

5.0 Sustainable development

5.1 Introduction

The waterway plan aims to be a model for sustainable development of the river. Sustainable development is all about ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for future generations to come. It is about a more inclusive society that achieves and shares the benefits of increased economic prosperity, which is less wasteful in its use of natural resources, and in which the environment is protected and improved.

The UK government is committed to the principles of sustainable development and its approach is set out in 'Securing the future – delivering UK sustainable development strategy' (HM Government, 2005). This new strategy develops the 1999 UK Sustainable Development Strategy, which included four central aims:

1. social progress which recognises the needs of everyone
2. effective protection of the environment
3. prudent use of natural resources
4. maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment

Sustainable development means meeting economic, social and environmental aims at the same time, and requires us to consider the long-term implications of decisions. The government's revised strategy shows in more detail how the four central aims can be integrated into sustainable development driven by the following principles:

- living within environmental limits
- ensuring a strong, healthy and just society
- achieving a sustainable economy
- promoting good governance
- using sound science responsibly.

An important element of the UK strategy is a set of indicators and targets intended to focus attention on what sustainable development means, and to give a broad overview of whether we are achieving a 'better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come'.

At a more local level these indicators and targets are presented in Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks (RSDFs). These are overarching documents that inform other strategies and policies in the region and are prepared by a collaboration of several bodies, including the Regional Chamber or Assembly, Government Office and Regional Development Agency.

5.2 The regional integrated framework

The South East of England developed its own RSDF in 2001, with 25 regionally derived objectives and 41 indicators under the four main aims of sustainable development. In 2004 an Integrated Regional Framework (IRF) was published, which establishes a shared vision and objectives for integrated working and, ultimately, sustainable development of the region. The IRF is an evolution of the RSDF and was produced not only by the South East England Regional Assembly, but also the Government Office for the South East, South East England Development Agency, Environment Agency, Department of Health, South East Forum for Sustainability and Regional Action and Involvement South East.

The IRF provides a common reference point for sustainable development and aims to help guide the work of other organisations to ensure sustainable development is at the heart of policy. As well as the same 25 objectives as the RSDF, it also includes the following vision for the South East: 'a prosperous region delivering a high quality of life and environment for everyone, now and in the future'.

The Environment Agency has applied the South East RSDF in preparing the Thames waterway plan. (The vast majority of the non-tidal River Thames is within the South East Region, with just the extreme upstream and downstream reaches falling outside.)

5.3 Sustainable waterway leisure and tourism in the South East

Leisure and tourism activities have significant implications for the environment, economy and social fabric of the River Thames corridor. This is especially apparent within major settlements along the Thames itself, such as Oxford, Abingdon, Reading, Maidenhead, Windsor, Chertsey, Kingston on the outskirts of London. The River Thames has been referred to as ‘liquid history’ because of the famous riverside towns, stately homes and historic sites, such as Hampton Court and Runnymede, along its course. It is a major tourism and leisure resource that supports a wide range of activities and facilities, including holiday accommodation, powered and non-powered boating (for both sport and recreation, as well as for commercial purposes), walking, observing wildlife, cycling and angling. However, these varied uses put pressure on the river and its surroundings. We need to plan and manage the use of this unique resource in sustainable ways so that future generations can enjoy it.

Leisure and tourism not only brings economic vitality. It also contributes to the quality of life, through enjoyment of the countryside, improving health and wellbeing. Sustainable leisure and tourism requires an approach that ensures the long-term viability and quality of natural, human and financial resources.

5.4 Sustainable development principles

We have used Strategic Sustainability Assessment¹ (SSA) to integrate environmental, as well as social and economic, considerations into the development of the plan. As part of this process, we defined a sustainable development framework for the Thames based on objectives included in the South East’s RSDF and IRF and more detailed criteria pertinent to the Thames (see Appendix 3). The appraisal criteria under each objective were used to test the sustainability of potential Thames waterway plan policies and proposals. Our aim is for the plan to consider the full range of sustainable development issues and to provide criteria against which to judge performance in achieving the plan’s objectives. Where possible the SSA identifies possible targets and indicators.

The SSA is concerned with the assessment of high-level policies and proposals. Environmental Impact Assessment will be applied, as necessary, to individual sites. The principles of sustainable development and the use of SSA will be integral to the further development of the plan and its subsequent revisions. The SSA document and a short summary is available at www.visitthames.co.uk/twp

Development policy We will support appropriate development necessary to achieve the objectives of the Thames waterway plan

Possible actions

- 1 establish a planning policy sub group of the River Thames Alliance
- 2 develop model policies for the Thames for adoption in Local Development Frameworks
- 3 define “appropriate” with reference to the character of the river, for example to ensure that tranquil and remote reaches are not compromised
- 4 follow principles of Thames Environment Design Handbook guidance
- 5 undertake environmental impact and flood risk assessments of relevant projects and proposals
- 6 introduce mitigation and enhancement measures in accordance with Environment Agency guidance

For the river to thrive some development will be necessary to sustain the viability of its sport, recreation and tourism assets.

¹ This approach draws on both Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Sustainability Appraisal (SA). A full explanation is provided in the separate SSA Report, available from the Environment Agency.