

### Sustainability

**Inequalities in health arise because of inequalities in society – in the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age.**

**Actions to tackle health inequalities demand the efforts of government, statutory organisations, the community, and voluntary and private sectors. This Good Practice Guide to sustainability is one of a series designed to capture information about health inequalities and highlight evidence-based interventions and key actions for improvement across sectors.**

**Other Good Practice Guides in this series can be accessed at [www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/good-practice-guides](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/good-practice-guides)**

#### Why do it?

One of the guiding principles of sustainable development is to ensure a strong, healthy and just society. Often it is those that are most economically and socially disadvantaged who live in the most degraded environments. With fewer jobs and unsafe and unattractive streets, people's health and life expectancy suffer as a consequence.

#### Health and social context

Our health is directly affected by many factors, such as water, sanitation, environmental conditions, food, housing, employment, peace or conflict and the provision of health care services. Degraded environments, floods, droughts and climate change put pressure on resources and are linked with issues such as poverty, unemployment and social exclusion.

The Marmot Review, *Fair Society, Healthy Lives* states that economic growth is not the most important measure of our country's success.<sup>1</sup> The report also states that the fair distribution of health, wellbeing and sustainability are important social goals and addressing social inequalities in health and tackling climate change must go together.

Direct effects on our health as a result of climate change include an increase in skin cancers, respiratory problems, bacterial growth, pest activity and the spread of new diseases, with indirect effects being damage to both the natural and built environment as well as indigenous industries.<sup>2</sup> Some positive effects include a reduction in deaths related to cold weather

and better public health due to increased opportunities for physical recreation.

The most widely accepted definition of sustainable development is from the Brundtland Report: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps more understandable for most of us, in financial terms is "...living off the interest from our assets, as opposed to the capital". The field of sustainable development can be conceptually broken into three pillars: environmental sustainability; economic sustainability and social sustainability.

One of the six policy objectives within the Marmot Review is to "Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities."<sup>1</sup> The review calls for the development of common policies to reduce the scale and impact of climate change and health inequalities as well as encouraging the improvement of community capital and reducing social isolation across the social gradient.

For a community to function and be sustainable, the basic needs of its residents must be met. A socially sustainable community must have the ability to maintain and build on its own resources and have the resiliency to prevent and address problems in the future. There are two levels of resources that are available to build social sustainability (and indeed, economic and environmental sustainability) – individual or human capacity, and social or community capacity. To be effective and sustainable, both these individual and community resources need to be developed.

The Egan Review identifies eight components of a sustainable community, with each being a determinant of health:

- governance;
- transport and connectivity;
- services;
- environmental;
- equity;
- economy;
- housing and the built environment;
- social and culture.<sup>4</sup>

This has strong links to the Dahlgren and Whitehead model of the determinants of health.<sup>5</sup>

## Policy context

*Everyone's Involved: Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland*<sup>6</sup>

The effective implementation of the strategy requires our government to join together many different policies and strategies from across the social, economic and environmental dimensions and to bring them forward within a cohesive framework for delivery.

Listed below are some examples of those policy drivers which complement the strategy and provide direction and guidance for the delivery of a strong, healthy, just and sustainable Northern Ireland:

*Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006, Duty for Sustainable Development*<sup>7</sup>

The Duty states that “a public authority must, in exercising its functions, act in a way it considers best calculated to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in Northern Ireland...”

*Climate Change Act 2008*<sup>8</sup>

The Act, which is relevant to all of the UK, puts in place a legally binding target to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. Two key aims are to improve carbon management, helping the transition towards a low-carbon economy and to demonstrate UK leadership internationally in reducing global emissions.

*Warmer Healthier Homes, A New Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland March 2011*<sup>9</sup>

A primary aim of the strategy is to target resources on vulnerable households most in need, but the eradication of fuel poverty remains a core goal. It identifies four key areas for action: targeting of resources; improving energy efficiency; achieving affordable energy and building strong partnerships.

*Our Children and Young People - Our Pledge. A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006 – 2016*<sup>10</sup>

The aim of the strategy is to produce improved outcomes for all children and young people and ensure that they are fulfilling their potential, are safe and feel safe, are free from poverty, are living in decent homes in communities that are free from distress and in environments that are welcoming.

*Air quality strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland 2007*<sup>11</sup>

Air quality in Northern Ireland has shown considerable improvement, however some pollutants still exceed air-quality objectives. Current average levels of man-made particulates are estimated to reduce life expectancy by up to eight months. Measures outlined could help to

reduce the impact on average life expectancy to five months by 2020 and help protect our environment.

*The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy 2000*<sup>12</sup>

The strategy forms the blueprint for conserving and improving biodiversity in Northern Ireland. The rich diversity of rocks, soils, water, plants, birds and animals is not only of intrinsic value and beauty but is also of importance to our health and wellbeing, providing recreation and a counter balance to the pressures of modern day living.

*Towards Resource Management: The Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy 2006–2020*<sup>13</sup>

The strategy provides a framework for the development and achievement of sustainable waste management practices in Northern Ireland, as required by EU directives. Emphasis is placed on waste prevention and breaking the link between waste production and economic growth.

## What works?

The evidence base for interventions and programmes is growing, with local and regional initiatives and case studies providing direction as we go forward. Listed below are examples of interventions which illustrate the links between sustainability and health and wellbeing, and the gains to be achieved.

### For individuals/families

Interventions to increase the consumption of fresh local produce can result in reduced consumption of salt, fat and artificial additives as well as reduced packaging, processing and transport, which can help to meet landfill targets, mitigate against climate change and support the local economy.<sup>14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19</sup>

Interventions and financial support to alleviate fuel poverty in the home can impact positively on health and wellbeing particularly for the most vulnerable, help alleviate the wider impact of poverty and debt and mitigate against climate change.<sup>20</sup>

### In communities/settings

Support for local communities to adopt sustainable living practices such as the development of community gardens, waste and energy reduction initiatives, sustainable transport and environmental improvement schemes can mitigate against climate change, generate financial savings, improve health and wellbeing and build social capital.<sup>14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23</sup>

## For workplaces

Local government support and guidance to implement sustainable practices and good environmental management in small local businesses can result in reduced levels of carbon emissions and waste to landfill and generate financial savings that can enhance the economic viability of businesses, support the local economy and mitigate against climate change.<sup>24</sup>

## For schools

Promotion and support for environmental education programmes such as eco-schools, which encompasses education for sustainable development can change the attitudes of children and encourage them and their families to take a responsible attitude towards the environment.<sup>25</sup>

## Policy level

Development and implementation of a model based on the Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change, signed by over 200 councils in England.<sup>26</sup> Financial incentives and assistance for businesses, communities and households to adopt sustainable practices can mitigate against climate change.<sup>14, 17, 20, 21, 24</sup>

## Measures for which evidence is lacking or unclear

Government funding is usually directed to environmental awareness-raising campaigns for which little or no evidence of effectiveness is sought, rather than towards behaviour-change initiatives where evidence is demanded.<sup>27</sup> There is a growing level of academic evidence that increased environmental awareness does not translate into changes in behaviour.

## What can we do?

### Key actions for health improvement

Develop policy within central and local government to adapt to and mitigate against climate change and provide support to the private, community and voluntary sectors to do likewise. Examples include the Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change and the implementation of an environmental management system such as ISO 14001.<sup>24, 26</sup>

Develop household-focused initiatives to:

- alleviate fuel poverty;
- increase consumption of fresh, local produce;
- encourage and facilitate the use of sustainable transport.

Support local communities to develop initiatives such as:

- community gardens;
- sustainable transport schemes;
- waste and energy reduction initiatives;
- environmental improvement schemes.

Support programmes like:

Eco-Schools

[www.eco-schoolsni.org](http://www.eco-schoolsni.org)

Community Eco-Challenge

[www.sgehc.com](http://www.sgehc.com)

Making Local Food Work Programme

[www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk](http://www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk)

Decent Food for All

[www.foodvision.gov.uk/pages/decent-food-for-all](http://www.foodvision.gov.uk/pages/decent-food-for-all)

Grow Great Grub

[www.foodvision.gov.uk/pages/growing-food](http://www.foodvision.gov.uk/pages/growing-food)

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