

Briefing: From 'securing' to 'procuring' our future

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1. INTRODUCTION

This briefing note describes how, through the Sustainable Procurement Task Force (SPTF), the Government has been set a challenge to apply the principles of its sustainable development policy in its own procurement.

In March 2005 the UK Government launched its new strategy for sustainable development, *Securing the Future*.¹ The document reflected a growing recognition that carbon is the key environmental driver and that personal and organisational (not just corporate) culture and performance are key to delivering the social and economic elements of sustainability.

The strategy is based on five principles of sustainable development: living within environmental limits; ensuring a strong, healthy and just society; achieving a sustainable economy; promoting good governance; and using sound science responsibly. It also sets out shared priority areas for UK action: sustainable consumption and production; climate change and energy; natural resource protection and environmental enhancement; and sustainable communities. Cross-cutting all of these is the Government's recognition that behavioural change is needed to deliver sustainable development.

2. MOVING FROM STRATEGY TO DELIVERY

To encourage a step change in public sector procurement practice the Prime Minister established the SPTF, under the chairmanship of ICE Fellow Sir Neville Simms. The aim is for the UK to be recognised as a leader in sustainable procurement across Europe and the world by 2009.

Presented to the Prime Minister on 12 June 2006, the SPTF's report *Procuring the Future: Sustainable Procurement National Action Plan*² identified critical areas to address and provided a flexible framework for procurement which would enable all Government bodies to assess their current capabilities and performance and understand the necessary steps to achieve improved performance.

In summary, the SPTF recommended that Government should do the following.

2.1. Lead by example

The lack of consistent leadership and ownership of sustainable procurement emerged as a key barrier. It was identified that current incentive systems neither rewarded sustainable procurement nor did they punish failure to comply with existing policies, resulting in confusion for suppliers.

2.2. Set clear priorities

Procurers complained of too much guidance, presented in an incoherent manner with no cross-government ownership. It was therefore recommended that existing policies be rationalised into one practical, unified, sustainable procurement framework covering environmental, social, ethical and economic factors.

2.3. Raise the bar

The SPTF believed that existing minimum standards for central Government should be properly enforced and extended to the rest of the public sector and that further standards should be developed in the priority areas of spend identified, including construction, energy, transport and waste. It also recommended that Government make clear which standards are mandatory and that it should be prepared to apply sanctions for non-compliance.

2.4. Build capacity by developing its capabilities to deliver sustainable procurement

Procurers complained of ambiguous information and training, confused messages and lack of tools showing how to put sustainability into practice. The SPTF concluded that for sustainable procurement to be undertaken effectively all procurement should be carried out by people whose procurement skills have been developed appropriately. Accordingly, the SPTF developed a new framework to allow public sector organisations to benchmark their own capability. The SPTF also recommended a new commitment to training and education for public sector procurers as part of the delivery of a National Action Plan, alongside rapid implementation of the Government's existing plans to develop a robust knowledge base on the sustainability impacts of products.

2.5. Remove barriers

The SPTF recommended that barriers to sustainable procurement—whether actual or perceived—be removed and that budgetary mechanisms that enable and support sustainable procurement be implemented. Evidence submitted to the SPTF suggested that whole-life costing was not being implemented in practice, the focus being on lower upfront costs. The Government's efficiency programme was perceived to be a barrier to sustainable procurement. Other barriers recorded were: the split between maintenance and capital budgets; and uncertainty on how to take account of non-monetary benefits. The SPTF called on HM Treasury to simplify and clarify existing guidance on whole-life costing and to reinforce the requirement that it is applied in public spending.

The UK Government is currently reviewing the National Action Plan and is expected to respond in full by the end of 2006. Its future policy with respect to sustainable procurement will be informed by this response.

It was evident during the course of the SPTF's work that construction is seen as a leader in terms of its understanding of sustainability and delivery of more sustainable products. Indeed many of the examples of excellent practice in the report were from the construction

industry. It is also evident that there is a massive opportunity for civil engineers to help the Government deliver its aspiration to be more sustainable in all its £150 billion spend. Civil engineers possess the knowledge to deliver more sustainable solutions and should therefore consider how the SPTF's report can help them demonstrate leadership in this area.

ICE is continuing to take the lead and will be holding its own Sustainable Procurement Conference on 7 February 2007. The conference will provide members and delegates with an opportunity to learn directly from Sir Neville Simms, Jonathon Porritt (Chair of the Sustainable Development Commission) and key Government clients and suppliers how the SPTF recommendations and the Government Action Plan will affect procurement in the future. For more information contact Vidya Gunapala at vidya.gunapala@ice.org.uk.

REFERENCES

1. HM GOVERNMENT. *Securing the Future*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 2005.
2. DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS. *Procuring the Future: Sustainable Procurement National Action Plan*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 2006.

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