

Sustainable development

The view from Government

Alan Meale, MP

As we near the end of the century and prepare to face a new millennium, it is a good time to reflect on how far society has come. In many respects, we have come an awful long way. We only need to look at our own homes to see the benefits of rising prosperity and improved technology. At the same time, we face major challenges. Pressures on resources and the environment remain and too many people still lack the opportunity to play their full part in society. We must now develop in ways which are based on an innovative and efficient economy, social justice, and protection of the environment. In short, we need to develop sustainably.

Sustainable development is an idea whose time has come. The term has been around for the past twenty years, but what does it mean? It used to be associated with essentially green issues i.e. the

environment. However, sustainable development goes much wider than that, it goes to the very heart of policy making. It is an important element and part of a much bigger picture.

Sustainable development is all about quality of life. And the only way for us to ensure a better quality of life for all of us, now and in the future, is to embrace the concept of sustainable development and make it work. This Government's vision of sustainable development is based on four broad objectives:

- **social progress**, ensuring better health, good education and a reasonable standard of living for everyone;
- **effective protection of the environment**, ensuring that people's health does not suffer from poor air quality or other pollution and protecting wildlife and the countryside;

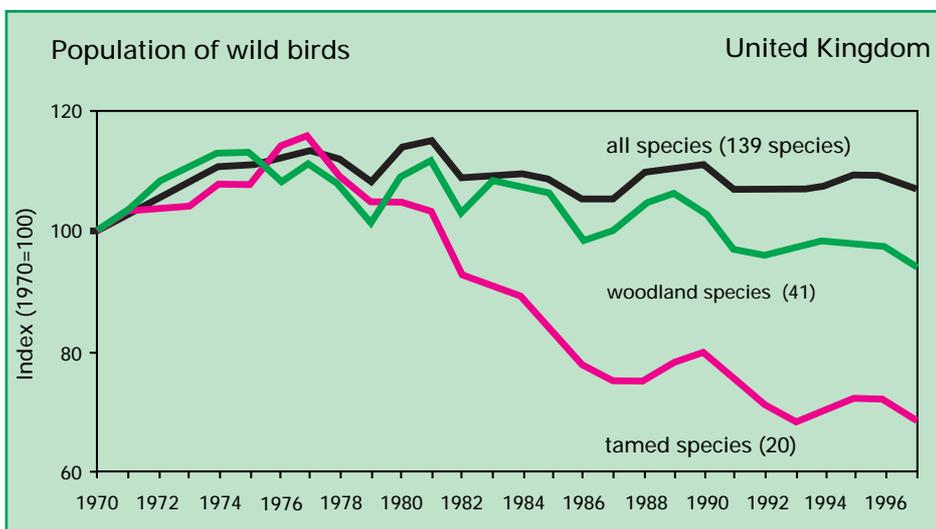
- **prudent use of natural resources**, ensuring that we use resources efficiently and minimise waste;
- **maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment** so that everyone can share in high living standards and greater job opportunities and to generate the income and wealth needed to pay for essential infrastructure and future investments.

Sustainable development is essentially about making decisions and developing policies in the light of these objectives. It requires a new and integrated way of thinking about choices right across Government, and throughout society. It will involve changes in the way we do things if we want to create a society that meets all our needs, and our children's needs.

Science is one of the areas that can help us to achieve sustainable development. Science helps us to get things in perspective. It takes the long view, and it helps us focus on what are the major and underlying problems. A good example is provided by the work on climate change. Science has helped provide an arena for debate about options for the future and has enabled business to engage in its own detailed projections and assessments.

Although this Government has an important part to play, it cannot achieve sustainable development alone. We need the understanding, commitment and involvement of all sectors of society. Last year, we produced a consultation document, 'Opportunities for Change' and invited everyone to let us have their views and comments on our vision for sustainable development. Without the understanding, commitment and involvement of all sectors of society, sustainable development will simply not work. The response was impressive and the results of the consultation have been used in the preparation of the 'UK Strategy for Sustainable Development' which will be published within the next few months. The strategy will be a blueprint for action that will take us towards a more sustainable future.

But how will we know that we are moving in the right direction? How do we measure our successes? A vital part of the strategy will be indicators which will allow us to keep track of progress, and enable the reporting of successes, and failures, in a way that is clear, comprehensive and



Bird populations are regarded as good indicators of the health of the wider environment.

useful to a wide audience. A good indicator should be scientifically sound, technically robust and easily understood. Our headline indicators are designed to meet that need.

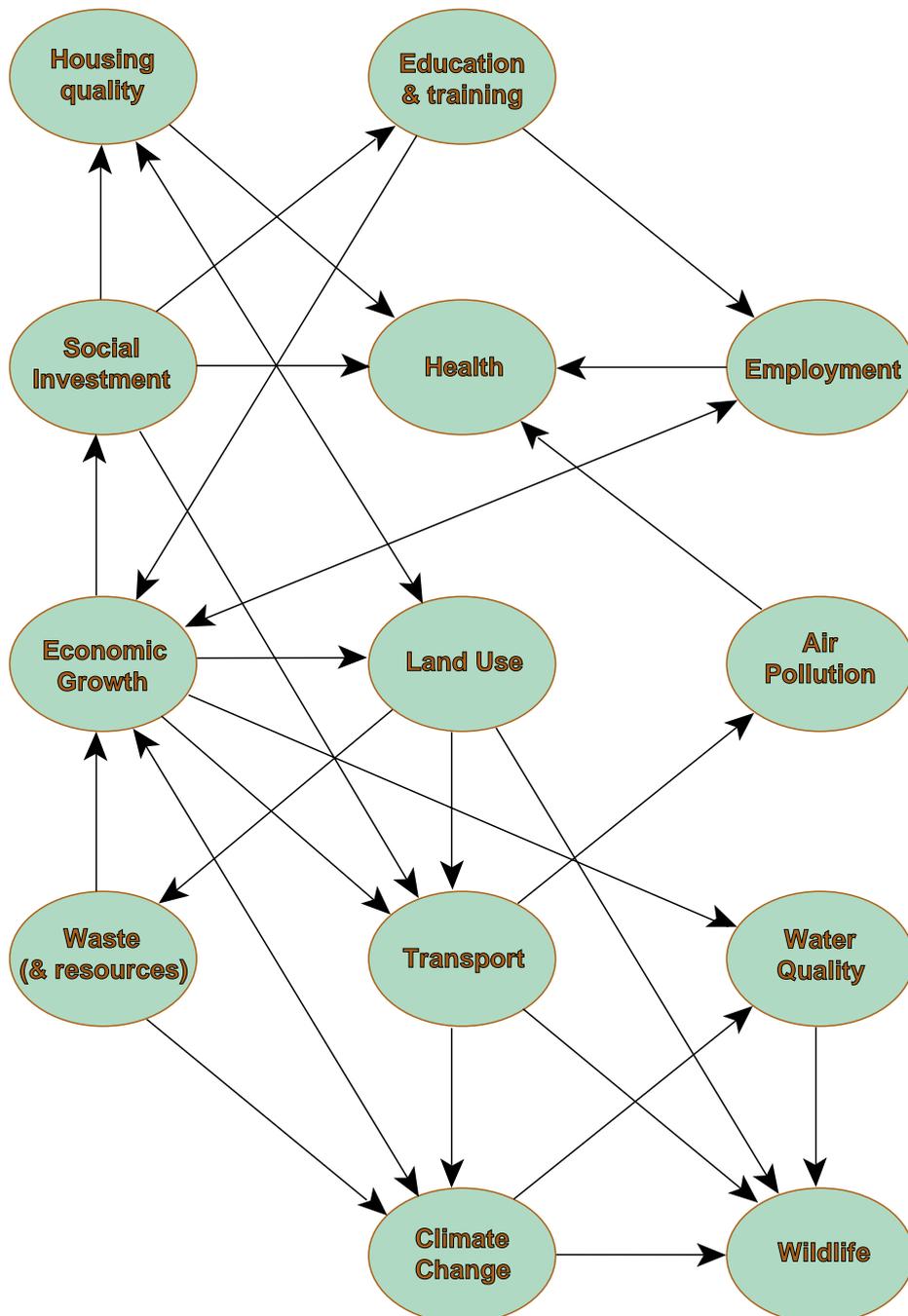
The intention is to have a small number of headline indicators which will allow people to see an overall picture of whether our development is sustainable. These indicators will cover areas such as health, education, economic growth and

housing. For example, people will be able to assess the UK's progress in limiting emissions of the greenhouse gases which are contributing to climate change. We are also working on a core set of about 150 or so indicators to monitor progress in specific detailed areas and these will be published along with the strategy.

As well as being carefully monitored, the strategy will draw together initiatives from across government and show how they fit

together. Policies on transport, health, social exclusion, and urban and rural development, as well as environmental policies on issues such as air quality, all link together in an integrated approach to sustainable development. The indicators will highlight the linkages between initiatives such as the Health Strategy and the Transport White Paper. For example, the indicator covering health will illustrate the highest level objectives of health policy, promoting better health and longer life for all the population. But additional, more detailed, indicators on reducing specific causes of ill health or premature death will figure in the forthcoming Health Strategy. In this way it is hoped that the headline indicators will act as a barometer of quality of life.

Sustainable development affects everyone, it involves everyone, and its success will depend on everyone playing their part, however small. The opportunities to build a modern and fair society for now and for the future are real. We must grasp them. The Sustainable Development Strategy will help us to do just that.



Some of the links between the proposed headline indicators.

Alan Meale, the Member of Parliament for Mansfield since 1987, is Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Mr Meale was a member of the Select Committee on European Legislation 1987-90; and Home Affairs 1990-92; an Opposition Whip 1992-94; PPS to the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party 1994-97; and PPS to the Deputy Prime Minister 1997-98.

Alan Meale, 48, was educated at St Joseph's RC School, Bishop Auckland; Durham University; Ruskin College, Oxford; and Sheffield Hallam University. He was a seaman in the Merchant Navy before joining NACRO as National Employment Development Officer 1977-80. He was assistant to the General Secretary of ASLEF 1980-84; political advisor to the Opposition spokesman on Health and Social Security 1984-86; and spokesman on Employment 1986-87.

Married, with a son and a daughter, his interests include music, writing, art and sport – especially Mansfield Town Football Club.