



Learning Brief Two: Autumn 2007: Local Application of SSN's Best Value & Sustainable Development Toolkit

Introduction

The Sustainable Scotland Network (SSN) exists to support information sharing and delivery of sustainable development across local authorities in Scotland¹.

This learning point has been developed on the back of SSN's September Quarterly Network Meeting, which focused on Best Value & Sustainable Development. It summarises, condenses and prioritises key points that emerged from this meeting.

Who is this learning brief aimed at?

The priority audience for this resource is SSN members and their local authority colleagues. It may also be of interest to anyone working in a large public sector organization, and for whom embedding sustainable development principles is a concern.

What is the purpose of this learning brief?

- a) To collate information generated and ideas established at SSN quarterly meetings.
- b) To reinforce participants' learning.
- c) To provide a resource for members that can be distributed amongst their colleagues.
- d) To provide a baseline of information from which we can move forward in future network discussions.

What is the foundation for SSN's approach to Best Value & Sustainable Development?

SSN's Best Value & Sustainable Development Toolkit was published in September 2006, and commended to local authorities for use by John Mason (Head of Environment Group, Scottish Executive) and Ruth Parsons (Head of Public Sector Reform Group, Scottish Executive). The Toolkit was developed in collaboration with local practitioners, CoSLA, WWF-Scotland, the Sustainable Development Commission Scotland and Audit Scotland.

The Toolkit supports local authorities' continuous improvement on sustainable development, both at a corporate and cross-service level. Primarily, it assists Councils in meeting the Duty of Best Value's 'contribution to the achievement of sustainable development' (Local Government in Scotland Act 2003). But the toolkit is more than that: a number of local authorities have used the tool as a service planning tool, a framework for sustainable development strategies and implementation plans, or as a training resource for staff groups, such as Heads of Service.

¹ For more information on the work and priorities of the Sustainable Scotland Network, please visit www.sustainable-scotland.net

SSN is committed to supporting local authorities' use of the toolkit, and to ensuring that the document has life beyond its publication. The SSN September Quarterly provided members with an opportunity to learn from one another's application of the Toolkit, and to explore the Toolkit in two new formats (please see www.sustainable-scotland.net/bestvalue for the online and pdf toolkit). It also provided SSN members, staff and partner agencies with ideas about better resourcing local authorities to bring sustainable development to the heart of Council business.

What are the most useful features of SSN's toolkit?

SSN's Best Value & Sustainable Development toolkit was developed to raise awareness that **sustainable development (SD) is core Council business**. The toolkit contains three main sections: (i) an overview of the statutory Duty of Best Value and specifically the 'contribution to the achievement of sustainable development.' (ii) information on mainstreaming SD, including leadership for SD and (iii) a service-specific chapter, detailing what SD means in relation to a range of services and providing a table of 'paths to improvement' for each.

The **fundamental role of the toolkit is to make SD relevant to all services** – talking SD in services' own language - and ensuring SD is seen as central to service-delivery, rather than as a distant, strategic approach.

Practical use of the toolkit demonstrates that it:

- *“Provides neat links to statutory guidance on Best Value”*
- *“Is a good tool for preparing for the Best Value audit”*
- *“Shows services what and how their actions contribute to SD”*
- *“Uncovers hidden service-level approaches to SD”*
- *“Questions practitioners' engagement with SD in a constructive way”*
- *“Joins up services, linking them together through specific policy areas”*
- *“Is engaging”*
- *“Is flexible and adaptable”*
- *“Stimulates discussion, conversations... and more questions”*

There are a number of excellent SD tools / guidance documents in common usage (such as those developed by Forum for the Future and SOLACE), and the SSN Toolkit does not aspire to be comprehensive. Rather, the **unique qualities of the toolkit** should be emphasised and developed: 1) the service-by-service approach; 2) the paths to improvement and 3) the self assessment element.

What are the gaps and weaknesses in the toolkit?

Discussions on the more challenging aspects of applying the toolkit locally identified where more support could be provided, and where the common sticking points are for SD practitioners.

The **sheer quantity of information** contained within the toolkit was seen as an impediment by some, making it difficult to locate key chapters. The range of material can be intimidating for those that are coming to SD afresh².

² SSN has now developed a web-based version of the Best Value & Sustainable Development Toolkit, which should help to overcome this problem through clear navigation and accessibility. The website is at: www.sustainable-scotland.net/bestvalue

The impact of the toolkit when used as a resource for the Best Value audit is key, but it can be difficult to persuade senior officers to endorse its application. There can be difficulties in **motivating staff to engage** with the toolkit.

This reflects the fact that, in many areas, **SD is still not seen as core business**. Many services regard SD as something outside their parameters, and do not think they have the knowledge to answer the questions incorporated in the toolkit. Participants on the day commented that 'many people still don't realise how they connect to SD.'

The process of **applying the toolkit can be demanding**. The toolkit seems to work most effectively when it is part of an outreach process, led by the SD officer. To be impactful, this requires face-to-face discussion & a time commitment.

Once the toolkit has been used for cross-service self-assessment on SD, it can be difficult for SD officers to know **how to use the data**. Many services censor their results (being over positive about the contribution they are making to SD), and not all services are covered by the toolkit. The toolkit relies on a level of honesty of response (in order that the SD officer can use the data effectively for strategic work / audit), and on links between services that sometimes simply aren't evident.

Finally, those that have used the toolkit expressed a concern about **how to quantify the impact** of the tool and how to fill the gaps identified through application of the toolkit.

Learning from local experience: the role of the toolkit in embedding sustainable development.

The toolkit is most effective when tailored locally. This can mean breaking the toolkit up to heighten its relevance to service-level staff / corporate managers.

The most important section for local adaptation is the '**paths to improvement**' tables. Encouraging officers to add their own paths to improvement rows (defining their own actions) is a good way of ensuring their engagement and reflecting their experience. **Adding columns titled 'evidence', 'actions', 'priorities' or 'outcomes'** also amplify the functionality and relevance of the toolkit. An outcomes-based approach will increasingly be the focus of the Scottish Government, and their appraisal of Best Value.

This local adaptation requires some time investment from the SD officer. Local experience of the toolkit suggests that the **toolkit is most effective when it is used within a broad sustainable development strategy-development / audit process**. It is worth, then, taking time before applying the toolkit to plan how you will use the collected data and how you will address the gaps that are revealed. Garnering senior support at this early stage is key to later successes.

Local experience demonstrates that, without **senior support**, the process of applying the toolkit will be weakened. Practitioners suggest presenting the duty of sustainable development to a corporate management group / committee, with an explanation of how the SD officer can support the Council to meet the Duty (training, and an audit of Council-wide action on SD using the framework provided by the toolkit).

The toolkit has been very effective in raising the profile of SD. It enables recognition of the work that services are doing and is clearly **connected to services' daily concerns**, as well as corporate priorities.

The self-assessment feature (paths to improvement) has proved a successful way for people to engage with SD, from managers to junior officers. **It allows officers to identify what SD means to them**, how they are delivering on it and what the priorities are for improvement. This approach has been incorporated into a number of 'mainstreaming SD training courses.'

Once data has been collected from each service, it has proved effective to use the priorities identified through service-level responses to formulate **SMART objectives and a monitoring system**. Encourage each service to establish their own service-level SD team to monitor their delivery of their SD targets.

Additionally, participants noted that the toolkit:

"...provided material for our Best Value audit."

"... integrated well with other processes – such as implementation plans"

"...can join up best value and SD working"

"... enabled us to gather raw material for the best value audit and internal reporting."

"...is useful – it gives a consistent approach for all services"

"... was used to assess services' improvement plans – what had been omitted was revealing – it provided a baseline of services' engagement with SD."

"... encourages holistic thinking on SD – it's educative."

"... is useful in providing a tool for services to define their own actions"

"... is a tool for identifying gaps in service plans, policies and projects."

"... provided a starting point for our SD action plan."

"... helps to give a hook to all services"

"... is a good starting point for developing an SD strategy."

"... synthesises lots of information, provides a structure and puts it in context."

Fundamental to local success in applying the toolkit is an emphasis on the importance of the Duty of Best Value's 'contribution to the achievement of sustainable development.'. The Scottish Government's support for SSN's Best Value and Sustainable Development toolkit has led to corporate support for officers' application of the toolkit through a robust process as outlined above (and in supporting documents on SSN's Best Value & Sustainable Development website www.sustainable-scotland.net/bestvalue)

Where is more attention / support needed for practitioners' use of the toolkit?

Again and again, participants returned to the vital role of augmenting the support of Chief Executive / Director Level / Leader / an elected member (those of influence, and with budgetary authority). **Leadership and commitment to the process are the vital ingredients to applying the toolkit locally and ensuring the resulting audit can be acted on.** This provides the mandate for all later work.

The toolkit can appear too unwieldy for unengaged officers. A document that provides a **précis of the contents** would be useful for ensuring initial buy-in to the process.

While the Duty of Best Value's 'contribution to the achievement of sustainable development.' has motivated local delivery and allocation of resources, it was argued that there is still a need for **explicit legislation on SD** – separate to the Best Value regime. At present, there is too much 'encouraging guidance' on delivery of SD for specific areas, and not enough sticks / guidance to influence senior officers and members.

Gaps in the toolkit that could be filled include³:

- More on the role of corporate services
- A section on integration in human resources
- An enhanced focus on local government finance
- A more explicit focus on climate change mitigation and adaptation.

There is a need for **more opportunities for local authority officers to share their approaches** to using the toolkit and sharing the results of this work.

Successful application of the toolkit requires a **drip feed of additional information to keep up momentum** – eg new issues / changing context (public service reform / shared services).

Where do we go from here: how can local authorities, SSN and other bodies further use of the toolkit?

Liaison between a range of public sector bodies is key to successful local approaches to sustainable development. To this end (i) Audit Scotland's view on the toolkit could usefully be made public; (ii) secondments could be initiated between the Scottish Government's Greener Scotland Team and local authority SDOs; (iii) the Improvement Service could incorporate the toolkit, and the approach it espouses, in their work with local government.

The Best Value regime and its relation to delivery of SD, **needs to be tied up with other SD / local government assessment / support regimes.** This includes the forthcoming Single Outcome Agreements (to be agreed between the Scottish Government and local authorities), Scotland's Climate Change Programme / Declaration support and the Local Authority Carbon Management Programme.

The toolkit also needs to provide **better linkages to policy developments on climate change, procurement and other areas.** SSN's role should be as a horizon-scanning body: keeping a weather eye on developments and ensuring local authorities are equipped to respond.

There is a need for **more effective learning and training** – SSN has a key role to play here. The toolkit can be used as a gap analysis tool, after which time SSN could provide a pool of good trainers on each area (whether service-level or corporate).

SSN could help by **marketing the toolkit to senior officers and elected members** (through SOLACE and CoSLA) and to professional / service-support bodies.

Local approaches to interpreting and applying the toolkit (incorporating SD strategies and training resources) need to be shared through SSN's new online knowledge base (www.sustainable-scotland.net/bestvalue).

³ Please refer to the local authority resources that have been incorporated in SSN's Best Value & Sustainable Development website. Some of these cover some of the gaps identified – for example, those produced by Dundee City Council focus on the role of Chief Executive and support services.