

Engagement and Sustainable Development

1. What is the relevance of engagement to sustainable development?

If we are to create a strong, healthy and just society that exists within environmental limits, we need to tackle the complex and intractable issues that sit at the top of the political agenda - climate change being an obvious and pressing example. However, it is clear that Government cannot rely on traditional approaches to decision-making to bring about the understanding, mandate and mobilisation required to address these issues.

The SDC believes that there is a growing imperative for a new model of engagement, which enables government, stakeholders and the public to engage in constructive debate and action to address complex issues. The need for such a model is increasingly recognised in Government,¹ and in recent years there has been an increase in engagement on policy issues². However, there are still many questions left unanswered. Engagement and consultation 'events' are often seen as one offs. There is still uncertainty about how engagement 'fits' with representative democracy, and we are not yet clear about how engagement helps us, as a nation, to make the difficult decisions that we face.

2. What is engagement and what are the benefits?

Engagement is far more wide-reaching than consultation. It encompasses a whole spectrum of activities, from communications and consultation, through to empowering people to make their own decisions³. Done properly, engagement can deepen the understanding and commitment of both decision-makers and participants (stakeholders, citizens and consumers) to deliver more sustainable outcomes.

The benefits of engagement include:

- **Effectiveness and delivery** – engagement enables more informed, robust decisions, and builds potential for co-creation and co-delivery
- **Democratic renewal and legitimacy** - through good engagement, people understand and value the necessary trade-offs, allowing for more acceptable decisions. This builds more equitable decision making processes which take into account the full range of views
- **Empowerment and ownership** – engagement enables people to develop skills, networks, influence, and to change what really matters to them.

3. What are the principles of effective engagement for sustainable development?

Engagement will contribute to sustainable development when there is:

- **Clarity** – about what is to be achieved through the engagement process; the framing of the issue to be resolved; what’s up for grabs and the level of support that’s needed.
- **Integration** – joined up engagement activities which are a coherent strand of activity within the decision-making process itself (rather than as an add on)
- **Independence** – mechanisms to help ensure the approach is balanced and the results are trusted
- **Tailored** – use of different approaches to meet the needs of different participants, whilst ensuring where possible that different participants link to and inform each other throughout the process
- **Follow through** – clear demonstration of how the results are used; enabling all to be part of the solution where possible; evaluation of the process.

4. What critical changes are needed around engagement?

The SDC is working collaboratively to develop the evidence base around engagement in decision-making ⁴. This work tells us that it’s critical that the Government:

- Recognises the contribution of engagement to change:
 - A bolder use of engagement to open up political space for change. The toughest decisions with the most political risks often call for greater engagement
 - Framing processes correctly to elicit creative solutions to complex problems
 - Enshrining engagement within new governance arrangements
- Uses a consistent framework for engagement:
 - Developing a shared understanding of engagement which distinguishes between communications, consultations and community empowerment; that fits with all levels of decision-making, from national policy-making to local delivery; that provides guidance on how to go about engagement for different purposes
 - Encouraging a cross government use of engagement to reduce duplication of effort and maximize joined up action
- Develops its capacity to deliver:
 - Adopting a learning approach to connecting engagement with decision-making frameworks

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- Understanding why and how to use engagement in decision-making as part of the professional training of public and civil servants

5. What is the role of the SDC?

The SDC has three roles in relation to engagement:

- **Advice** - we advise on the design of effective engagement processes and trial innovative new approaches
- **Capacity Building** – we build capacity within Government around greater understanding of sustainable development, policy design and engagement
- **Watchdog and Scrutiny** - as the UK Government’s sustainable development watchdog, we are also involved in assessing engagement processes

For more information about the SDC’s work on engagement, see www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/engagement.html

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¹ For example: Strong and prosperous Communities. CLG White Paper, 2006; The Governance of Britain. Green Paper 2007 (Ministry of Justice); Prime Minister’s Speech to the National Council of Voluntary Organisations on politics (3rd Sept 2007); DIUS and Sciencewise (www.sciencewise.org.uk)

² For example: National Pensions Debate, GM Nation, Your health, your care you say, Citizen Summit on Climate Change. Also see Digital Dialogue for an analysis of online engagement by Government (www.digitaldialogues.org.uk)

³ See SDC’s typology of Engagement (www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/engagement.html)

⁴ For example: Engagement and political space for policies on climate change. IPPR (2007); Engage for change: the role of public engagement in climate change policy. Involve (2007); www.peopleandparticipation.net