficiency. However, the main argument used to justify such a small capability is that the central aim of the units is, not to deliver services themselves, but to influence, support, encourage and provide a source of expertise to the wider organisation.

What is the ideal size of a dedicated SD capability? One view expressed by a corporate planning manager is that 'the less people involved in running it – the more we can get it mainstreamed'. The reverse is that the agenda is so immense; it needs to be properly resourced. Probably, the level of effectiveness relates to what duties they have been allocated and how they undertake them, and not to numbers of staff as such.

Should the SD capability be in a service department or at the corporate centre? Either position has its advantages and disadvantages. The usual model is for SD to be located in a service department, typically responsible for environmental functions such as planning, environmental health and the natural environment, reflecting the environmental inheritance and the legacy of LA21. The advantage of such a location is connection with real improvements, projects and programmes on the ground. The success of many SD practitioners is evidenced in their ability to stimulate change and action primarily within their own department's span of responsibilities.

However, a location in a service department makes it difficult to influence other departments in any meaningful fashion. It does not 'send a powerful message' and encourages the perception of SD in terms of the responsibility

and roles of the host department – usually environmental. SD officers, in particular, argue that this makes it difficult to 'get buy-in and recognition from other departments'.

A common view is that 'SD should be positioned at the heart of an organisation' to achieve effective policy integration. Such a location is assumed to signal to the rest of the organisation that SD is a corporate issue; that it has the backing of the chief executive and political leadership; that it can be plugged effectively into the organisation's corporate machinery; and that the power of the chief executive's office can be deployed to encourage the less than enthusiastic parts of the organisation to follow a corporate line. The following two quotations are typical of this position:

It is easier to lever action if you are in a central role.

You have a better chance of being effective if you are close to the cabinet and powerbrokers.

The SD unit at the Assembly has made the move from the Environment Division into the Strategic Policy Unit at the core of the organisation. It has deliberately lost the badging of SD in the process, in an effort to signal that the agenda is essentially around integrated policy making and change management. In a similar kind of move, and as a result of a service review under Wales Programme for Improvement (WPI), the SD unit of one local authority is being relocated to the corporate planning section of the Chief Executive's Department.

This approach has considerable merit in the context of strategies that are geared to

cross-cutting policies and integrating SD into the whole of an organisation. Additionally, they can sit alongside frameworks that offer a means of penetrating all parts of the organisation such as community strategies and WPI in local government.

However, many practitioners and service managers who were interviewed disagree. Organisational centres are often concerned primarily with the formative stages of setting policy direction and strategy, and of determining performance management frameworks. They are not responsible for service delivery – a function and power that is distributed among a number of service departments. The critical issue relates to the effectiveness of top-down models of policy making, the separation of policy formulation from service delivery, and the ability of corporate planning units to influence service managers and practitioners. Experience suggests that there are considerable tensions at this interface, which need careful management. Two comments from local authority interviewees on this subject are:

> *A top-down approach where the corporate policy section writes the plans, and service departments are expected to implement them, is not the way forward.*

> *More and more stuff is seen as corporate, and there is a danger that the unit is seen as an ivory tower, remote from services, an overhead on services, and always asking for additional work.*

Top-down directives often meet front-line resistance, whereas strategies that treat delivery agents as equal partners are more likely to be effective. The Assembly's approach to

integration is grounded in this latter model, seeking to effect change through consensus and win 'hearts and minds'. However, the point at which mechanisms of compliance are considered to be necessary and invoked is a matter of careful judgement.

Inevitably, there is a third way. Several local authorities are reacting to the need to integrate service functions with cross-cutting issues by innovating with matrix structures or other forms of flexible organisation. For example, one utilises a system of strategic directors to lead on cross-cutting themes not traditionally embraced by their professional areas of expertise.

In such a case, it may not matter where the SD function is located, as long as it is well supported there. In the words of an Assembly officer; 'you can be whatever you want to be, it doesn't matter where you sit, it's how you work'. The real test is how effectively the function is wired into the corporate management arrangements. In practice, this can be equally effective at the centre or at service level, and may be determined by other factors such as the competency of the people charged with leading on that agenda and their influencing strategies laterally across hierarchical structures.

People and management

Organisational configuration and structure are contributors to the effectiveness of the planning and delivery of services. However, individual actors have an important role in shaping outcomes and in determining organisational effectiveness. SD is managed by a diverse community of individuals from different backgrounds, with different areas and degrees

of expertise, and operating from different levels within the organisational hierarchy. However, in local government, a strong environmental legacy influences the people who now occupy SD roles, many previously being environmental co-ordinators. This group of practitioners is perceived as champions and advocates of environmental interests. In addition, the position of these individuals fails to rise above middle management, with many occupying more junior positions.

Given that the majority of the organisations concerned are organised along traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical lines, managing vertically can be a barrier. Direct representation is not always possible in top-level internal or corporate arenas and SD officers often have to rely on their line managers. Power over resources (finance, staff, prestige and status) is sedimented into the different levels of the hierarchy and SD officers can be marginalised in many organisations.

However, the power of SD officers is more potently expressed through 'meaning' and their ability to influence others – in terms of support, advice, understanding and general promotion of the merits of an SD agenda. This lies at the root of any strategy that is intent on mainstreaming and integration. This influence can be steered through corporate management arrangements established to promote interdepartmental working, as is the case in some local authorities, but the skills and competencies of individuals are also crucial for making connections within a wider organisation.

The competency base required is not just a discrete area of expertise or knowledge, although this is a factor. It is more to do with an ability to work as a 'boundary spanner' (Williams, 2002) to influence and connect with disparate but interconnected parts of a multi-functional organisation. It requires effective interpersonal skills; an ability to manage in different modes of governance (hierarchical and network forms); an appreciation of complexity; and a propensity to innovate and be entrepreneurial.

SD practitioners at local and national government level are associated with programmes and projects that evidence these skills and competencies. The importance of the 'right people being in the right places at the right time' is a significant factor. Nevertheless, a coherent programme of training and development in cross-boundary forms of working is likely to be a good investment for the future.

SD officers in local government have organised into an all-Wales network – the SDCC (Sustainable Development Co-ordinators Cymru). Some of its members aspire to professional accreditation, with the attendant benefits of identity, status and control over membership. A contrary viewpoint apparent outside this network suggests that 'the last thing SD needs is a profession'. There are already enough professions in the public sector, and professionalism is often a significant barrier to working effectively across and between organisational agendas. The critical challenge that this approach faces is how to mainstream the boundary-spanning skills and competencies required to pursue an SD agenda into the skill sets of all professionals and managers.

Does having a dedicated set of practitioners for SD help or hinder the promotion of the agenda? Probably the answer lies somewhere

between. One critical challenge is to mainstream SD competencies and awareness into the skill sets of all professionals and managers. But, even if this succeeds, there will remain a role for a small cadre of dedicated practitioners to provide constant support, advice and monitoring to ensure that the agenda does not get submerged or diluted by the pressures of organisational life and competing management initiatives. The importance of identity and badging cannot be underestimated in keeping SD at the forefront of the minds of people and organisations.

Integration frameworks

Throughout our interviews and interrogation of strategic documents, we found a strategy of policy integration increasingly viewed as the best way of embedding SD into the whole of an organisation's business. The argument is that an SD discourse is equally relevant in all policy sectors, although it may be manifested in different forms and to differing degrees. The challenge is either to construct an integration strategy around SD, as is implied by WAG's approach, or to identify suitable hooks on which to hang SD.

The Assembly's approach differs from other organisations primarily because the duty requires it to place SD at the heart of its policy and decision-making processes, and to devise a Scheme and associated Action Plan setting out how it intends to do this. It is to its credit that policy integration is seen as the primary route for embedding SD in its organisation. However, interviewees from the WLGA, an NGO and ASPB argue that it is contradictory to have a Sustainable Development Scheme separate from

the Corporate Plan (Wales: A Better Country), and there should be one integrated document.

The evidence from the local authorities that were examined suggests that the prevailing approach in local government is opportunistic, based on the latter model of attempting to use existing frameworks, regimes or mechanisms requiring whole-authority action. Some SD practitioners interpret this as 'getting SD through the back door', but others confess to a more pragmatic view of taking advantage of opportunities when they arise. The two main integration opportunities are community strategies and WPI, and other possible routes include procurement, scrutiny and spatial planning. They are not mutually exclusive and combinations of some, or all, of these mechanisms are likely to make a significant impact on SD outcomes.

Community strategies

The statutory obligation on local authorities to prepare community strategies clearly embraces SD. They are strategies that involve both the spectrum of local authority activities and those of other public, private and voluntary sector bodies acting locally. Some of the principles espoused in the government advice on the preparation of community strategies (National Assembly for Wales, 2001) resonate with those of SD including working in partnership, engaging with local citizens and communities, and linking social, economic and environmental considerations within a single framework. In addition, community strategies involve defining community visions for the future and considering slightly longer time frames than is generally the custom – 10 to 15 years. Although this is certainly a move in the right direction, it

falls considerably short of the intergenerational time frames prescribed by some versions of SD.

Most community strategies were still in an emergent phase of development in 2003, although there was an expectation by WAG that draft strategies would be available by mid-2004. The focus has been on the creation of structures and mechanisms, particularly local strategic partnerships, through which the process will subsequently be managed.

The lead on the preparation of the strategies is generally with the chief executive and corporate policy department. In some cases, SD practitioners are not able to gain easy access to the decision-making structures. In others, they are viewed as contributors to an environmental agenda and bracketed with activities relating to the physical environment.

Many approaches to community strategies create a framework with a matrix of four or five policy areas arranged vertically and a number of cross-cutting themes arranged horizontally. While there is a degree of internal logic in this arrangement, it is complicated in practice by a proliferation of cross-cutting themes and can be criticised for treating SD as just another cross-cutting theme as opposed to being an overarching framework. The problems of converting the rhetoric of SD into terms that can be operationalised are very apparent in the draft strategies interrogated.

In two cases studied, we found evidence of attempts to establish a framework for involving people and communities in the community strategy process. Whether the ambition of connecting with 'hard to reach' groups is being achieved is less convincing. Also, the real test of whether community participation makes a difference to the priority setting and resource allocation process of the conventional local authority machine is yet to come.

The NAfW and the Audit Commission in Wales (ACiW) have important roles to play both in supporting and guiding local authorities in their preparation of community strategies, and in holding them to account. Unlike the prescriptive approach adopted in relation to Best Value, a more permissive regime is apparent in relation to community strategies, which makes it somewhat more difficult to audit. Additionally, in relation to SD, there is little consensus on its meaning. The approach adopted so far is to stocktake in the case of the Assembly and to apply a 'diagnostic' in the case of the Audit Commission in Wales (2001). Currently, the diagnostic relates to the formative stages of the community strategy process, with little attention being given to how authorities intend to demonstrate a 'contribution to SD in the UK'.

Performance management: Wales Programme for Improvement
The Local Government Act 1999 introduced a performance management framework for UK local government known as Best Value. For many reasons this regime became discredited and was replaced in Wales by the Wales Programme for Improvement (WPI). Its importance cannot be overstated as it is recognised, by many SD practitioners in particular, as a huge opportunity for determining the health of SD within individual local authorities and for devising improvement strategies that can be integrated into all sections of the organisation.

However, the guidance (National Assembly for Wales, 2002) from WAG is not

overprescriptive, containing scant reference to SD. In relation to the Whole Authority Analysis, a checklist of suggested aspects to take into account include 'the arrangements for making sustainability and equality of opportunity integral to its work'. On the latter, the Generic Equality Standard is referred to as a possible basis for authorities to assess their position. No similar advice is forthcoming on SD. Sustainability is also identified, along with 19 other factors, as a potential area of risk, i.e. 'failure to take account of sustainability means short-term benefits have longer-term disadvantages'. This can be viewed as a narrow interpretation of SD. The onus is very much on individual local authorities to consider how they should take account of SD in their reviews.

In practice, the first round of the process has achieved mixed results for SD. In one authority, the SD function is highlighted as high risk – not because it has failed to be effective in a number of areas, but because of its inability to influence the wider corporate organisation. This example was noted above because the Improvement Plan proposals include a repositioning of the SD function from a service department to the chief executive's department, and the introduction of a continuous programme of training and awareness for elected members and key officers. This is a very good example of how WPI can enhance the promotion and effectiveness of SD.

Elsewhere, particularly among SD practitioners, there is concern about how effectively the obligation to take account of 'sustainability', as it is referred to in the guidance, is pursued. Also, a view expressed by a WPI manager is that particular cross-cutting themes are more relevant to some services than others. However, while, with limited resources,

it may be most effective to target certain services before others, we would argue that SD principles are applicable to all services.

A major problem concerns 'how sophisticated the understanding is of SD by the people who administer the process'. All service departments need good enough advice and support to incorporate this perspective into their review process. In one authority, a guidance note (in checklist form) was circulated to all departments. In another, the SD officer was identified as a source of expertise. In the opinion of one service manager:

> It was a major achievement getting acknowledgement that SD needs to be part of the Best Value process, and there is always much more to be done in terms of training, guidance, support and whether systems of checks and other forms of compliance should be considered.

However, lack of information and guidance leads to situations such as in one planning department review:

> We only looked at SD in terms of our own housekeeping – paper recycling – not whether it was reflected in our own services.

Herein lies the dilemma of a framework that is based on self-assessment. Throughout Wales, SD is not generally identified as a risk factor – a situation that appears to us not to be credible. There is a role for all-Wales bodies such as the ACiW, WAG and others to challenge this situation. Indeed, this is the conclusion reached by the ACiW, resulting in a mandatory review of SD. There is enormous potential in this performance management framework for mainstreaming SD through cross-cutting reviews and associated action plans. A local

authority director remarked that it is 'a potentially tough route if audited rigorously', and offers a holistic structure within which key interdependencies and connections can be enhanced.

Procurement, scrutiny and spatial planning
Arguably, although community strategies and WPI potentially offer the most significant integration opportunities for SD, there are a number of other very important mechanisms that are beginning to be recognised including procurement, scrutiny and spatial planning. At both national and local government levels, the leverage that public procurement policies can induce in relation to a number of public policy objectives is enormous. Value for money, equal opportunities, economic regeneration and SD are perspectives that can be embraced through collaborative public procurement policies and programmes. The purchasing power of both individual organisations and their collectives can be used to direct and influence suppliers and producers.

Following a major review of public procurement in Wales (National Assembly for Wales, 2000b), WAG has been instrumental in setting up the Welsh Procurement Initiative. This is implementing the recommendations of the review through several mechanisms including Pathfinder Projects, and the role of procurement in achieving SD is currently one focus of a selection of these. Also, a number of local authorities and other organisations interviewed are taking steps to reflect aspects of SD in their procurement strategies.

The Local Government Modernisation Programme introduced a new set of political management arrangements in Wales. In particular, the cabinet model replaced the old committee system of government. Along with this new structure, a new role of scrutiny was included as a means of holding the executive to account on policy content, direction and delivery. Although scrutiny offers a major opportunity for examining the effectiveness with which local authorities manage and address SD, we found no evidence of where, apart from individual services, the scrutiny role had been directed to SD. Likewise, the new power of social, economic and environmental well-being has not been invoked to legitimise or facilitate activities around the SD agenda.

The potential of spatial planning to contribute to SD policies and outcomes is increasingly acknowledged. The statutory planning system and the production of unitary and other development plans have far-reaching consequences for SD. Importantly, there is a requirement for all local authority Unitary Development Plans to be the subject of a sustainability appraisal, and a good practice guide from WAG sets out how this can best be undertaken (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002a).

Currently, the form of sustainability appraisal is a product of local determination rather than central prescription. The extent to which the process is embraced has implications for both staffing and time. In one local authority examined, the appraisal process was perceived to be worthwhile in that some policy changes were made as a result, although the major problem identified was that the exercise was bolted on to the process at the end and sustainability was not built into policies at the formative stages of the process. The role of the planning system in shaping and delivering SD

solutions is emphasised by Welsh Assembly Government (2003a) in its draft *Wales Spatial Plan: People-Places-Futures*. Critically:

> The plan complements and helps to translate into practice our SD duty. For the first time, this draft describes the Welsh Assembly Government's SD aspirations for different parts of Wales and proposes actions, at the national level, necessary to achieve them. We also suggest, at an area level, perspectives for SD.
> (Welsh Assembly Government, 2003a, p. 5)

The Plan's focus points directly at the heart of the spatial implications of SD in Wales and the realisation of its objectives would represent a huge boost for SD.

Integration tools

A range of appraisal tools designed to measure impact and promote compliance can assist strategies that aim to integrate SD principles into the constituent parts and policy areas of organisations.

Quality assurance

One route pursued by a number of organisations to embed particular cross-cutting themes into their core business activities is quality assurance. The increasing profile of the environmental agenda has prompted a number of local authorities and other organisations to develop Environmental Management and Audit Schemes (EMAS) to manage the impact their activities have on energy efficiency, waste management, transport, biodiversity, and other elements of the environment.

The schemes involve the development of a rigorous and comprehensive programme of systems, policies and procedures coupled with regular and independent external verification and auditing. Training and reporting are key elements of such systems, and public confidence is enhanced by their relationship to British or European Quality Standards Bodies. The potential of extending EMAS to encompass the wider notion of SD is being explored in one local authority examined.

Impact assessment

Another tradition, which has gained in prominence in a number of areas, is impact assessment. There are many different forms and examples of this tool. In the field of equalities, for instance, gender proofing and gender impact assessment are increasingly seen as important (Crawley and O'Meara, 2002; Equal Opportunities Commission, 2003a, 2003b), with training in the use of such techniques especially valued (Fitzgerald, 1999). Another policy area in which impact assessment is highly rated is health (Welsh Assembly Government, 2003b).

In relation to SD, the inheritance of the environmental agenda can be detected in the use of different types of checklists of varying degrees of sophistication. Typically, sustainability appraisal tools involve a matrix of ticked boxes where development options or proposals are assessed against a short or long list of objectives. Various scales are deployed to assess likely impacts. Such techniques are not without their critics. Ravetz (2000) claims that 'sustainability appraisal is both impossible and essential', and others conclude that many integrated appraisals project the impression of being objective and technical, but are in fact highly subjective in character.

Numerous operational and methodological issues are involved including:

- difficulties in defining terms such as SD

- the weighting given to individual objectives

- the difficulty of obtaining data

- problems of understanding complexity – 'many balance sheet and matrix methods, and many indicators for urban sustainability, seek simple summaries of complex changes' (Ravetz, 2000, p. 34)

- the emphasis given to what is tangible and measurable as opposed to reflecting contraction, indeterminacy and subjectivity

- problems of timescale and assessing impacts/outcomes over different timescales

- value judgements of appraisers and perspective multiplicity

- boundary assumptions.

Integrated impact assessment

The Strategic Policy Unit of the NAfW has commissioned Forum for the Future to develop an integration tool 'for use in developing policies and in evaluating projects and policies during development and delivery'. The tool was originally badged under the title of SD, but subsequently appeared as a policy integration tool – the message being that SD and policy integration are the same thing. This approach attracts criticism from some quarters because it is premised on the view expressed by an NGO representative that:

SD will frighten the horses, so by calling it 'policy integration' it gets in through the back door.

The tool is planned as the primary mechanism for integrating SD into all the Assembly's divisions and activities. Also, there are aspirations by Assembly officers that it can be rolled out to ASPBs and local government. Evaluation is premature, as the tool has only recently been operationalised and is currently the subject of various pilots. However, a number of observations surfaced from various interviewees.

First, in line with the Strategic Policy Unit's general approach to integration, both the development of the tool and its subsequent use have been based on collaboration and encouragement, as opposed to prescription and compliance. Interdivisional workshops helped develop and promote the tool, with piloting directed at sympathetic users at divisional level, e.g. economic development, ICT (information and communications technology). The point at which this permissive approach turns to one of compulsion is yet to be determined, but the ambition of the Strategic Policy Unit must be to make this approach non-negotiable at some point. This is reputedly the case in one ASPB interviewed, where it is mandatory for all projects and programmes to be accompanied by a clear statement of their relationship to SD guidelines. We wonder if the alacrity with which appraisers undertake appraisal is influenced by whether the approach is permissive or mandatory.

Second, the policy integration tool is intended to embrace not only the Assembly's guiding principle of SD, but also its other two principles of social inclusion and equal

opportunities. The tool is quite sophisticated and comprehensive; it attempts to include all possible considerations or impacts under a single umbrella framework, and is capable of both prospective and retrospective use. Its disadvantages are implicit in its comprehensiveness and complexity, and the time taken to undertake the exercise. It requires a range of specialists to be most effective, and the view of many service managers and practitioners, not only in the Assembly, is that this kind of appraisal is an added burden on an already heavy workload. One service specialist in WAG suggested that, given the huge task of combining integrated appraisal within one framework, it may be more manageable to undertake environmental, economic and social appraisals separately, and then to combine them at the decision-making stage.

A systemic criticism of the integration tool is that its use is currently confined to experts and practitioners, and ways need to be found to include politicians and other stakeholders in the process of deliberation. Finally, the integration tool is essentially about integrated government and may not automatically lead to SD.

Barriers and issues in policy integration

A number of barriers to, and issues in, implementing SD through policy integration were raised by a number of interviewees including the following.

- Problems associated with the notion of SD including a view that it is too impractical and idealistic; viewing it as a function rather than a set of principles; countering images that perceive SD 'as

somebody's else's responsibility'; and the difficulties associated with operationalising the concept for different audiences.

- Tackling a widespread view that: 'I am already struggling to do the day job, and SD just means more work for me and costs more'.

- Overcoming barriers associated with professionalism, 'turf' consciousness and entrenched ways of working.

- Addressing problems of increased complexity caused by unified and integrated ways of working.

- Coping with the task of prioritisation within a very large agenda and not trying to move across too wide a front.

- Ensuring that there is both visible and practical high-level commitment in organisations in both political and executive communities.

- Managing the tensions between bottom-up and top-down perspectives, including balancing systems of compliance with empowerment and devising strategies to cope with service-level indifference to top-down imperatives.

- Raising the capacity for organisational learning through capacity-building programmes and targeted process-oriented and content-based training.

- Identifying strategically placed 'institutional catalysts' to ensure that policy integration is embedded in system-wide behaviours.

- Managing the problem of fragmented accountability, and divided and unclear responsibilities within integrated forms of working.

- Recognising that integration and mainstreaming strategies are not cost-neutral but require dedicated resources to introduce and maintain.

- Ensuring that a 'hearts and minds' component to SD is not lost in the process of mainstreaming.

- Allowing enough time for policy integration strategies to work.

A number of these issues are treated in more detail in the following discussion.

Political and executive leadership

There is a considerable body of literature stressing the importance of top-level commitment and leadership in effective change management. In the case of WAG, there is visible political leadership surrounding the management of SD. The First Minister and a number of his cabinet ministers appear to be engaged – a view that is echoed by the CAG report (2003):

> *There is a high level of ministerial commitment to the Assembly's duty to promote SD. Co-ordination mechanisms sit at the heart of the political and administrative structure of the Assembly.*
> (CAG Consultants, 2003)

In some ways, the reputation of Wales as an exemplar of good practice on SD has been put on the line in both European and global arenas. WAG is bravely taking a lead on the international stage. Of course, while this is highly commendable, this strategy is not without its risks. Can practices in Wales actually live up to these expectations? One concern expressed, not unsurprisingly from local government quarters, is that the WAG's focus at European and international levels is misdirected. Rather, the priority should be on delivering SD solutions within the country. However, notwithstanding these reservations, there is a degree of visible and cross-party political leadership at a national level.

The situation in local government is more ambiguous and it is hard to identify high-level political or executive champions within Welsh local authorities. SD does not figure highly in the strategic-planning processes of local authorities and efforts at integration are problematic.

One of the many reasons for this absence of local leadership is lack of understanding. A programme of training and development directed at chief executives, senior officers and politicians across the public sector in general, as proposed by the Sustainable Development Forum, should make a difference in the future. The trick will be to connect the relevance of SD to the contemporary challenges that chief executives consider important.

Elsewhere in Wales, evidence of high-level leadership can be detected in a number of the ASPBs, and in certain NGOs such as Oxfam and WWF-Cymru. Of course, leadership is necessary not only at a senior level and it is important to differentiate between leaders, who are people, and leadership, which consists of a series of functions and tasks that can be distributed among a number of people. The role of institutional catalysts or champions is important in this respect and they are often found in the most unlikely places in organisations.

Communication and training

The section on policy framing earlier in this report highlights the conceptual diversity bedevilling the notion of SD. This conclusion relates to the people who are already engaged with the agenda in some way. However, the reality for a large body of politicians, practitioners, professionals and managers is that perceptions of SD are at best cursory and often purely environmental in nature. The expressed challenge for most organisations is as follows.

1   How to raise the level of awareness and understanding of SD?

2   How to devise effective training programmes and staff development opportunities?

3   How to choose the most effective communication mechanisms to broadcast SD messages and encourage meaningful engagement?

4   Whether, and how, to cultivate and support small pockets of sympathisers throughout the organisation?

WAG has taken a relaxed approach to the issue of general awareness and, as yet, there has not been a heavy investment in staff training. Seminars and workshops have been organised over the course of its first administration and participation has been optional. Some local authorities have attempted a more coherent programme of general staff training but report that this approach often lacks content and relevance to the diverse realities of service managers and practitioners. SD is fine in principle but how can I apply it in my job? The inclusion of SD within induction or one-off events is not the best way of achieving change.

Awareness training needs to be: related to the different responsibilities and duties of people in different parts of an organisation; translated into different discourses; and constantly reinforced and updated. Training materials and methods are relatively underdeveloped with the exception of some innovations using computer-aided learning and training packs. Currently, this area is a particularly fertile market for consultants.

However, messages about SD are difficult to communicate. The general practice is that staff are encouraged to alter their housekeeping behaviours in relation to recycling paper, not printing e-mails, switching off computers and lights, and sharing transport to and from work – commendable in their own right, but further consolidating the green view of SD. The most effective training and development has to be undertaken in the context of particular managerial responsibilities such as community strategies or WPI, and it has to be related to particular sectors and professional tasks. The bottom line is that this requires a significant release of financial resources to facilitate individual and organisational learning. Sadly, this is not evident in our research.

Given the enormity of the task of engaging with large and highly differentiated organisations, one strategy is to identify and support 'champions' or institutional catalysts throughout all levels of the organisation. However, the effectiveness with which a particular message is embraced can depend on whether the messenger is formally or self-appointed. Bottom-up approaches to integration are contingent on the active role and

engagement of local champions. One local authority surveyed is attempting to encourage and disseminate examples of good practice through a network of key champions. However, the level of resources demanded to support effectively a network of service-based champions is identified as an inhibiting factor.

Integrating the policy process

There is copious evidence in the local and national government strategies we interrogated of the need to take SD into account. Vision and purpose statements, guiding principles and values, invariably contain a reference to SD in one form or another. However, a frustration articulated throughout our research concerned an apparent inability to translate the best intentions of strategy makers into policy and service implementation. The accusation is that the commitment is no more than rhetoric and that policy commitments often evaporate (Longwe, 1995). This phenomenon is endemic in current approaches to public sector strategic management. We consider that, unless new and alternative paradigms are developed, there will be little progress on SD.

The problem lies in the dominance of the rational-comprehensive model of strategic planning, with its inherent fallacies of over-formalisation, separation and predetermination (Mintzberg, 1994). The issue of separation concerns the detachment of the strategy formulation stage from the strategy implementation phase, involving a different set of stakeholders at each. Many strategies place their effort at the front end of the process at the expense of a viable implementation structure that sets out how strategies will be delivered, where the resources will come from, who will undertake the action and when this will happen.

In addition to the methods employed to design strategies, there is an increasing recognition that a proliferation of plans and strategies at both national and local levels is unproductive and confusing. It leads to duplication, lack of co-ordination and an inefficient use of resources. Certainly, the moves at local government level to rationalise the system of statutory plans and strategies are very welcome. This will provide a better focus for SD advocates, in contrast with the present arrangements that present difficulties for determining where best to target limited resources.

4   Policy evaluation: assessing progress

The third element of the framework used to analyse the approach to governance of SD is policy evaluation. Evaluation is very much the cinderella of the policy process, not accorded the same importance as policy formulation and implementation, and invariably considered as an afterthought. The 'seven enemies of evidence-based policy' (Nutley and Webb, 2000, p. 36) go some way to explaining this situation. However, New Labour's 1997 election slogan of 'what counts is what works' has catapulted evaluation and evidence-based policy making and practice up the public policy agenda.

The prevailing paradigm firmly places performance management at the centre of all decision-making processes. A performance culture is increasingly seen as one of the fundamental pillars of modern public policy making, and evidence-based policy making, outcome-focused decision making and accountability are the hallmarks of this new model. The consequence of this approach has been an explosion of mechanisms and structures dedicated to performance management and forms of policy evaluation.

Of course, there is some disaffection with the emphasis on the performance culture, and particularly its manifestation in terms of performance indicators. Some argue that it has become an obsession that, in reality, fails to measure the right things, or has the perverse or unintended effect of skewing priorities and resource allocation. However, it is unlikely that many will argue against the need to find ways of assessing performance – the debate centres more on the means by which this is best achieved.

The renewed interest in evaluation and evidence-based policy making and practice is also expressed in a greater propensity for experimentation by government, as is witnessed by action zones in various policy areas, and pilot schemes and initiatives in others. There has been a growth in the number and influence of 'think tanks' and government appears more willing to include 'experts' from outside government to contribute to public policy making. Whether the role of research is taken more seriously is less convincing. Certainly, the conclusions reached by Percy-Smith (2002) in relation to local government make depressing reading.

Problems in evaluation

Evaluation in public policy is a highly contested area for a number of reasons. There are methodological and conceptual disagreements among academics on how it should be undertaken. Is it about value for money? Is it concerned with outputs and outcomes? What counts as good evidence – quantitative or qualitative measures? Should concerns be focused on the process? And how appropriate is it to involve service users and multiple stakeholders in the process? In addition, there are often reservations about the problem of costs and co-ordination of evaluation studies; timescale is an issue because politicians and policy makers want immediate results; and, finally, there is always the danger that studies might arrive at results that are unpalatable for politicians.

The problems of evaluation in SD are compounded by other factors including the following.

- There are many different ways of conceiving SD and the concept is difficult to operationalise.

- Goals are multiple and conflicting.

- It is a very large agenda covering a wide spectrum of policy areas.

- It is a complex and interdependent agenda that makes causal attribution a hazardous occupation.

- It is difficult to establish criteria and standards to measure performance.

SD evaluation in Wales is dominated by the use of indicator-based frameworks – either freestanding or related to performance management regimes. The Assembly has adopted a small suite of headline indicators (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002b) that attempt to capture the essence of SD. Nine of the 12 indicators chosen are similar to those used at a UK level and one relates to the notion of an ecological footprint. While the framework is not immune from criticism in terms of the choice and number of indicators and the overly quantitative nature of the data set, it represents one way of measuring national performance. WAG recognises that this may not be the finished article, and further developments and consultations are expected to improve the framework in the future.

However, the overall value of this methodology is open to question. In particular it:

- is difficult to make clear connections between policy, practice and performance

- is not based on any theoretical stance of causal connections

- fails to represent the trade-offs that are inherent in SD decision making

- is an overly simplistic representation of reality at one point in time, with little explanatory value.

Similar indicator frameworks are present at a local authority level. However, there are differences of approach between authorities, and there is an issue as to whether there is merit in encouraging compatibility between frameworks at a local and national level. The situation is further complicated at a local level by the existence of a number of different statutory performance management frameworks including National Assembly Performance Indicators and WPI Indicators. Overall, the system of regulation and performance management is a source of some considerable confusion, duplication and inefficiency. In many instances it is not clear why and for whom, information is being collected, and whether or not it informs policy, practice and resource planning in any meaningful way.

The system of policy agreements between local authorities and WAG is a useful instrument for encouraging links between the local delivery of services and national objectives. As one local authority manager put it: 'it is a demonstration of the shared ground between national and local government'. In exchange for agreed local performance against

prescribed indicators and targets, national government offers certain financial flexibilities to local government. Linking performance to finance is a powerful tool and, as one local authority director reported:

> *You cannot ignore the fact that things get done when resources are made available.*

Although not bannered under SD, many, if not all, the performance measures relate to this agenda including education, transport, social care and waste. Many SD practitioners consider a further extension of this framework to encourage explicitly the promotion of SD practices as an effective way forward. Indeed, a current review of the policy agreement system for 2004–07 invites suggestions for appropriate measures to reflect more fully sustainability issues. However, even if policy agreements are negotiated over three-year timescales:

> *There are profound difficulties in identifying quality of life indicators that are both in the control of local government alone, and can be delivered upon within such a short timeframe.*

The problems associated with the existing performance management framework for local government have been recognised by WAG and it has commissioned a major review from the Local Government Data Unit (2003). A consultation paper envisages a single unified system more coherently linking local government services to national objectives. In addition, ways of reflecting the cross-cutting principles of SD and equalities throughout the framework are being examined.

This reflects a key dilemma for evaluation: do you devise a set of dedicated indicators to represent SD, or do you attempt to reflect SD principles through content-based indicators? The answer to this question is probably both. One way of achieving this objective that is being developed by a number of local authorities interviewed in relation to their community strategies is to integrate them into individual service or policy areas. One community strategy manager argued that this approach allowed: 'the debate to be undertaken in the context of each theme, not on the basis of a vertical, cross-cutting issue'.

During the course of this research, it was apparent that performance indicators and target setting dominated most evaluation frameworks. There was a marked absence of evaluation studies of policy interventions, and evidence-based policy making and practice was not a significant feature of the policy process.

An exception in part to this generalisation was the approach that WAG has taken, driven by the statutory duty, to formally review its Sustainable Development Scheme (Welsh Assembly Government, 2003c). The first iteration of this process is currently under way, consisting of stakeholder evaluation involving a formal consultation process with various interests through a variety of mechanisms, together with commissioned evaluation studies, one internally (Welsh Assembly Government, 2003d; see Appendix 4) and one externally (CAG Consultants, 2003; see Appendix 5).

5 Policy co-ordination: working between organisations

This research project is framed theoretically within a general body of literature known as 'governance' (Rhodes, 2000), which reflects a position that 'government is actually not the cockpit from which society is governed' (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000, p. 136), but just one player among a series of other public, private and voluntary actors interacting on behalf of interests which they jointly represent. The argument forwarded is that SD demands a collective approach to its management and resolution from a variety of individual and institutional actors interacting at, and between, different levels of governance. Figure 3 maps the key organisational actors operating at two of these levels in Wales.

Although it is limited to two levels of governance, it acknowledges that the boundaries above and below these levels are very porous, and significant influences and interdependencies flow between them. At each level of governance, there are a number of important and separate organisational actors subject to different forms of operating system and accountability. Hierarchical forms of organisation predominate across the system; a principal–agent relationship exists in the main between national and local government; democratic forms of accountability characterise the NAfW and local government, but other forms are evident in the NGOs, SDCC and the

Figure 3 Policy co-ordination
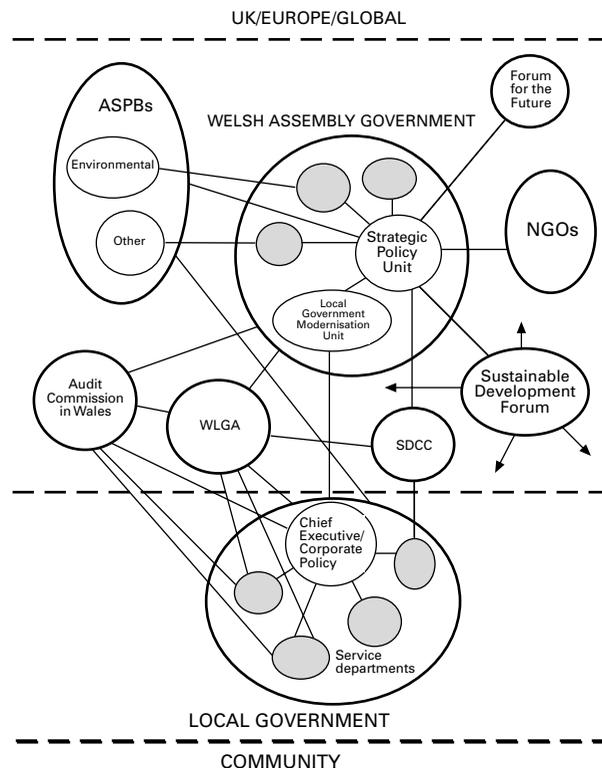
new Sustainable Development Forum; and statutory roles, responsibilities, duties and other formal arrangements are distributed in various ways throughout the system. The picture is complex. There is a diverse set of relationships, connections and interdependencies between the various actors of variable intensity and form. These relationships are dynamic – they are in a constant state of evolution, emergence and dissolution, and the formal and informal interfaces between them are replete with tensions and contradictions. They are often the sites of creativity and innovation, but can also be the barriers to progress.

Evaluating the effectiveness of policy co-ordination

Evaluation is notoriously difficult; assuming added complexity for SD in the context of a network form of governance. The OECD (2002) has developed a useful checklist (or good governance principles) for assessing institutional and decision-making practices for SD. It argues that the overall aim should be to improve policy coherence and integration, and to be effective this requires:

- a common understanding of SD

- clear commitment and leadership

- specific institutional mechanisms to steer integration

- effective stakeholder involvement

- efficient knowledge management.

In addition, it suggests that the availability of certain key management tools is crucial, particularly performance measurement,

mechanisms for citizens' engagement, specific policy and implementation processes, and continuous strategic assessment. It is instructive to reflect on the extent to which some of these principles and mechanisms exist for the governance of SD in Wales.

A common understanding of sustainable development

The evidence of this research clearly indicates that there is significant conceptual diversity and confusion around the notion of SD, although environmental perceptions still predominate. This is apparent at both intra and interorganisational levels. Particular difficulties centre on the problems of operationalising the concept, and of envisioning SD solutions. The important question to resolve is whether it is necessary to have clarity and/or consensus about the notion. We consider that a search for clarity would be helpful, but given the nature of the concept, it is unlikely that complete consensus will be achieved across a very diversified set of institutions, actors and sectors. This, in itself, is not necessarily a problem because the discourse of SD varies between different policy areas and collective action can be developed around negotiated areas of consensus.

Commitment and leadership

With the exception of parts of WAG and certain ASPBs, visible top-level commitment and leadership throughout the public sector around SD is not evident. Even in these organisations, the rhetoric and confusion inherent in SD is often a convenient veneer to mask the resilience of conventional wisdom and practice. The leadership deficit is especially problematic in

local government, because this sector is charged with the delivery of many important local services. In the absence of the effective engagement of local government, significant progress will not be made on the SD agenda. Despite ongoing modernisation, local government still suffers from problems associated with professionalism, functionalism and short-term thinking, and political and executive leadership has difficulties in rising above these systemic challenges.

The evidence leads us to conclude that the representative arm of Welsh local government, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), has remained largely passive on the subject of SD. Little advice has been forthcoming from this organisation; there is not a dedicated political spokesperson on the subject; and, apart from some stocktaking (Welsh Local Government Association, 2002) and responses to WAG on various consultation documents, it appears not to have been a high priority. Responsibility for SD in the WLGA rests within a heavy portfolio (Regeneration and Environment) of an adviser, supported by one dedicated member of staff.

It is too early to judge the impact of the Sustainable Development Forum for Wales, but it has already identified the absence of effective leadership for SD in Wales as one of its top priorities and is in the process of commissioning a suitable training programme. More generally, a Public Sector Management Initiative, developed by WAG in partnership with other public sector bodies in Wales, aims to improve the quality of public sector managers, and equip them with transferable skills and competencies in modern public sector management and leadership. It is crucial that matters of SD are embraced by this important initiative, in order that they are integrated into the mainstream of management practice.

Leadership and commitment are not just the exclusive domains of top-level management, but need to be demonstrated at other levels of organisations. SD co-ordinators in local government, other officers in ASPBs with responsibility for SD and staff within the Assembly's Strategic Policy Unit act as beacons for SD. However, whether they are able 'to punch above their weight' and develop a sufficient critical mass to achieve step change in policy and practice is more debatable. The barriers to surmount remain considerable.

Interorganisational integration and co-ordination

Chapter 3 outlines the ways in which individual organisations are attempting to integrate SD into their policy processes. WAG has established a number of co-ordinating mechanisms to mainstream SD at a political and executive level. In particular, the Strategic Policy Unit represents a strategically located institutional catalyst and its Policy Integration Tool offers a potential framework for integration across different policy divisions. However, the approach currently is permissive rather than one based on enforcement, the links between policy formulation and service delivery are unclear and, critically, SD is not integrated into the budget process. Elsewhere, integration is dependent on opportunistic endeavours around a variety of existing regimes such as community strategies, WPI and spatial planning. Narrow sectoral perspectives still predominate over a more issues-orientated agenda.

The extent to which policy is integrated between organisations and levels of governance is equally problematic, and in the main embryonic or absent. This was evidenced by the research findings in relation to the following:

- Welsh Assembly Government and local government

- Welsh Assembly Government and ASPBs

- Sustainable Development Co-ordinators Cymru

- Sustainable Development Forum for Wales

- non-governmental organisations, charities and pressure groups.

Welsh Assembly Government and local government

The relationship between national and local government is fundamental to the realisation of SD in Wales. Although national government, as the superordinate authority, has the ultimate power to prescribe the conditions and parameters within which local government operates through legislative and financial controls, local government represents the main agent of service delivery. The path that WAG has followed in this relationship has been one of partnership – attempting to manage the inevitable tensions that result between central control and local determination through constructive dialogue, negotiation and collaboration.

In terms of SD, the relationship between the Assembly and local government is less than effective. In the words of one source:

Welsh Assembly Government speaks with a number of different professional tongues.

There are currently three sources within WAG that liaise with local government. The individual divisions relate directly on a professional basis to the relevant service departments of local government; the Local Government Modernisation Unit, which is responsible for corporate governance, performance management, community strategies and political management arrangements engages with the chief executive and corporate policy units; and the Strategic Policy Unit currently has no direct route to local government. For these arrangements to work effectively, the units within each of the organisations must be working together coherently. There is evidence to suggest that this is not the case. For instance, the guidance and advice on community strategies from the Local Government Modernisation Unit is underdeveloped in relation to SD. Similarly, the guidance from the same quarter on WPI is non-existent. The Strategic Policy Unit, as the main driving force within the Assembly on SD, needs to devise an effective strategy for directly or indirectly influencing local government. One interviewee suggested that comparisons could be made with the role of the Prime Minister's Social Exclusion Unit and its ability to work around existing structures and systems, and by appealing directly to local government and other policy communities.

WAG has a formal Partnership Committee to deal with its political interface with local government. As far as SD is concerned, the issue has not figured prominently on the agenda, although one meeting was dedicated to a discussion on the subject, and a Compact has been drawn up between the Assembly and the WLGA. Currently, the Compact is little more

than a set of fine words and there is scant evidence of actions flowing from it. Again, there may be issues of organisational integration at work. The main axis to and from the Partnership Committee is through the Local Government Modernisation Unit of the Assembly and the strategic policy arm of WLGA. The question for the Assembly to answer is: what is the right balance to strike between exerting downward pressure and working in partnership?

An additional important actor in the national–local government arena is the Audit Commission in Wales (soon to merge with the National Audit Office to become the Wales Audit Office). It has a key role to play, as both scrutineer and policy supporter, in the Community Strategy and WPI processes. Therefore, its view on SD is potentially far reaching. However, advice and guidance on this matter is currently embryonic and there is considerable room for improvement in order to hold local government to account. The expected mandatory review of SD in 2004 is a welcome announcement and a move in the right direction.

Welsh Assembly Government and ASPBs

The situation between WAG and its sponsored bodies is close in terms of both direct funding and democratic accountability. Like local government, ASPBs have a huge contribution to make in the delivery of SD outcomes across the country. Individual ASPBs are managed through appropriate functional divisions of WAG and accountable to different cabinet ministers. From an SD perspective, they broadly fall into two categories – environmentally based bodies such as the Environment Agency and Countryside Commission for Wales, which could be

considered to have a good handle on SD, and a second set which may not have tradition in this agenda. However, counter-intuitively, as one Assembly official explained:

> Green ASPBs may be a harder nut to crack than the others because they are at heart only interested in environmental issues.

It is often assumed that the duty on NAfW to take SD into consideration in all of its activities applies equally to ASPBs by association. WAG's approach has been to encourage ASPBs to embrace its guiding principles into the heart of their decision-making processes. Indeed, numerous corporate strategies examined include such principles and individual SD Schemes have been developed. As elsewhere, the problem revolves around converting strategic intentions into policy making in practice. It may be that some ASPBs will benefit from more support and guidance (the Policy Integration Tool is designed to be of assistance in this context), but in the case of some less than enthusiastic bodies, the full potential of the remit letter process should be deployed. One respondent in an ASPB argued that the remit letter provides a stimulus or source of legitimacy to enable them to engage proactively in an otherwise less than committed agency, but another was disappointed that the most recent remit letter for his/her ASPB was:

> Very weak in relation to SD – it only asks the body to consider sustainable development in the preparation of our plans.

However, there is little doubt that this mechanism, used to its full potential between collaborative partners, can be an effective means of promoting SD.

Sustainable Development Co-ordinators Cymru (SDCC): a policy network

SDCC is a formally constituted body with growing links to the SD units of WAG, WLGA and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). It is still in its infancy as an organisation, but has an increasing list of partner organisations with which it works and which routinely consult it. SDCC's activities can be categorised into three types discussed below. In terms of the 'four Cs' of ways of influencing policy (Thomas *et al.*, 2001), the first concerns promoting 'complementary activities'; the second involves 'collaboration' (or sometimes 'confrontation'), while the third is 'consciousness-raising'.

- *Networking among members*: this involves information sharing and joint learning about the implementation of specific types of project, and the problems and constraints associated with them. The projects involved tend to be mainly 'environmental' in character. Following the publication of the results of a survey of SDCC members (Netherwood, 2003), a collection of 50 examples of 'good practice' in a variety of areas is planned to be published on the SDCC website. Also, SDCC has organised specific training workshops to disseminate good practice in areas of interest such as procurement.

- *Lobbying*: SDCC has been attempting to influence Wales-wide decision-making processes, and representative bodies such as the WLGA and WAG. However, it is unclear whether SDCC is in a strong enough position to have a great deal of influence through its lobbying activities.

Just as SD does not represent an important interest in any particular locality, so SDCC does not represent a politically important national constituency. However, SDCC finds itself consulted regularly, particularly by WAG's Strategic Policy Unit but increasingly by other agencies, and may have some small influence through being able to supply opinions based on its members' collective expertise.

- *Disseminating information from partners and other outside sources*: while SDCC may have only a very small influence on national bodies, it plays an important role in passing information from agencies such as WAG Strategic Policy Unit, WLGA and the Sustainable Development Forum in Wales to its members, and, hence, to practitioners in all the local councils. This is an informal channel of communication, which parallels the formal communications taking place via partnership agreements and other arrangements between these bodies.

To the extent that SDCC is having some limited success in promoting SD, there are a number of factors influencing its success. Two very positive factors are the enthusiasm and commitment of the membership, and the acumen shown by the leadership. However, there are some considerable constraints. One is the way that SD co-ordinators, and hence SDCC itself, are labelled historically as interested only in environmental issues. There can be strong negative preconceptions that make it difficult for SDCC to promote the broader version of SD that it upholds. Additionally, despite SDCC's

efforts at networking, it lacks links in certain mainstream policy directions.

SDCC's links with WAG are primarily with the Strategic Policy Unit and not with the key policy divisions, and it also has fairly weak links with the Audit Commission in Wales. Hence, interest in SD remains trapped in a network of practitioners in different agencies that link well to each other. However, they do not link strongly to different and parallel networks around issues of more centrality to their agencies and these other networks link different, more powerful, people in the same set of agencies. One might even argue that the existence of SDCC and its members allows those in these other networks to avoid taking responsibility for issues of SD, since these issues can be delegated to the SD practitioners, even though they lack the power to act decisively on them.

Sustainable Development Forum for Wales: the role of a new institutional actor
A traditional route for addressing emerging policy issues such as SD has been to create new institutional structures. However, this has largely been resisted in Wales apart from one new addition to the landscape in the shape of the Sustainable Development Forum. WAG identified the need for such a forum and has been instrumental in providing the initial three-year core funding. The gestation phase of the Forum's development has been a little protracted, and it is premature to comment on its impact and effectiveness. However, a few observations are warranted.

The Forum is conceived as an independent forum for civil society in Wales embracing a wide range of public, private and voluntary stakeholders. It envisages undertaking a variety of roles including being a catalyst for change, an innovator, a critical friend, enabler and influencer at all levels of governance. There may be tensions and contradictions in attempting to be 'all things to all people'; of being seen as independent of government and of 'representing' all elements of Welsh civil society. Accountability and legitimacy are likely to be ongoing issues. The Forum's work programme will need to be carefully targeted to ensure that it adds value in a very wide agenda. Mapping SD activity in Wales and developing SD literacy and capacity-building programmes for key decision makers in Welsh civil society are understood to be the focus of the Forum's initial work.

Interestingly, WAG deliberately chose to rebadge its appraisal tool from SD to policy integration because it considered that SD would project the wrong message. Perhaps there is a similar danger with a Sustainable Development Forum and an argument for renaming it a Policy Integration Forum?

Non-governmental organisations, charities and pressure groups
Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), charities and pressure groups have always been important contributors to public policy. Arguably, their importance and the range of roles that they play have now increased in the shifting terrain of network governance that surrounds SD.

A wide variety of NGOs at all levels are involved in SD in Wales including:

- local community and voluntary groups involved in conservation, local service provision or mutual aid

- larger organisations at local authority level, including development trusts, employment workshops, development education centres, charities and many others, generally supported by a Council for Voluntary Service; nationally, many of these types of organisation have federations

- independent Welsh NGOs

- Welsh branches of some UK NGOs

- UK NGOs active in Wales without specifically differentiating their Welsh work from what they do in the rest of UK.

Traditionally, pressure groups and other NGOs have played a role in policy framing by placing new issues on the public agenda and supplying information to help in problem definition. Then, at a later stage in the policy process, they have assisted with implementation or adopted a kind of 'watchdog' role with respect to policy evaluation. It is the central part of the policy process, where decisions are made within public bodies, where NGOs have been thought to have least influence.

NGOs played a major role in policy framing in the run-up to the establishment of the NAfW when they lobbied for the inclusion of Section 121. Flynn *et al.* (2003) detail how over 25 environmental and development NGOs formed the Sustainable Development Charter Group with government agencies such as the Countryside Council for Wales, Environment Agency and Welsh Development Agency, and succeeded in obtaining a 'considerably strengthened' SD clause. Flynn *et al.* (2003) also describe how some of the same NGOs and agencies (now 'ASPBs') then formed the

'Glamorgan Group', which met regularly with staff from WAG's then SD Unit to discuss and comment on drafts of the Sustainable Development Scheme. At the same time, through this process, NGOs were able to help WAG put flesh on the obligation to be consultative over SD and promote a more open policy process, and also put Assembly officers in touch with 'the NGO sustainable development community'.

Leading members of this 'community' include not only environmental NGOs, such as RSPB and WWF-Cymru, but development NGOs such as Oxfam-Cymru and those involved in anti-poverty work locally, as well as the national umbrella Welsh Council for Voluntary Action. Flynn *et al.* (2003) claim that the network between members of this NGO community and others, with a common agenda in ASPBs and academia, was quite sophisticated and effective in terms of exchange of knowledge and ideas, and contrast it with the 'shallow' network between WAG and local government professionals dealing with sustainability.

Since the early days of drafting the SD Scheme things appear to have changed. On the one hand, with the formation of the SDCC in parallel with the formal 'Compact' and partnership arrangements between WAG and local government, the WAG–local government SD network may be argued to have strengthened, although it is still not as strong as its leading members would like. On the other hand, the privileged position of the above network of NGOs with respect to national policy on SD might have weakened. Consultation processes now appear to be aimed at reaching directly a broad range of members of the public, and the undoubted expertise of

specific NGOs may be downplayed for fear of allowing 'special interests' to drive the agenda.

It may be that having acted collectively to make SD part of the NAfW's duties and to help create an open policy process, NGOs now prefer to utilise that openness to promote their particular interests. Several of them sit on Wales-wide partnerships with respect to different aspects of sustainability. Hence, some of them at least have a great deal of influence in particular sectors, but they have less influence as a group on the way SD policy is integrated. One example of a sector where NGOs exert a considerable influence is education – working closely with local government, Assembly officials and ASPBs. Appendix 6 describes how Welsh NGOs have promoted Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) at a national level.

NGOs are important members of policy networks locally. For example, local partnerships or forums have representation from local NGOs and, where SD co-ordinators are promoting particular local projects, they often work with particular NGOs. Indeed, both locally and nationally, it is a mistake to think of NGOs as a single-interest group. Particular NGOs may form alliances with particular parts of a council just as they may with parts of the WAG. Examples of this can be found in relation to energy and sustainable schools.

Finally, there are potential clashes between different forms of NGO engagement with policy. The idea that NGOs 'fit in' to partnerships and play a role along with others in a co-ordinated approach to implementing, say, 'sustainable schools' is fine. However, this may sit uneasily with the role of NGOs in challenging policy from an independent position or in building up

'alternative' provision or new, experimental ways of doing things. It is necessary to allow for 'confrontation' and 'complementary activities' as well as 'collaboration' (Thomas *et al.*, 2001).

Stakeholder involvement and knowledge management

In relation to the final two items on the OECD (2002) checklist, a few brief observations can be made in relation to the situation in Wales. First, it is suggested that the culture of government should move towards an effective engagement of citizens and other stakeholders in all aspects of policy and decision making. Certainly, the expressed aim of WAG is to foster approaches that are participatory in approach – premised on inclusivity, transparency and partnership with a wide cross-section of stakeholders. Involvement in the policy cycle is encouraged at earlier stages than is the norm, and forms of collaboration litter programmes and initiatives across the policy spectrum. Also, WAG has created three formal partnership committees with the voluntary sector, business and local government. However, if anything, the complaint currently is of there being too many partnerships leading to problems of co-ordination, overlap and duplication.

Although the model of the policy process espoused above is evidenced in the activities of the Strategic Policy Unit in relation to SD – particularly through the consultations around the formulation and review of the Scheme – it is recognised that 'we have not yet sought to engage the wider Welsh civil society'. It is complicated by the difficulties faced by politicians in attempting to describe SD 'on the doorstep'. Hence, the role of seeking effective means of engaging with Welsh civil society has

been delegated to the Sustainable Development Forum. The use of such an intermediary and the confused accountabilities that might ensue are issues that require careful attention as the new body evolves.

At a local level and stimulated by the modernisation agenda, local authorities and other service providers are searching for new and innovative ways of involving their citizens and service users in planning and delivery processes. The community strategy process is a particularly important mechanism in realising this aspiration, although the tensions between participatory and representative systems of democracy will never be far from the surface.

On the question of knowledge management in relation to SD, and the use of science, evaluation and evidence-based policy making and practice, the situation in Wales is variable. In general, and as discussed in Chapter 4, the status of evaluation remains rather poor, investment in research and evaluation in the public sector is small, and evidence-based policy making is in its infancy in many areas. However, there are some signs that its importance is being raised with significant evaluation studies being commissioned by WAG on the Communities First and Local Government Modernisation Programmes. In

addition, the review of the SD Scheme has been informed by a number of specific pieces of internal and external evaluation.

A number of national conferences, seminars and workshops have been a feature of the SD calendar over the last few years – organised with the intention of raising awareness, understanding, notable practice and knowledge sharing in SD matters. The post-Johannesburg Conference in Swansea (2002) and the International Network of Regions Conference in Cardiff (2004) are examples of these activities. Also, some links are developing between research and policy communities including the Observatory for a Sustainable Knowledge-based Region (with ERDF funding), and the Regional Framework Operative Bid to the European Union (funded through INTEREG 111C), which aims to demonstrate, through collaborative projects, 'How to build a Sustainable Region' using structural funds to deliver SD based on policy integration.

However, in general, there is a great deal more that needs to be done to stimulate the generation and exchange of knowledge between the key stakeholders. In addition, as most knowledge is contested, stakeholders, including the wider citizenry, need to be engaged in its appraisal and evaluation.

6 Conclusions and implications

This research study aims at understanding the effective governance of SD in Wales. Following a short discussion of the position of SD within public policy in general, it describes the organisational and institutional framework that currently exists to manage this issue in Wales. It highlights important differences from other parts of the UK including the statutory duty on the NAfW, the relationship between national and local government, the culture of partnership working and the advantages of scale.

The institutional framework of governance is described as multi-level, multi-nodal and multi-ordered, in which actors and agencies – public, private and voluntary – work both within and across traditional demarcations. It is based on a view that the governance of SD must be a collective endeavour because no individual agent has the necessary knowledge, influence or resource capability to tackle this issue independently.

This report has dealt in turn with a number of components of the policy process – policy framing, policy implementation, policy evaluation and policy co-ordination. We have deliberately avoided ending with a list of prescriptions or recommendations. Our belief is that individuals and organisations need to think through the implications of the findings themselves and consider what actions are appropriate in the light of this learning. Therefore, we summarise the main conclusions and implications as follows.

Policy framing

Conceptual confusion and diversity characterise the notion of SD, and this is manifested both within and between organisations. A typology of main meanings ranges from SD as policy area to SD as a set of principles or overarching policy paradigm.

It is an inescapable conclusion that: 'the difficulty in understanding the concept has prevented its progress' in many areas and organisations.

As a consequence, there is a need to promote clarity of understanding, although it will be impossible to impose a single definition. Flexibility must be allowed for multiple interpretations in different settings and sectors, and vague aspirations must be capable of being operationalised in areas of service delivery.

However, any flexibility for interpretation must be constrained by the need to secure sufficient consensus on understanding and purpose to allow for collective action between individuals and organisations.

SD by its very nature is highly contestable and, at its best, is essentially about 'managing tensions'. It will not give answers; rather it offers a coherent framework for deliberation and governance.

Policy implementation

One approach to implementing SD focuses on making a difference within individual policy sectors – an approach sometimes referred to as vertical integration. This has led to a proliferation of initiatives and projects accompanied by sectoral interventions in areas such as waste management, energy efficiency and transport. The availability of financial resources and statutory regulation have been important driving forces. Such initiatives are often limited, opportunistic and fragmented, but, in some cases, are justified as 'exemplars' or demonstration projects.

It is now increasingly recognised that vertical integration alone is unlikely to deliver sustainable futures, and that ways of integrating principles of SD horizontally across organisations and sectors need to be encouraged. Hence, many view policy integration as the panacea to the effective management of SD – to 'bolt in' and not 'bolt on' SD into all stages of the policy process. Strategies of policy integration were examined in relation to a number of integral components – statutory duties, organisational design, people and management, integration frameworks and integration tools.

There was consensus that the statutory duty on the NAfW was an important vehicle for stimulating interest in SD – the requirements to prepare a scheme, produce regular action plans and make suitable arrangements for monitoring and evaluation were considered to be instrumental in raising the profile of SD in the newly devolved administration. However, a duty is no guarantee of effectiveness and the question of whether a similar provision should be applied to other public bodies, particularly local authorities, was met with some ambivalence. We support the position that local government already has sufficient powers and duties to undertake SD approaches – particularly with the duty to prepare community strategies and the power of well-being. It remains a matter of commitment and will on its part.

A number of issues surfaced around the appropriateness of different organisational designs and management arrangements. At a political level, the NAfW has made an effort to design structures and mechanisms that promote the effective management of SD. A particularly

interesting discussion emerged in relation to the ideal position of a dedicated SD capability – at the centre of an organisation or within a service department? Although there are advantages and disadvantages of each, and in some ways it does not matter as long as the capability is integrated into the corporate management structure, the balance of evidence suggests that a location at the political and executive heart sends a powerful message to both internal and external stakeholders of the importance being accorded to SD.

An associated matter concerned the role and type of individual actor in the process of managing SD – should there be dedicated sustainable development officers, or should the skills and competencies necessary to manage SD be inculcated into managers and practitioners throughout the body of an organisation? Not surprisingly, the answer is both. It is important to maintain a body of dedicated individuals who can champion the agenda, offer technical support and monitor progress, but it is also essential to achieve a critical mass of managers who are able to interpret and manage in a sustainable fashion within the contexts of their individual work areas. This requires a coherent training, education and development programme, delivered over a long period of time, targeted at different audiences.

The research identified a number of existing frameworks that present SD with an integration opportunity. Examples of these included community strategies, WPI, procurement and spatial planning. In general, although these opportunities were increasingly being recognised as potentially important conduits for mainstreaming SD principles, and notwithstanding the genuine difficulties of

undertaking the task, practice is certainly in its infancy. Currently, advice and guidance on how best to achieve integration of SD principles through these routes is lacking, and the ACiW and WAG are perhaps best placed to redress the situation.

Finally, there is some interest being generated in the role and use of integration tools in promoting policy integration. Quality assurance methodologies have been favoured in some areas, but WAG is placing great stock on its bespoke Policy Integration Tool. It is too early to cast judgement on its overall effectiveness, but there are technical, methodological and practical areas of concern that will need careful monitoring, not least the danger of losing the 'cutting edge' of SD principles by subsuming them into general integration processes. The answer may be to recognise that it is not an objective means of generating the right solutions, merely an aid to deliberative enquiry, which highlights distributive dilemmas and tensions, and contributes to more sustainable decision making.

The examination of approaches to, and views on, policy integration generated a long list of barriers and issues relating to professionalism, complexity, prioritisation, balancing bottom up and down perspectives, operationalising the concept of SD, managing joint accountability systems and recognising that such strategies require a significant and sustained input of resources to be successful. In addition, a number of other important factors emerged.

The first concerns, with the exception of a few pockets, the dearth of high-level political and executive leadership on SD in Wales. This

deficiency needs to be remedied as a matter of some priority and also leadership issues need to be tackled at other levels of the organisational hierarchy.

Second, communication and awareness are aspects of an integration programme that require careful design and management. Lastly, one of the conclusions reached in this study is that the level of rhetoric surrounding the management of SD in Wales is high in some areas, but this is not matched by practice and change on the ground. There are two possible responses to this accusation. One view is that there is the question of time frame and whether it is fair to accuse the system of lack of delivery when it perhaps takes:

> A decade or more in order to complete at least one formulation/implementation/reformulation cycle, to obtain a reasonably accurate portrait of success and failure, and to appreciate the variety of strategies actors pursue over time.
> (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999, p. 11)

Another is that, too often, an approach to the policy process is being adopted that separates the formulation stage from the implementation stage and this detachment leads to a deficit in implementation. Integrated models of strategic planning and management are demanded in this complex area of public policy.

Although elements of an approach to policy integration were detected in a number of organisations, there was scant evidence of any single organisation devising a coherent and well-resourced strategy consisting of all the necessary components including: organisational design; an awareness and communication programme; an integration framework and tools, and mechanisms for evaluation.

Finally, we believe that the choice of approach does not lie between one or other of the two tracks identified, but is best prosecuted through a twin-track model that seeks to achieve integration vertically and horizontally.

Policy evaluation

Evaluation and evidence-based policy making and practice are under-represented in the policy process in general. The practice of evaluation in SD is a hazardous occupation because of the considerable conceptual, methodological and practical difficulties that need to be surmounted. The situation in Wales is further complicated by the confusion, duplication and inconsistencies that surround different performance management frameworks at a local level, the problems of lack of compatibility between local and national government indicators and variability in performance management regimes between WAG and ASPBs.

Fortunately, there is a good level of awareness of these and associated issues, and efforts are being made to address them including the review of performance management frameworks for local government and the development of Quality of Life indicator sets.

It is considered that the future development of policy agreements and their link with resource allocation mechanisms presents an important opportunity for SD.

However, there is an unhealthy preoccupation with performance indicators and targets in general at the expense of an exploration of alternative means of evaluating the effectiveness of services, strategies and policy interventions. It is important that, if

evaluation is to promote improvement through more effective policy and practice, and better accountability in terms of results, 'it must be fully integrated into the ongoing discourse, able to sustain advocacy of "evidential voice"' (Sanderson, 2002, p. 19), and help raise the levels of literacy of SD matters within a wide policy community.

Policy co-ordination

No phrase expresses as frequent a complaint about federal bureaucracy as does 'lack of co-ordination'. No suggestion for reform is more common than 'what we need is more co-ordination'.
(Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973, p. 133)

This certainly applies to the governance of SD in Wales. The sources of these co-ordination problems are numerous and include the following.

- An intensification of complexity flowing from multiple interdependencies across social, spatial, sectoral and temporal spaces. Jessop (2000) infers that this may lead to the conclusion that SD is 'inherently ungovernable'; a view that was partly endorsed by one interviewee who claimed that: 'SD is too big a bucket to throw every single policy area that a government engages with into – the agenda becomes too unmanageable'.

- The problems associated with establishing a common world view of sufficient clarity and purpose to mobilise individual action by actors and organisations of different types.

- The difficulties of managing multiple and diverse accountabilities within joint accountability frameworks.

- Balancing the desire for co-operation with natural individual and organisational self-interest and competition.

- Integrating the formulation of policy with effective implementation structures.

- Developing collaborative cultures and capacities in individuals and organisations.

- Promoting effective network leadership.

- Developing policy instruments that are fit for networks not hierarchies, such as covenants, compacts, incentives and communicative planning.

The research identified a number of tensions at key interfaces between important actors in the network.

- The relationship between WAG and local government needs to be better managed. The Strategic Policy Unit at WAG has to decide whether to work around its professional divisions, or more effectively through them to local government. The WLGA has an important role in making the local–national partnership work more effectively on SD. There is little evidence in the past that this has been accorded any real priority.

- WAG has a symbiotic relationship with its ASPBs and, although the mechanisms for influence have been identified, particularly the remit letter process, there

is room for improvement in the future. Also, the way in which ASPBs engage directly with local government is an area that requires further exploration.

- SDCC works through networking and lobbying. Despite positive factors in terms of leadership and commitment, it is constrained by misconceptions that its agenda is purely environmental, by a lack of resources and by its limited ability to influence mainstream policy arenas and actors.

- The Sustainable Development Forum is the newest entrant to the institutional landscape and it is largely premature to comment on its performance. However, it faces considerable challenges in performing a number of roles – being a critical friend, mobilising civil society, disseminating good practice, being an independent voice and providing leadership and capacity building programmes – some of which may be conflicting at times. Its contribution to the encouragement of an advocacy coalition for SD in Wales – with people from various governmental and non-governmental organisations sharing normative and causal beliefs and engaging in material forms of co-ordination over time – will be watched with interest.

- NGO networks were instrumental in promoting the obligation on the NAfW to engage in SD; they operate locally and nationally in implementing sectoral policies, and in holding WAG and other

public bodies to account. However, the influence of NGOs as a group may have declined with the increase in consultative mechanisms aimed at directly involving a range of interests. Also, SD is a contested domain for NGOs as much as for other agencies, with some engaged in 'public action' promoting SD principles and others defending vested interest. It is important to allow for different forms of NGO engagement with SD policy: for independent challenge and experimenting with new methods as well as for NGOs which straightforwardly 'fit in' to co-ordinated policies

Capacity and incentives for effective governance

During the course of the research, the opinions of many individuals were canvassed on the question of whether there existed all the necessary instruments, duties, mechanisms and other arrangements to effectively manage the governance of SD in Wales. A broad consensus emerged, which was crudely summarised by one interviewee that:

> Many, if not all, the pieces of the jigsaw are in the box, but what you need is to find the lid to show you the picture to help you do it. And if it doesn't work in Wales, we are all stuffed!

There was a real sense that, with the possible exception of the benefits of primary legislative powers for the NAfW, all necessary instruments and tools were in place to work towards a more sustainable approach to public policy. There was no excuse for inaction.

Although SD has still to get a foothold in many organisations, the task for others is one of converting fine intentions into practice – of building personal, organisational and interorganisational capacities to deliver SD solutions over a sustained period of time, and 'of making what now exists work better'. This requires attention to integration and maintenance, not just innovation and change. A constant source of irritation for many managers was that politicians:

> Never give enough time to see whether a particular initiative works before abandoning it and moving on to something else.

However, by its very nature, SD is not capable of short-term treatment and fixes. It must not be knocked off course by the next government or management fad and needs a longer-term focus. Squaring this time frame with the political imperatives of instant solutions is a dilemma that is unlikely to disappear overnight.

Lastly, although this research raises as many questions as it answers, and is informed by what is happening only in Wales, it deserves a wider readership because the lessons and learning are transferable to other administrations and other cross-cutting issues. The profile of SD in future English regional government can be informed by the experiences of Wales, and the constant challenges of managing cross-cutting issues such as equalities, health and crime might equally gain from an insight into how SD is approached in Wales.

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Appendix 1

Research design

A case study approach (Yin, 1994) was used for the research design. It involved the collection and examination of evidence from a number of different sources in a triangulated framework as follows.

1 *Welsh Assembly Government*: the focus here was the Sustainable Development Scheme, and its implications for the whole organisation and ASPBs. Data was assembled through the collection and interrogation of documentary evidence, and 20 in-depth interviews with a wide variety of individuals both within and outside WAG. In addition to conversations with members of the Strategic Policy Unit, managers from a number of divisions were interviewed, particularly to test the extent of policy integration in health, rural affairs, ICT, economic development and local government. External views were provided from the WLGA, ACiW, WWF-Cymru, two ASPBs and Forum for the Future.

2 *Local government*: three local authorities were selected to examine different approaches to the management of SD. Again, a considerable body of documentary evidence was collected for examination, but the bulk of the evidence was generated through 15 interviews with a collection of core actors including the SD co-ordinator, community strategy co-ordinator, corporate policy manager

and WPI co-ordinator. Additional perspectives were gleaned from a chief executive, service director, procurement manager, principal town planner and senior politician.

3 *Sustainable Development Co-ordinators Cymru (SDCC)*: this case study was carried out at two levels: working with a small group of individual SD co-ordinators; and investigating the SDCC as an organisation. In addition to those interviewed for the local authority cases described above, three SD co-ordinators took part in the study and provided the following sources of information:
   - data from their interview questionnaire with Netherwood (2003)
   - a detailed reflection in writing on their role in response to a series of questions (explanation of elements of a typical week; examples of 'success' and of barriers to success; critical incidents; current priorities and how they have changed; own analytical comments)
   - an interview to explore key themes emerging
   - interviews with between two and six other stakeholders such as immediate line manager, head of section, community strategy co-ordinator and/or manager of other important policy sector within the council, key outside stakeholder(s).

On SDCC as an organisation, various information sources were used:

- written information on SDCC and by SDCC itself
- Netherwood's (2003) survey on all SD co-ordinators in Wales
- interviews with key members of SDCC (chair and past chair)
- observation of SDCC meetings to understand process and priorities, and identify themes.

4   *Policy area*: Education for Sustainable Development. Combination of documentary evidence, observation at meetings and seminars, and interviews with 19 respondents including school teachers, school heads, education officers in NGOs, ASPBs, NafW and local government.

Also, two group discussions were organised with people from a variety of interests, organisations and levels of government. The first was held at the start of the study to collect and explore views of SD. In addition to providing a rich source of material in its own right, the discussion helped provide a focus for the subsequent case studies.

The second group discussion was organised towards the end of the study with people who had previously been interviewed as part of individual case studies. As well as providing a source of validation for the construction placed on the evidence, this was an opportunity for a further exploration of particular aspects of the emerging findings.

The research study was undertaken between February 2003 and January 2004.

Appendix 2

The state of sustainable development in Welsh local authorities (Netherwood, 2003)

- Welsh local authorities are not successfully integrating SD into their strategic and business planning including community strategies and Wales Programme for Improvement.

- There is little evidence of high-level political and executive leadership.

- There is evidence of good practice and innovation manifested in a variety of ad hoc programmes and projects.

- Measurement on the whole is confused and fragmented.

- Human and financial resources dedicated to SD are poor and inappropriate to the demands of the agenda.

- Environmental management of local authority organisations is poor in relation to EMAS systems, climate change, energy and procurement.

Appendix 3

Summary of findings of an assessment of the first four years of the Welsh Assembly Government's sustainable development duty (Flynn, 2003)

- People across all categories are comfortable talking the language of SD and are supportive of the Welsh Assembly's agenda.

- Mainstreaming is happening and there is commendable senior political commitment.

- There is evidence of some frustration in the lack of pace of change.

- The Sustainable Development Scheme/Action Plan does not provide an effective agenda for action.

- Initiatives to promote sustainability have been opportunistic and lack an evidence base to aid prioritisation.

- There is variability across the Assembly in terms of interpretation of sustainability, levels of commitment and activities.

- There is variability in terms of the ability and willingness of ASPBs to mainstream SD.

- More needs to be done to mainstream SD across all WAG functions and the portfolios of staff.

- WAG needs to make more rapid progress on procurement.

- WAG has been slow in using indicators to drive policy in key areas.

- The Policy Integration Tool has failed to make an impact at senior levels.

- Leadership is required to move from policy to delivery and from rhetoric to action.

Appendix 4

Summary of findings from a report on external perceptions of the first Sustainable Development Scheme of the National Assembly for Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2003d)

- There is persistent confusion in all sectors about the term 'SD'; many respondents took the term to mean environmentalism.

- The Sustainable Development Scheme is welcomed and supported.

- There was general agreement that the Scheme has had limited impact on the ground to date, but it was still too early to judge.

- There was praise for the top-level political commitment at the Assembly, but concern over the absence of joined-up working between different parts of the organisation.

- There were reservations about the effectiveness with which the Assembly was working in partnership with ASPBs, local government and business; there was a need for the Assembly to be more proactive in promoting the agenda through a variety of mechanisms.

Appendix 5

Summary of findings from the report on how effectively the National Assembly for Wales has promoted sustainable development (CAG Consultants, 2003)

- SD Scheme is marginal to the promotion of SD in the Assembly; the duty and commitment of ministers are the main drivers.

- SD Scheme not clear about key sustainability pressures facing Wales.

- SD Scheme Action Plan is an important mechanism for converting commitment into action; demonstrates commitment to mainstreaming but does not recognise key priorities.

- Evidence of genuine efforts to mainstream SD through commitment of Strategic Policy Unit staff, although success is variable across policy sectors.

- Understanding of SD in the Assembly is particularly good at senior level, but is weaker at lower levels.

- There are reservations over the potential effectiveness of the Policy Integration Tool.

- System of annual reporting is not suitable for alerting ministers to problems in implementing the Action Plan.

- Focus of mainstreaming has been on policy development and there is little evidence that this has yet worked its way into practice.

- Although the Assembly has been successful in raising the profile of SD, there is less evidence that this has resulted in other organisations changing their attitudes.

- The Assembly has made progress on improving its own 'housekeeping', particularly in relation to renewable energy and procurement. However, there is still much to do in relation to green transport and home working.

- Although there are co-ordination mechanisms across the Assembly, there are reservations as to whether the Strategic Policy Unit has the resources to fulfil its role; and whether the subject committees are discharging their scrutiny role effectively.

Appendix 6

Welsh NGOs and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

The Rio Summit acted as a stimulus for a number of NGOs in Wales to promote a co-ordinated approach to environmental education. In 1996, the Environmental Education Council in Wales (EECW) was formed and, in 1998, EECW in conjunction with the RSPB launched Caring for our Future – A Way Ahead in Wales for Developing Environmental Education – a cross-curricular strategy for environmental education. The National Assembly for Wales' duty for SD came into effect in 1998, and presented a significant change in the policy landscape and context within which ESD could be promoted.

In 2000, the unlikely alliance of the education officers of Oxfam and RSPB, with a number of others, mainly from ASPBs, created a new forum – Education for the Future. This now forms the basis of the Advisory Panel for Education for Sustainable Development. Although they recognised the new opportunities presented by the SD duty, this was not apparent to other members of the EECW, which continued to promote a narrower environmental agenda. The Education for the Future group was formed specifically to promote the broader agenda of SD, with the key aim of lobbying for an advisory panel for ESD to sit within the Department for Education and Lifelong Learning in the National Assembly of Wales.

The Minister was convinced by this argument and announced the formation of an Advisory Panel for Education for Sustainable Development. The EECW was disbanded and the Advisory Panel took over its role with a broader SD remit, integrating environmental, economic and social dimensions.

Since its inception, the Advisory Panel has funded various ESD initiatives including setting up a virtual directory of resources and forum for teachers and educators, producing Guidance for Curriculum and Qualifications for schools on best practice for ESD in conjunction with ACCAC (the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales), Estyn (the office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales) and DFID (the Department for International Development), and a report on how to integrate ESD into Initial Teacher Education and Training in Wales.

Through recognising opportunities and making the most of them, some NGOs have managed to reposition themselves inside the policy-making structure. They are no longer outside lobbying for policy change, but inside influencing policy formation.

There is now a governance framework in place that could be a successful way of promoting ESD in Wales. It is too early to measure the full impact of the Panel but the fact that it exists at all is down to the political acumen of certain people and their NGOs.