



House of Commons
Environmental Audit
Committee

**Government Response
to the World Summit
on Sustainable
Development 2002:
From Rhetoric to
Reality**

**First Special Report of Session
2003–04**

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The Environmental Audit Committee

The Environmental Audit Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider to what extent the policies and programmes of government departments and non-departmental public bodies contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development; to audit their performance against such targets as may be set for them by Her Majesty's Ministers; and to report thereon to the House.

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Publication

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at: www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/environmental_audit_committee.cfm. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Parliament is at the back of this volume.

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First Special Report

World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002: From Rhetoric to Reality – Government Response

1. The Environmental Audit Committee published its report on the *World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002: From Rhetoric to Reality* on 23 October 2003 as HC 98.
2. The Government's Response to the Committee's Report was received on 7 January 2004 in the form of a memorandum to the Committee. It is reproduced as an Appendix to this Special Report.

Appendix

The Government's Response to the Environmental Audit Committee Twelfth report (2002-3): World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002 – From Rhetoric to Reality

Introduction

1. The Government welcomes the report of the Environmental Audit Committee into the follow-up of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.
2. The Summit set an ambitious agenda, with some challenging targets and goals. The Government remains committed to delivering the outcomes of the Summit, recognising that the Summit was a significant step on a long road to achieving development which is sustainable.

Response to the Committee's Conclusions and Recommendations

Focus on implementation

Recommendation 1. We recognise the difficulties associated with an international event of the scale of the Summit. However, in the context of the scale of the global challenges we face and the potential which the Summit presented, we find it impossible not to feel a sense of missed opportunity. Nevertheless, the Summit achieved more than many expected. The outcomes were solid if somewhat limited and it is essential the UK Government rigorously pushes for their implementation. (Paragraph 26)

Recommendation 2. The outcomes of WSSD could provide a helpful step along the path to sustainable development, if implemented effectively. However, like many, we are disappointed that participating nations could only agree a handful of specific targets and timetables amongst the range of commitments which they made. (Paragraph 27)

Recommendation 5. We believe that the UK delegation took a realistic and sensible approach to negotiations at the World Summit, and performed well despite the limitations of negotiating through EU channels. (Paragraph 43)

3. The Government welcomes the assessment that the Summit outcomes were solid and that it achieved more than many expected. As set out in the Government's Memorandum of evidence to this EAC enquiry, the UK and the EU would have preferred stronger targets in some areas. But international agreement depends on consensus.

4. Throughout the Summit preparations, at the Summit itself, and since, the Government made clear that the global community must move from words to concerted action and implementation. We have been doing just that, by taking immediate action in the UK, and by pressing others to do the same, at local, national, regional and international level.

5. The action already taken is set out in a progress report published in September 2003 to mark the anniversary of the Summit (<http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/eac-wssd/progress.htm>). This included an updated table of the main WSSD commitments and sectoral follow-up processes (attached at Annex A for ease of reference), along with an update on the activities of the multi-stakeholder partnerships which the Government is supporting.

6. We have been keen not to set up a separate WSSD delivery apparatus, which risked fragmenting WSSD from pre-existing, strongly related, workstreams. WSSD did not start from a blank sheet of paper and nor should its follow-up. We are taking WSSD outcomes into account when reviewing Departments' strategic documents.

Working in Partnerships

Recommendation 3. We welcome the extensive range of Partnerships for Sustainable Development which have been established to support the commitments made at the Summit. It is important that these Partnerships are effectively monitored to ensure that they amount to more than a re-branding of existing initiatives. (Paragraph 28)

Recommendation 4. We are encouraged that the UN Commission on Sustainable Development has introduced measures to monitor the progress of Partnerships against UN guidelines and has required them to report regularly on their progress. This monitoring process will be crucial in maintaining the credibility of these projects. It is important that the UK Government maintains pressure at UN level to ensure that this process is sufficiently resourced and rigorously followed-up. (Paragraph 29)

7. We agree that governments alone cannot achieve sustainable development and that the involvement of stakeholders such as business and civil society is essential to meet the commitments made at Johannesburg. This is not a new concept, but the formal recognition by the Summit of the importance, and potential, of working in multi-stakeholder partnerships is novel for the UN.

8. Continued monitoring, reviewing, and information exchange will help ensure the quality and credibility of partnerships as a means of implementation. Nevertheless, partnerships are essentially voluntary, self organising and self regulating. An over-burdensome, over-prescriptive and inflexible framework might deter partnerships from

engaging with, and reporting to, the UN system, depriving the UN of a valuable source of ideas, innovation and information.

9. A formal framework for multi-stakeholder partnerships' involvement in the follow-up to WSSD was agreed at the Eleventh Meeting of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD 11) in April 2003, building on informal guidelines developed before the Summit. The UK took a leading role in these negotiations, which delivered a transparent and credible framework which is not over-prescriptive.

10. Defra has maintained its support for a member of staff on loan to the CSD Secretariat. The UN CSD Secretariat is preparing a report on the progress of the partnerships registered with them, identifying obstacles to action, as well as examples of best practice. This will inform discussions at CSD's twelfth meeting in April 2004 (CSD12).

11. As well as taking forward partnerships through CSD, the Government intends to participate in the "International Forum on Partnerships for Sustainable Development" organised by the Italian Government for March 2004, in consultation with the CSD Secretariat. The outcomes of the Forum will feed into CSD 12.

12. The UK is well placed to make a strong contribution to both the Rome Forum and partnerships discussions at CSD12, given our long-standing commitment to partnership working and the wide range of partnerships with which we are involved.

Communications

Recommendation 6. The Government was slow to capitalise on the sustainable development communications opportunity offered by the Summit. The confusion surrounding Michael Meacher's attendance was an appalling own-goal, serving only to detract media coverage further from the Summit's purpose. However, we congratulate the Government for its effective media briefing at the Summit. It is essential that the Government's sustainable development communications review evaluates Summit experience to inform future sustainable development communication strategies. (Paragraph 49)

13. Ministers and officials from all the departments involved in WSSD held briefings with media, NGOs and other stakeholders before the Summit. The Prime Minister met the UK Earth Champions at No10, and departments used the interest generated by the summit to highlight a variety of government sustainability initiatives. Defra held a communications event, attended by several dozen organisations involved in communicating sustainability. This was co-ordinated by Futerra, a company with recognised credentials on sustainable development, and included journalists and government departments as well as NGOs. The meeting discussed matters of substance and was influential in getting balanced and informed coverage of the summit

14. Initially at the Summit there was a lot of scepticism and hostility from the NGOs and media, and it was unclear that there would be any breakthrough or what actions might follow out of it. The Committee has recognised the work the delegation's media team did during the Summit: there were twelve daily media briefings and similar for stakeholders. These gave journalists and stakeholders access to UK officials, giving them both notice of the progress of the negotiations and the details behind the issues. Communications in this

respect supported the negotiating effort that the ministerial team of Mrs Beckett, Mr Meacher and the Deputy Prime Minister were taking forward. Getting all sides round the table allowed information to be shared and issues to be talked through and resolved.

15. Following the Summit Defra's sustainable development communications team developed a communications framework which stimulated a debate, including government, NGOs and communications practitioners, on how better to communicate sustainability. The outcomes from these discussions have informed work since and will feed in to the process leading to the review of the UK sustainable development strategy during 2004-5.

UK mechanisms for Summit follow-up.

Recommendation 7. We strongly support DEFRA's efforts to ensure that the Johannesburg commitments are incorporated into the mainstream of existing departmental work programmes. It is important that the commitments are swiftly embedded. (Paragraph 57)

Recommendation 8. In the absence of a separate implementation mechanism, it is essential that the Government ensures that the key Johannesburg commitments are fully reflected in Spending Round 2004 as specific targets and objectives in Public Service Agreements and Service Delivery Agreements. (Paragraph 60)

Recommendation 9. As part of their bids for Spending Round 2004, departments will be required to submit a sustainable development strategy. We recommend that HM Treasury ensures that these strategies set out how each department is intending to implement any identified Johannesburg commitments even if these are not reflected in formal targets. (Paragraph 61)

Recommendation 12. The wording of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation is too vague and the commitments too indirect to enable effective auditing. We recommend that the Government develops and publishes a specific action plan for the implementation of its Johannesburg commitments which would form the basis of subsequent audits. (Paragraph 81)

16. Follow-up of the main commitments from the World Summit requires action by a range of Government Departments. We remain committed to the approach set out in the Memorandum to the EAC's inquiry (February 2003): to incorporate, where appropriate, WSSD commitments into HMG's formal delivery planning system, Departmental Public Service Agreements, Service Delivery Agreements and associated targets and taking account of WSSD outcomes in the review of the sustainable development strategy for the UK, A better quality of life. These two processes are in their early stages and the outcomes cannot be pre-empted.

Spending Review 2004

17. Spending Review 2004 offers an opportunity to assess our formal delivery targets, including whether as a whole they reflect the breadth of commitments made at WSSD and consider how best to direct the resources needed to achieve them. We are not, however, expecting to see direct transposition of all the WSSD targets, goals and commitments into

departments' PSA targets. Given the wide ranging, and long-term, nature of the WSSD targets, and the need for PSA targets to be "SMART", such an approach would not be practicable.

18. Sustainable development is one of a number of cross cutting themes which will be considered as part of Spending Review 2004. Departments will be required to submit their Spending Review proposals to the Treasury, which will evaluate the various sustainable development components along with other horizontal government priorities.

Action Plans

19. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs chairs a Ministerial-level Sustainable Development Task Force, including leading non-governmental stakeholder representatives, to provide a forum for dialogue on how to best achieve implementation of the WSSD commitments and a revised sustainable development strategy focussed on delivery of these and other commitments at home and abroad.

20. The Government does not intend to develop a standardized set of formal, stand-alone WSSD delivery plans, as this would cut across our desire to build on existing workstreams and processes. However, WSSD follow-up must be based on rigorous analysis and departments have been encouraged to draft "delivery plans" for the commitments on which they lead.

21. These internal documents are intended to help inform both the review of A better quality of life and the Spending Review, as well as other strategic priority setting exercises. They present a structured statement of objectives, roles, resources, intermediate milestones and risks associated with delivering the substance of specific WSSD commitments.

22. The Government intends to publish summary versions of those delivery plans that have been finalised, as an interim step pending the outcomes of the strategy review, and SR2004. At present, these include Defra's plans on sustainable fisheries, marine biodiversity, international biodiversity, sustainable agriculture, chemicals management and sustainable patterns of consumption and production, and FCO's plan on international sustainable development governance. As other plans are developed, Departments will publish summary versions.

23. The Government's formal delivery planning system and the strategy review are not the sole route for delivery. Commitments should be embedded in other strategic documents and priority setting exercises. A good example is FCO's recent Command paper on the UN, which made clear that sustainable development is a key element of the overarching framework of UN activities, in particular for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and highlighted the need for more integrated and coherent follow-up of the major UN conferences. A revised EU Sustainable Development Strategy, incorporating external policies as well as internal, will also be important.

Sustainable Patterns of Consumption and Production

Recommendation 10. If the UK takes an enthusiastic approach to the development of a sustainable consumption and production strategy, it could pave the way for a radical review of the use of resources in the UK. The preparation of such a strategy offers a key

opportunity to weave together strands of existing energy, waste and procurement policy and ensure that each reinforces sustainable resource use. We look to the Government to produce a clear vision for sustainable resource use which avoids merely cobbling together existing policies into a strategy for business as usual. (Paragraph 77)

Recommendation 11. The Government has been promising resource productivity indicators since 1999. We recommend that their development is made a priority and that the UK pushes for their development at EU level to support the EU Sustainable Development Strategy as called for by the EU Environment Council. (Paragraph 78)

24. At the end of September the Government published “Changing Patterns: UK Framework for Sustainable Consumption and Production”. This starts to map the long route towards an economy which continues to provide high living standards, but does so without the levels of environmental degradation and unsustainable resource use that have historically accompanied industrial development.

25. The UK Framework represents the first major national statement on how to approach in practice the commitment at WSSD for a “framework of programmes ... to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production”. The Government will use the Framework to help pursue this ambition at EU and international level. It will also guide the Government’s actions at home, linking with our strategic approach to key resource issues such as energy, waste and water.

26. The Framework sets out a political, economic and environmental rationale for future policy-making and interventions to improve market mechanisms. It consolidates a significant policy goal, that of “decoupling” economic growth from adverse environmental impacts and unsustainable resource use. It also establishes a preference for cost-effective measures deployed as early as possible in the life-cycle or supply chain, favouring the prevention of unsustainable patterns of consumption - rather than ‘cures’ after the event. It identifies areas where further action is needed and which will need collaboration across a range of partners and institutions. The document therefore marks the start of the process and shows the intended direction, but the agenda is a long-term one and a great deal of work lies ahead.

27. One recent step foreshadowed in the SCP Framework is the Government’s new approach to sustainable procurement, announced at the end of October, which includes the introduction of minimum environmental standards for purchases of certain types of product. Action in hand includes a review of programmes aimed at helping businesses with more sustainable production, with a view to improved coordination and greater added value. And a review of Government policies on innovation, due to report shortly, will be supporting the drive to integrate environment and resource efficiency issues. These are indications of the Government’s firm intention to pursue the SCP agenda.

28. Alongside the SCP Framework, the Government has published a consultation paper on associated indicators. These will be used to monitor the decoupling of economic growth and household consumption from environmental degradation and resource use. The proposed basket of indicators includes a set of economy-wide indicators of material flows, and a number of indicators which cover resource productivity by comparing the output of particular sectors with their direct environmental impacts.

Reporting and monitoring

Recommendation 13. We welcome INTOSAI's initiative to seek to develop guidance for audit institutions world wide on the effective audit of national performance against the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. We also congratulate the UK National Audit Office for taking a lead in this work. (Paragraph 85)

Recommendation 14. We recommend that the National Audit Office initiates discussions with DEFRA and the Sustainable Development Commission to explore how they could work together to report UK progress against the Johannesburg commitments. Any such arrangements should take account of the need to keep Parliament informed, preferably through regular reporting to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee. (Paragraph 86)

29. Defra, the National Audit Office and the Sustainable Development Commission have begun discussions to explore the Environmental Audit Committee's suggestion that the three bodies could work together to report progress against the Johannesburg commitments to Parliament, EAC and to the public.

30. Currently, the Government uses its Annual Report on UK Progress towards Sustainable Development as the main vehicle for regular reporting on international sustainable development commitments to Parliament, public and the UNCSD. It should be noted, however, that this year's Annual Report does not cover WSSD in great detail, since it would duplicate the progress report published to mark the anniversary of the Summit, and that the Government does not currently intend to publish an Annual Report for 2004, as resources will be focussed on the sustainable development strategy review. Discussions on reporting both domestic and international commitments will necessarily form part of this review.

Action at EU Level

Recommendation 15. The World Summit commitments have led to renewed calls by the EU Environment Council to ensure that sustainable development is at the heart of EU policies and policy-making processes. We urge the UK to maintain its efforts to ensure that sustainable development permeates beyond the realms of the EU Environment Commissioner and Environment Council and is effectively integrated across the full range of EU governance. (Paragraph 92)

31. The Government will continue to support the implementation and further elaboration of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy which was agreed by the European Council in Gothenburg in 2001. The Government sees the Strategy as an opportunity to involve all the EU institutions and sectors on a regular basis. The commitment by EU Heads of Government to review progress and give strategic direction at the Spring Council meetings helps to maintain a high profile and engage a much broader spectrum of interests than the environment sector alone. The Government has sought to strengthen the focus on global sustainable development issues in the EU Strategy and will aim to secure a much better integration of the internal and external policy agendas in the review of the Strategy taking place in 2004. The Government also supports the better policy-making goals of the

Strategy, in particular the application of impact assessment to all major policy proposals in order to ensure that economic, social and environmental impacts are properly accounted for in decision-making.

Action at UN level

Recommendation 16. We welcome the UK's role in pressing for the reform of the UN Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) and welcome the new monitoring and review arrangements which the CSD has adopted to assess progress against the Johannesburg commitments and sustainable development principles in general. (Paragraph 96)

32. CSD is the main UN body charged with follow-up of commitments made at World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), as part of the wider effort to pursue sustainable development through the UN system, including the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). Follow-up needs to reinforce the compelling links made at WSSD between environmental issues, economic growth and human well-being. Government departments are working closely together on preparations for CSD 12.

33. CSD11 (April 2003), reached a constructive conclusion, with reformed work methods and a focused work programme that will, with continued political commitment, help keep implementation on track. The most conspicuous feature of the reformed CSD is a two year work cycle – a “review” year looking at progress, sharing information on best practice, and identifying barriers; followed by a “policy” year identifying policy responses needed to keep progress on track. Each cycle will focus on a “thematic cluster of issues”.

34. CSD will next meet in April 2004 in New York to assess progress and identify obstacles, focussed on the thematic cluster of water, sanitation and human settlements. The UN Secretary General is preparing 5 reports to inform CSD12, one on each of the thematic cluster issues, one on overall progress on WSSD commitments and one on partnerships. CSD will issue a non-negotiated Chair’s Summary, which will inform policy responses in the second “policy” year of the cycle.

35. It is right that CSD 12 should focus on the thematic cluster issues. But CSD will also need to spend some time looking at other key commitments. For example, we must keep up momentum on sustainable patterns of consumption and production, on its own and in relation to the cluster. We would also expect to address issues where targets have been set for 2004-5, such as implementing national strategies for sustainable development, including poverty reduction strategies that integrate economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development.

36. We are pleased that new CSD work methods give greater scope for inputs from regional and sub-regional meetings. The UNECE (Economic Commission for Europe) regional event, to feed into CSD12, will be held in Geneva, 15-16 January. The UK will be playing an active role as Chair of this meeting.

Recommendation 17. We believe that the status of UNEP should be enhanced to reflect its important role as the key UN facility relating to environmental protection and sustainable development. We would like to see the UK Government actively support and progress such reform. (Paragraph 99)

37. Governance reform is very important if UN institutions are to play their full part in tackling environmental degradation and delivering on the sustainable development commitments made in Johannesburg. UNEP has a key role to play not only as the principal international environmental authority, but also in promoting the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the UN system. The Government sees advantage in UNEP becoming a UN specialised agency (or UNEO) with a broad environmental mandate, properly funded through mandatory contributions based on the UN assessed scale. This is a good aim for the future. However, it can only be achieved through the consent of the global community. Similar proposals were discussed at some length during the 2000–2002 international environmental governance process. If this proposal, recently revived by the French Government, is to make progress, there must be inclusive discussion to achieve consensus on the practical implications of such a transformation.

38. Our immediate priority is to pursue achievable incremental reform in UNEP. At the forthcoming Special Session of UNEP's Governing Council in Jeju (29-31 March 2004), the Government would like to see progress on governance issues such as the UNEP Indicative Scale of Contributions and universal membership.

Conclusion

39. Achieving long-term goals will require sustained momentum and regular scrutiny to keep progress on track; continued political commitment at the highest levels; and actions by local and regional authorities, government departments, the EU, the UN, the World Bank, the IMF, other international bodies, civil society, and the private sector.

40. Ultimately, success will depend on the resources, both human and financial, which Governments and international bodies are prepared to devote to implementation, and how well sustainable development is established as the central organising principle for international and domestic policy making.

41. The UK Government is committed to playing its part in achieving a sustainable global future.

42. The Government welcomes the Committee's continued interest in international sustainable development and looks forward to their future work in this area. We will report the outcomes of the Sustainable Development Strategy Review and Spending Review 2004 to the Committee.

7 January 2004

Past reports from the Environmental Audit Committee since 1997

2003-04 Session

First Annual Report 2003, HC 214

2002-03 Session

First Pesticides: The Voluntary Initiative, HC100 (*Reply, HC 443*)
 Second Johannesburg and Back: The World Summit on Sustainable Development–Committee delegation report on proceedings, HC 169
 Third Annual Report, HC 262
 Fourth Pre-Budget 2002, HC 167 (*Reply, HC 688*)
 Fifth Waste – An Audit, HC 99 (*Reply, HC 1081*)
 Sixth Buying Time for Forests: Timber Trade and Public Procurement - The Government Response, HC 909
 Seventh Export Credits Guarantee Department and Sustainable Development, HC 689 (*Reply, HC 1238*)
 Eighth Energy White Paper – Empowering Change?, HC 618
 Ninth Budget 2003 and Aviation, HC 672
 Tenth Learning the Sustainability Lesson, HC 472 (*Reply, HC 1221*)
 Eleventh Sustainable Development Headline Indicators, HC 1080
 Twelfth World Summit for Sustainable Development – From rhetoric to reality, HC 98 (*Reply, HC 232*)
 Thirteenth Greening Government 2003, HC 961

2001-02 Session

First Departmental Responsibilities for Sustainable Development, HC 326 (*Reply, Cm 5519*)
 Second Pre-Budget Report 2001: *A New Agenda?*, HC 363 (*HC 1000*)
 Third UK Preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, HC 616 (*Reply, Cm 5558*)
 Fourth Measuring the Quality of Life: The Sustainable Development Headline Indicators, HC 824 (*Reply, Cm 5650*)
 Fifth A Sustainable Energy Strategy? Renewables and the PIU Review, HC 582 (*Reply, HC 471*)
 Sixth Buying Time for Forests: *Timber Trade and Public Procurement*, HC 792-I , (*Reply, HC 909, Session 2002-03*)

2000-01 Session

First Environmental Audit: *the first Parliament*, HC 67 (*Reply, Cm 5098*)
 Second The Pre-Budget Report 2000: *fuelling the debate*, HC 71 (*Reply HC 216, Session 2001-02*)

1999-2000 Session

First EU Policy and the Environment: An Agenda for the Helsinki Summit, HC 44 (*Reply, HC 68*)

Second	World Trade and Sustainable Development: An Agenda for the Seattle Summit, HC 45 (Including the Government response to the First Report 1998-99: Multilateral Agreement on Investment, HC 58) (<i>Reply, HC 69</i>)
Third	Comprehensive Spending Review: Government response and follow-up, HC 233 (<i>Reply, HC 70, Session 2000-01</i>)
Fourth	The Pre-Budget Report 1999: pesticides, aggregates and the Climate Change Levy, HC 76
Fifth	The Greening Government Initiative: first annual report from the Green Ministers Committee 1998/99, HC 341
Sixth	Budget 2000 and the Environment etc., HC 404
Seventh	Water Prices and the Environment, HC 597 (<i>Reply, HC 290, Session 2000-01</i>)

1998-99 Session

First	The Multilateral Agreement on Investment, HC 58 (<i>Reply, HC 45, Session 1999-2000</i>)
Second	Climate Change: Government response and follow-up, HC 88
Third	The Comprehensive Spending Review and Public Service Agreements, HC 92 (<i>Reply, HC 233, Session 1999-2000</i>)
Fourth	The Pre-Budget Report 1998, HC 93
Fifth	GMOs and the Environment: Coordination of Government Policy, HC 384 (<i>Reply Cm 4528</i>)
Sixth	The Greening Government Initiative 1999, HC 426
Seventh	Energy Efficiency, HC 159 (<i>Reply, HC 571, Session 2000-01</i>)
Eighth	The Budget 1999: Environmental Implications, HC 326

1997-98 Session

First	The Pre-Budget Report, HC 547 (<i>Reply, HC 985</i>)
Second	The Greening Government Initiative, HC 517 (<i>Reply, HC 426, Session 1998-99</i>)
Third	The Pre-Budget Report: Government response and follow-up, HC 985
Fourth	Climate Change: UK Emission Reduction Targets and Audit Arrangements, HC 899 (<i>Reply, HC 88, Session 1998-99</i>)
