

The Finnish National Commission on SD and the UK's SD Commission: Two distinct models of involving stakeholders in SD policy making

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This ESDN Quarterly Report complements the overview of participatory arrangements provided in the [country profile section of this website](#). It addresses the role of National Councils for SD (NCSD) as a key mechanism of involving different stakeholder groups in SD policy making. After a brief introduction it describes two distinct models of stakeholder involvement, namely:

- The Finnish National Commission on SD (FNCSD) and
- The upgraded UK Sustainable Development Commission (SDC).

While the FNCSD applies a partnership model that brings government officials, businesses and civil society organisations together in one organisation, the SDC is an independent 'watchdog' and advisory body involving different stakeholders.

Based on the description of the two models of stakeholder involvement, the Report tries to summarize some of their key characteristics.

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National Councils for SD across Europe – an Introduction

Whenever governance for sustainable development (SD) is under discussion, the quest for the involvement of civil society in policy-making is imminent. [Agenda 21](#), for example, emphasises that "one of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development is broad public participation in decision-making" (UNCED 1992a, paragraph 23.2.); and the [Rio Declaration on Environment and Development](#) states that "environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level" (UNCED 2002b, principle 10). Similar commitments to participation are reiterated in all kinds of international and national policy documents on SD, such as

the renewed EU SD Strategy. Paragraph 42 of the [renewed EU SDS](#) states: “Member States should consider strengthening or, where these do not yet exist, setting up multi-stakeholder national advisory councils on sustainable development to stimulate informed debate, assist in the preparation of NSDSs and/or contribute to national and EU progress reviews”.

Some of the relevant policy documents and the scholarly literature reveal at least four rationales behind these normative quests for participation. Participation is expected to

- help define the complex concept of SD that focuses on human needs today and in the future,
- facilitate the exchange of relevant knowledge and information that is necessary for good governance,
- increase the societal ownership of sustainability policies, and
- facilitate horizontal integration through the reconciliation of different stakeholder interests.

In accordance with UN and OECD recommendations, most EU Member States have established an NCSD or an equivalent institution. For an overview of the participatory arrangements employed in SD Strategy processes across Europe we recommend the website of the [European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils/EEAC](#), and the respective category of the [country profile section provided on this website](#).

However, if we take a closer look at existing NCSDs, we find at least two distinct models.

The ideal-type NCSD is a stakeholder forum that brings together a broad variety of stakeholders, such as business associations, social as well as environmental NGO representatives and academics/scientists. This model is portrayed below in the case study on the UK Sustainable Development Commission (SDC).

An alternative model can be found in several Central-Eastern European countries and in Finland. There, NCSDs also involve government officials. By doing so, they serve not only stakeholder involvement, but also horizontal coordination and integration of sectoral policies at the governmental level. This model is portrayed below in the case study on the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSD).

Both models are introduced in direct comparison in the fact sheets below.

Fact sheet: The Finish National Commission on SD (FNCSD) and the UK SD Commission in direct comparison

| | Fact sheet FNCSD | Fact sheet UK SDC |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Name of organization and link to homepage</i> | Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (“Suomen kestävän kehityksen toimikunta”) | Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) |
| <i>Mission/objectives</i> | “to promote and coordinate the implementation of sustainable development in Finland” | The SDC is the UK Government’s independent ‘watchdog’ on SD. It also has on advisory and advocacy role on SD for the Government |
| <i>Founding year</i> | 1993 | 2000 |
| <i>Responsible to whom</i> | the FNCSD is chaired by the Prime Minister and the Secretary General keeps the Environment Minister and other relevant Ministers informed about the FNCSD’s activities | it reports to the UK Prime Minister and the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales |
| <i>Structure</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The commission: 44 permanent members • The FNCSD secretariat: 20 experts • Sub-committees, sub-groups or working groups of the FNCSD | led by a board of Commissioners and supported by the SDC Secretariat. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Commission: 19 Commissioners (individual Commissioners are usually appointed for a three year term which can be renewed; they serve for a maximum of 10 years) • The Secretariat: 40+ policy staff members (incl. the Director of the Secretariat) |
| <i>Sectors and organizations involved (Commissioners)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government: 25 • Economic interest groups: 6 • Social interest groups (including education and church): 9 • Environmental interest groups (and environmental journalists): 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academia/research: 7 • Business/commerce: 5 • NGOs: 4 • Politics/public sector: 1 • Youth work: 1 • Law: 1 |
| <i>Resources (personnel) Key functions and activities</i> | 20 public administrators in the FNCSD secretariat <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion forum • Consensus finding mechanism • Coordination and cooperation mechanism • Outreach and reporting activities • Critical reviewer | The SDC Secretariat has 40+ policy staff members. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving as ‘watchdog’ regarding Government’s progress towards SD • Advising ministers, policy-makers and stakeholders across Government on SD • Publishing publicly available reports on various SD issues |

| | | |
|--------------|--|--|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responding to SD policies initiated by the Government • Inviting debates on complex and contentious issues. |
| Type of NCSO | partnership between government, business and civil society | independent watchdog for SD and advisory body |

The Finish National Commission on SD (FNCSD)

Introduction

This case study is based on several sources. First, it summarizes available literature and websites on the Finnish National Council on Sustainable Development (FNCSD). Second, and foremost, it is based on interviews with five FNCSD members that were conducted in Helsinki on 8 November 2006,* and on a telephone interview with the secretary and senior advisor of the FNCSD secretariat, Annika Lindblom, that was conducted on 5 December 2006. Third, it also reflects personal impressions of Reinhard Steurer who participated at the FNCSD meeting on 8 November 2006 thanks to the invitation of Sauli Rouhinen, the Secretary-General of the FNCSD.

* The interviewees were

- Risto Ranki from the Ministry of Trade and Industry,
- Ilkka Sipiläinen from the Evangelical Lutheran Church,
- Markku Tornberg from the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners MTK,
- Marjatta Melto from the Trade Union of Education in Finland OAJ
- Leo Stranius from Friends of the Earth

We thank all interviewees for their time and effort.

History, political context and mission

The Finnish National Council on Sustainable Development (FNCSD) was established in 1993 by government decree as a response to the Rio summit in 1992. From the beginning, the FNCSD involved not only business and civil society stakeholders (like most NCSOs do), but also a significant number of government officials (both politicians and public administrators from different ministries). Since the very beginning, the FNCSD has been chaired by the Prime Minister. Overall, the FNCSD is rather a partnership that serves a broad variety of purposes than a stakeholder forum that advises government (like most other NCSOs across Europe do).

In order to fully understand the partnership character of the FNCSD, being aware of some key features of the Finnish political system is crucial. Finnish governments are characterised by relatively broad coalitions that collaborate closely with social partners (business associations and labour unions). As a consequence, they are characterised by a strong consensus orientation, and a sense for continuity. These political circumstances may be regarded as prerequisites for a partnership model embodied by the FNCSD.

According to the [Council's homepage](#), the mission of the FNCSD is "to promote and coordinate the implementation of sustainable development in Finland". Overall, the FNCSD is a focal point for SD issues in Finland reaching into all three societal sectors, namely government (represented by politicians and public administrators), the private sector (represented by business associations) and civil society (represented by social and environmental NGOs).

Regarding changes over the last decade, one interviewee noted that the work habits of the FNCSD stabilized and long-term planning improved. Another interviewee noted that in the early days of the FNCSD, most Ministers attended the meetings whereas meetings nowadays are attended by four or five Ministers who have core competencies regarding SD. Despite this change, high-level political commitment is still regarded as very good by all interviewees.

Structure and functions

The structure of the FNCSD foresees that different tasks are fulfilled by different entities. The most important FNCSD institutions are [the commission](#) itself, [the FNCSD secretariat](#), and [sub-committees of the commission](#) (also called sub-groups or working groups).

The commission

The commission is the actual partnership body that brings together more than 40 permanent members from government, businesses and civil society organisations. The members are selected and appointed by the government for a four year term. They meet four to five times a year (for details see the [selected activities section below](#)). The meetings are chaired by the Prime Minister, and the Minister of the Environment acts as a deputy chair. Most often four to five other sectoral Ministers also attend the FNCSD meetings.

Currently, the commission consists of 44 members, including the chair and the deputy chair. A closer look at the members reveals the following composition ([click here for a full list of the FNCSD members](#)):

• Government (politicians and administrators): 25 members

- Prime minister and 6 sectoral ministers
- 4 members of parliament/Saami parliament
- 2 local/regional government representatives
- 12 public administrators from 12 different ministries

- **Economic interest groups: 6**

- 6 representatives of different business associations

- **Social interest groups, education and church: 9**

- 7 social interest groups (labour unions, women, youth, children and consumer issues)
- 1 education association
- 1 church representative

- **Environmental interest groups: 4**

- 3 environmental NGOs
- 1 environmental journalist

Regarding the composition of the commission, one interviewee was concerned that environmental interests tend to be underrepresented in the FNCSD. The interviewee said that because three environmental NGOs are not a sufficient counterweight to the better represented economic and social interest groups, environmental interests are sometimes marginalized.

Besides the 44 FNCSD members, the commission comprises also about 35-37 substitute or deputy members. They are invited to an FNCSD meeting once a year.

The function of the commission is at least twofold. First, it serves as a discussion forum that facilitates broad debates on SD issues between government on the one hand and the different interest groups on the other. Second, the commission also strives for finding a consensus among all commission members. If the commission manages to reach a consensus on a certain issue or programme, it provides political impetus and guidance for the government and for all sectoral agents involved. However, several interviewees emphasised that the price of the consensus orientation of the FNCSD is that the outcomes are often rather general (not to say superficial), and that the commission is not a decision-making body.

One of the major consensus finding achievements of the FNCSD so far is the [new Finnish SD Strategy](#). In 2005 and 2006, a sub-committee affiliated with the FNCSD (the so-called SD Strategy group) developed a new SD Strategy that was finally adopted by the entire FNCSD in mid 2006 (for details see the [section on "Selected activities" below](#)).

The FNCSD secretariat

The FNCSD secretariat supports the work of the commission in several ways. A closer look reveals that the secretariat consists of two functionally distinct yet closely collaborating institutions.

The so-called "**core secretariat**" consists of five experts from the Ministry of the Environment (including the Secretary General). It is located in the Ministry of the Environment. The core secretariat is the national focal point and operational driver for SD issues in Finland in general, and for most activities of both the commission and the wider FNCSD network secretariat in particular (see below). All major activities of the FNCSD, including the four meetings of the commission per year, are organised by the core secretariat. Besides this project management and coordination function, it also plays a key role in planning the FNCSD's future activities.

The core secretariat is complemented by the "**interministerial network secretariat**", a network of 15 desk officers from different ministries who are responsible for SD issues. The network secretariat is mainly responsible for horizontally coordinating and integrating SD issues into all relevant sectoral policies. Ideally, this policy integration process is based on a dialogue with other network secretariat members and with different stakeholder groups represented in the commission. Another key function of the network secretariat is to provide guidance and input to the thematic commission meetings in line with the work programme of the FNCSD. Before papers are submitted to FNCSD members, they are discussed and adopted within the network secretariat. Overall, the network secretariat is an interministerial expert group on SD that is heavily involved in both the SD work of the commission and of the Finnish government.

The five experts from the core secretariat and the 15 experts from the network secretariat constitute the FNCSD secretariat. Although the secretariat represents a vital part of the FNCSD structure, its experts are not members of the commission. In many cases, this role is fulfilled by their ministerial supervisors.

FNCSD sub-committees

Sub-committees of the FNCSD are initiated and established by the core secretariat on demand. Whenever a commission member or a network secretariat expert expresses the desire to discuss a particular issue in depth in smaller groups, and the secretariat finds that this desire is shared by others, it establishes a sub-committee (also called sub-group or working group).

A sub-committee is coordinated by a commission member, and it comprises those members that are thematically relevant for the focus of the sub-committee. Work in the sub-committees (as well as in the commission) is unpaid, but financial support is available for catering etc.

If the FNCSD is able to find a consensus on a particular issue or programme, this often happens in the sub-committees. They seem to be the locus of most of the substantial discussions and consensus finding efforts that take place in the context of the FNCSD. While some interviewees mentioned that they appreciate having direct influence on legislation that is prepared by public administrators who also participate in the sub-committees, some others were not able to confirm this kind of direct access to governmental policy making. They wished they had the opportunity to comment on draft legislation more often.

The number of sub-committees fluctuates strongly. In the 1990s, several FNCSD sub-committees operated in parallel. At the moment the FNCSD has one sub-committee for education in the context of SD. Recently, this sub-committee has developed a National Strategy of Education for Sustainable Development and submitted it to the commission for discussion. Other examples for FNCSD sub-committees were

the “strategy group” that developed the new Finnish SD Strategy (see below), and the group that developed the set of SD indicators that are used to monitor the SD Strategy.

The key functions of the FNCSD in a nutshell:

Obviously, the FNCSD has a quite differentiated structure. This implies that its key functions are fulfilled by different institutions. The allocation of key functions among the different institutions of the FNCSD can be summarized as follows:

- *Discussion forum:* The FNCSD (in particular the commission) facilitates broad debates on SD issues between government officials, business associations, social and environmental NGOs.
- *Consensus finding and political guidance mechanism:* By striving for a consensus on particular policy issues, the FNCSD (in particular the commission) provides political impetus and guidance. Sometimes it also plays an active role in developing SD government programmes (such as the 2006 SD Strategy).
- *Policy coordination and integration mechanism:* The FNCSD (in particular the network secretariat) coordinates and integrates SD policy issues between different sectoral ministries (horizontal policy integration).
- *Outreach and reporting agent:* The FNCSD (in particular the core secretariat) organises thematic seminars, awareness raising and education activities, and it reports to the UN.
- *Critical reviewer:* The FNCSD (in particular the core secretariat) sometimes installs sub-committees that critically review government programmes and activities (one example for this function was the assessment of the SD Strategy that was adopted by the Finnish government in 1998).

Overall, the FNCSD regards itself as “a permanent focal point for sustainable development issues in Finland”. One could add that, because the focal point concerns the government, the private sector and civil society organisations, its span is considerably wide.

Selected activities

As the different institutions of the FNCSD serve distinct purposes and functions, they fulfil a broad variety of activities, reaching from the development of common statements to the organization of SD awareness raising seminars. This report can highlight only a selection of activities, such as the recurring commission meetings and the development of the [new Finnish SD Strategy](#).

Commission meetings and newsletter:

The FNCSD members meet four times a year for three to four hours to discuss thematic priorities that are specified in the work programme of the commission or put on the agenda on demand by the secretariat. The meetings are organized by the core secretariat, and the discussions are often based on input provided or approved by the network secretariat (and the sub-committees).

The unique feature of the commission meetings is that the Finnish Prime Minister and other sectoral Ministers provide input to the FNCSD and, more importantly, listen to the stakeholders that are represented in the commission. All interviewees have emphasised that this direct access to politicians via the FNCSD is very important to them. For some of them it is even the ultimate reason for investing time in their FNCSD membership.

Since the stakeholders that are represented in the commission want to benefit from the attention of the Prime Minister and the sectoral Ministers, the discussion in the commission meetings seems to be directed towards the present politicians. This implies that substantial exchanges among different commission members and the secretariat tend to take place in the sub-committees, or ahead of the commission meetings rather than in the meetings.

The outcomes of the commission meetings and other issues are disseminated through the “RioNytt bulletin”, a newsletter format that is circulated four times a year.

Overall, the four commission meetings per year join the efforts of all FNCSD institutions, namely the commission itself, the FNCSD core and network secretariat, and the sub-committees (as far as they are operational).

Developing the new Finnish SD Strategy:

After reviewing the Finnish government SD Strategy in 2003, the FNCSD changed sides and has developed the [new Finnish SD Strategy](#) in a sub-group that was headed by an under-secretary of state from the Ministry of Finance. The new SD Strategy has been adopted by the FNCSD in late summer 2006, and by the Finnish government in December 2006.

When it comes to the implementation of the Finnish SD Strategy, not only governmental bodies but all sectors are asked for their contribution. In the FNCSD meeting in early November 2006, for example, the Prime Minister asked the commission members about their efforts in implementing the SD strategy, and he took notice of their plans and activities. Governmental actions regarding the new SD Strategy will be reviewed every two years in line with the EU SDS reporting scheme. How the review will be conducted is not decided yet.

As one interviewee mentioned, consensus finding for the new SD Strategy was taken very seriously by all involved stakeholders. Some groups even considered leaving the negotiation process in the sub-committee, but then decided to stay on board because they were able to negotiate some concessions. For several interviewees with different backgrounds, the negotiations in the SD Strategy group illustrate another important characteristic of the work in the FNCSD. They agree that striving for a broad consensus among diverse stakeholders comes at the price of rather general, less concrete positions or programmes.

Summary of strengths and challenges

Based on the interviews with FNCSD members, this case study mentions several strengths and weaknesses of the partnership model. The three most important strengths of the FNCSD can be summarised as follows:

- All interviewees emphasised the importance of the high-level political commitment that is given in the context of the FNCSD. The direct involvement of the Prime Minister and of sectoral Ministers can be identified as a major success factor of the FNCSD.
- Direct access to public administrators in the commission and in sub-committees gives interest groups (the impression that they have) leverage on governmental decision making.
- Trust among the FNCSD members is high, inter alia because fluctuation among them is low.

According to the interviewees, the three most important challenges of the FNCSD can be summarised as follows:

- Striving for a broad consensus among diverse stakeholders comes at the price of rather general, less concrete positions or programmes.
- The consensus orientation also limits the possibility of stakeholders to advise and review government officials critically.
- One interviewee mentioned that environmental interests are underrepresented in the FNCSD.

Overall, all interviewees were generally satisfied with the way the FNCSD is working. When we asked them for possible ideas for a reform, only a few had some suggestions.

The UK's Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)

Introduction

The case study on the UK Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) is mainly based on the available literature and websites outlining the work of the SDC. Additionally, a telephone interview with a policy staff member of the SDC Secretariat was undertaken on 15 December 2006 in order to deliver most up-to-date information and to investigate certain issues more in-depth.

History and Mission

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) was established in October 2000. As defined in the 1999 UK SD Strategy, "[A Better Quality for Life](#)" (HM Government, 1999), the SDC's main responsibility was "to monitor progress on SD, and to build consensus on action to be taken by all sectors to accelerate its achievement" (Article 5.25). From 2000 onwards, the SDC has acted as the Government's independent advisor and 'critical friend' on all issues related to SD.

With the establishment of the SDC in 2000, the new institution subsumed the work of two earlier initiatives, namely (1) the UK Round Table on SD which was established in 1995 to provide a forum for discussion on major issues of SD, and (2) the British Government Panel on SD, established in 1994 as an independent advisory body to the Government on strategic SD issues. Each year, the Panel reported directly to the Prime Minister.

The [1999 UK SD Strategy](#) pointed out that the reason for creating a new and more powerful SDC is "to help take forward this Strategy and to provide a focal point for considering SD in this country" (HM Government, 1999, Article 5.25). Since its establishment, the SDC has developed its role and gradually increased its influence as an UK-wide advisory non-departmental public body consisting of appointed Commissioners and a Secretariat.

The new 2005 UK SD strategy, "[Securing the Future](#)" (HM Government, 2005a, 154), proposed to redefine the role of the SDC as follows: "The Government will strengthen the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) and expand its role to act as an independent 'watchdog' looking at Government's progress on this strategy". Therefore, a change of the reporting process was set up: Until the redefinition of the SDC's role, the progress of the UK SD strategy has been monitored by the Government itself. With the 2005 UK SD strategy, the idea was to move "to independent scrutiny of action on SD across Government to determine whether real progress is being made" (HM Government, 2005a, 154). From April 2006, the SDC officially took up the watchdog role for SD, whilst retaining its advisory and advocacy roles.

The SDC policy staff member interviewed for this report argued that the SDC generally provides a "space for new arguments". This means that the SDC can offer "new ideas which are slightly radical". This is considered as necessary in order to foster SD in policy-making and reach at least incremental progress in practice. Furthermore, the SDC staff member pointed out that the SDC has grown exponentially over the last few years, taking on board an ever increasing number of SD issues. In order to ensure that the quality of their advice and monitoring work remains high, the SDC may consider specialising on certain SD topics in the future.

Overall, the new role of the SDC is to "report on progress towards implementing the UK Framework and the commitments in the UK Government Strategy, including on the institutional and accountability arrangements, as well as focusing in more depth on particular issues" (HM Government, 2005a, 166). The SDC regularly reports on its work to the UK Prime Minister as well as the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales.

Structure and Functions

The SDC is made up of Commissioners and a Secretariat that supports the Commissioners. It receives funding from several sources, including various UK Government departments, the Devolved Administrations (Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly Government) and WWF-UK.

The Commissioners

The SDC is led by a board of **19 Commissioners**, coming from a variety of different backgrounds, including academia/research, business, NGOs, the public sector, youth work and law. According to the SDC website, the Commissioners play a central role as they develop and steer the work programme for the SDC. Commissioners include the SDC Chair and four Vice-Chairs who focus on developing relationships across the UK Government and with the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The Commissioners are appointed by the UK Prime Minister in agreement with the First Ministers in Scotland and Wales. They are appointed for a minimum term of three years and serve for a maximum of 10 years. Posts for Commissioners are advertised in the national press. Applying candidates are then short-listed according to their competencies. The appointed Commissioners should reflect the diversity of the UK population and the variety of stakeholder groups in the country.

The Commissioners meet on a regular basis: The full board of Commissioners meets every six weeks in a plenary session where important issues concerning the SDC and its mandate are discussed. There are also regular steering group meetings for the work in the different policy fields the SDC is concerned with which involve several Commissioners and policy staff members. According to an SDC staff member, SD policy issues are lively debated among the Commissioners and uniform views about recommendations and position papers are the exception rather than the rule. Therefore, decisions about SDC recommendations and position papers are usually taken by a majority vote, as was recently the case for the position paper (SDC, 2006a) on the role of nuclear power in a low carbon economy. Unanimity among the Commissioners is only necessary for the SDC work plan (SDC, 2006b) which calls for broad agreement as it is a strategic mid-term framework for the SDC.

The SDC Secretariat

The work of the Commissioners is supported by the SDC Secretariat which includes 40+ policy staff members. The work of the SDC is divided into the following policy areas: climate change, consumption, economics, education, energy, engagement, health, housing and communities, regional and local government as well as transport. Each policy area is led by a steering group of Commissioners and SDC policy staff members. There is regular contact between the Commissioners and the policy staff in the Secretariat, mainly in the steering groups for the various policy areas.

The key functions of the SDC in a nutshell:

According to the [SDC website](#) and [Niestroy \(2005\)](#), the key functions of the SDC include:

- *'Watchdog'*: Reviewing the implementation of and the progress made towards the objectives outlined in the UK SD Strategy;
- *Advisory body*: Giving advice to the UK Government on SD issues;
- *Think-tank and agenda setter*: Generating ideas, producing reports on SD issues and inviting debates on controversial SD policy issues
- *Facilitator of policy integration*: Fostering an integrative approach towards SD and reviewing how far SD has been included/achieved in the various policy fields;
- *Facilitator of public engagement*: Fostering stakeholder dialogue and exchange;
- *Good practice advocate*: Encouraging and stimulating good practice on SD issues.

Activities

This section summarises some of the core activities that have recently been undertaken by the SDC in various policy fields. Generally, the work of the SDC is divided into ten policy areas with each policy area being led by a steering committee consisting of Commissioners and SDC staff members. It is the Commissioners who decide which projects will be undertaken in each policy area by reflecting upon new policy initiatives, needs of Government departments, contentious issues or technological innovations. Below are examples of recent projects undertaken by SDC in some of the policy areas:

- [SDC submission to the Environmental Audit Committee on the UK Climate Change Programme 2006 \(SDC, 2006d\) \(July 2006\)](#)
- [SDC Report "Stock Take: Delivering Improvement in Existing Housing" \(SDC, 2006e\)](#)
- [SDC Report "Towards Sustainable Consumption" \(SDC & NCC, 2006\) \(May 2006\)](#)
- [SDC submission to the Department for Trade and Industry's energy review, entitled "Energy Policy for the 21st Century" \(SDC, 2006f\) \(April 2006\)](#)

'Watchdog' function

Based on the 2005 UK SD strategy, the watchdog role of the SDC was formalised in April 2006. The SDC website lists the following specific activities that have been or will shortly be undertaken in this context:

- Monitoring cross-government and intra-departmental progress towards SD: In November 2006, the SDC published a report about the progress of the "[Sustainable Development Action Plans](#)" that had to be prepared by all Government departments and must be in line with the UK SD Strategy (SDC, 2006c).
- Developing biennial "State of the Nation" progress reports and three annual thematic reviews of public services on the following themes:
 1. Sustainable Communities: Watchdog review of the UK Government's housing policy (due end of 2006)
 2. Energy: Evaluating the role of the regulator for Britain's gas and electricity industries in offering the public a fairly prices, reliable and efficient energy system (due in spring 2007)
 3. Supermarkets: Reviewing the extent to which supermarket delivers a sustainable food system in the UK and the role of Government in facilitating this (due in spring 2007)
- Undertaking reviews of policies such as Treasury spending reviews.

- Monitoring the 'accountability framework' for SD.

Engagement

In order to find ways for solving problems associated with SD and to make sure the advice the SDC gives to the UK Government is well informed by a broad range of stakeholder opinions, it actively seeks to 'engage' the public and stakeholders. There are several ways the SDC engages with the public and stakeholders:

First, the SDC has set up a **virtual panel** of people with different backgrounds who should debate about issues that the SDC is involved with. Participation in the panel is based on invitation only in order to ensure the balance of skills and expertise. The aim is to involve a total of 1,000 people in this virtual panel. Currently, about 600 invited people are active in the panel. So far, the facets of well-being have been the main topic discussed in the panel.

Second, the SDC has set up an online discussion forum, the **SDC Forum**, for the broader public. Everyone can become member to the Forum and discuss SD issues of its concern. Until 15 December 2006, the following three policy topics ranked highest on the agenda of the discussants:

- Energy, transport and climate change (318 messages posted)
- Housing, communities and social change (158)
- Economics and sustainable consumption (86)

Work for the UK SD Strategy

The advisory and review work the SDC is carrying out for the UK SD Strategy is one of their major activities. The first activity of the SDC in this context was a review of the previous UK SD Strategy, "[A Better Quality of Life](#)", published in spring 2004. The title of the report summarised the SDC's view and provided a short message for the Government, "[Shows promise. But must try harder](#)" (SDC, 2004). As [Bronwen Jones \(2006\)](#), the Head of the Sustainable Development Unit (SDU) in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), pointed out in a recent article, the Government broadly shared the outcomes of the SDC review, although maybe not always agreeing with details. Generally though, the SDC review influenced the subsequent development of the new UK SD Strategy.

The process of developing the new UK SD Strategy, "Securing the Future" (2005), was a collaboration between DEFRA's SDU and the SDC. Both institutions worked in a partnership arrangement that included sharing information and views openly. The main role of the SDC was to provide advice to the UK Government in order to make sure that the new SD Strategy would be an improvement compared to the previous one. The SDC was involved in consultation workshops that were part of the strategy development process. Furthermore, the SDC Commissioners participated in several regional consultation events. In a section of the article by [Bronwen Jones \(2006\)](#), the SDC Secretariat points out that both the involvement of the Commissioners and the Secretariat in the process was important. While the Commissioners made use of their expertise and standing in order to make political interventions, the SDC Secretariat provided full-time advice to the Government and the Commissioners.

According to Bronwen Jones (2006, 129f), both sides, DEFRA's SDU and the SDC, have praised the partnership-like collaboration among them as excellent. Moreover, the SDC argues that the good relationship with representatives of a wide range of UK Government departments helps their aim to foster ownership of the UK SD Strategy's objectives throughout the Government. According to an SDC staff member, one of the reasons for this good relationship is that many SDC staff members previously worked for the Government. Additionally, there is regular official communication between the Chair of the board of Commissioners and the Government.

In order to facilitate the delivery of the objectives set out in the UK SD Strategy, the SDC has identified a list of 250 commitments ([SDC, 2005](#)). For each commitment, the SDC defined promises, specific actions and challenges as well as the responsible Government department(s). These commitments will serve as the basis for the SDC to monitor progress towards the objectives outlined in the UK SD Strategy.

Additionally, the SDC contributed – together with the SDU and the Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales – to a UK-wide vision for SD. The document, "[One Future – Different Paths](#)" (HM Government, 2005b), was published in 2005 and aims to offer a consistent approach of SD for the whole UK. This framework document is, of course, supported by separate SD strategies in each of the administrations.

Interesting characteristics:

The three most interesting characteristics of the SDC can be summarised as follows:

- 'Watchdog' and advisory role at the same time.
- High number of academics/researchers as Commissioners.
- Reports, recommendations and position papers on a variety of policy areas agreed on by majority voting.

Concluding comparison of the Finish FNCSD and the UK SDC

This ESDN Quarterly Report has portrayed two distinct models of stakeholder involvement, namely the partnership-model represented by the FNCSD and the watchdog-model that is represented by the UK SDC. Some key characteristics of the two examples portrayed here can be summarised as follows:

| | FNCSD | SDC |
|-----------------------------|-------|------|
| <i>Political commitment</i> | High | High |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Ratio of non-governmental and governmental commissioners</i> | 19:25 | 19:0 |
| <i>Key purpose</i> | Discuss and achieve consensus on SD policy issues | Critically review the UK government's SD policy ("watchdog") and provide advice on SD issues |
| <i>Agreement procedures</i> | Consensus finding | Majority voting for recommendations in reports and position papers; Unanimity for SDC work plan |
| <i>Access to government</i> | Direct access to politicians and administrators within the FNCSD | Good relationships with Government departments (in particular DEFRA) |
| <i>Horizontal policy integration leverage</i> | Takes place within the FNCSD (in particular within the network secretariat) | Many activities of the SDC try to facilitate horizontal policy integration |
| <i>Vertical policy integration leverage</i> | Limited because focus is on horizontal integration | Two SDC staff members are concerned with local and regional SD policy issues |
| <i>Satisfaction of involved stakeholders</i> | Very high, mainly because of PM and ministerial involvement in FNCSD | ? |

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