



Putting sustainability into practice in government departments

A new assessment tool has been developed to evaluate the sustainability initiatives of government departments. On its first application, in the UK's Department of Work and Pensions, it identified a good mix of practice alongside areas for improvement. The authors suggest that this method could be used elsewhere to assess how well an organisation is embedding the principles of sustainable development into all aspects of its business.

The UK government's independent advisor on sustainable development (SD), the Sustainable Development Commission (recently closed), developed the Departmental Sustainability Assessment (DSA) to assess SD in government departments and to offer suggestions on building capability. The DSA reviews departmental strategies and statistics alongside interviewing key departmental officials in five organisational areas: policies governance and leadership, operations, people and procurement. The first DSA was conducted on the Department of Work and Pensions.

Overall, the assessment has found there to be a mix of good practice within the department with some opportunities for improvement. In particular, it has embedded sustainable development principles into operations and procurement. In its operations, the Department has been successful in reducing carbon emissions from its offices, adhering to standards in new buildings and improving reporting on water consumption. However, better data collection systems are needed to fully understand the impacts of these. In procurement, it has pioneered both a strategy and a risk assessment, but it must now ensure these are translated into results in its work with suppliers.

Already the Department of Work and Pensions has made efficiency improvements, again mainly in the areas of operations and procurement. However, there are more opportunities for environmental and economic gain in terms of its policies, for example, in the area of social justice, where it could be improving the skills of the unemployed to participate in a new 'green' economy and also improving the health and wellbeing of people in the work place. Replicating the progress of the Department in operations and procurement in other areas could be achieved through better mainstreaming of sustainable development into policy making. This would require a more holistic approach that includes environmental impacts systemically into socio-economic concerns, for example, they could be included in policy making on the well-being of older people.

Finally, the report has identified that the Department already has a wealth of experience in addressing SD and suggests it could use this to help other departments realise the principles of SD. This would also improve cross-governmental interaction, particularly with the Department of Energy and Climate Change, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department of Health. This cross-departmental working is at the heart of good SD practice. To improve its leadership potential the report suggested a more comprehensive use of SD principles are applied throughout the Department and that it establishes its own SD champions' network with members from across different areas. It also suggested giving the departmental board a greater scrutiny role to ensure the Department is adhering to its sustainability commitments.

Source: Ullah, F., Shields, A-M. & Percy, J. (2011) *Departmental Sustainability Assessment, Findings and Recommendations from pilot with the Department for Work and Pensions*. Sustainable Development Commission, UK.
Downloadable from http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/data/files/publications/DSA_DWP_report_artwork.pdf

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