



Regional Centre of
Expertise on Education for
Sustainable Development



Draft consultation on the Wellbeing and Sustainable Development Bill

Member's Bill proposed by MSP Sarah Boyack

Submission deadline: Sunday 24 August 2025

Q1. Do you think that more needs to be done to embed sustainable development and wellbeing as primary considerations into public policymaking? Please tell us why.

This is a joint submission on behalf of members of Learning for Sustainability Scotland; Scotland's UN University-recognised Regional Centre of Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development; and SDG Network Scotland; which is an open coalition of members from across Scotland committed to achieving the SDGs in Scotland.

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Yes, more needs to be done to embed sustainable development and well-being as primary considerations into public policy making. Sustainable development is a pathway towards an aspirational concept of sustainability. Many actors incorrectly assume that sustainability is only an environmental issue. However, sustainable development recognises the interconnectedness between ecological integrity and social justice. Human futures depend on the well-being of our planet. Hence, human and ecological well-being are fundamental to sustainable development. In a policy sense, the UN Sustainable Development Goals were designed to create a holistic vision for the future. This requires a policy coherent approach in which not only are human and planetary well-being recognised to be aligned, but different policies should be tested for synergies and possible negative trade-offs.

The National Performance Framework (NPF) was an ambitious attempt to align public policy with the holistic vision and strategic planning potential of sustainable development and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, but the NPF did not fully engage at all levels of government and has now been in review for some time. This, or a similar approach, needs to be developed and fully implemented in Scotland.

Public policy needs statutory underpinning. It is not sufficient to have policy that merely *suggests* the importance of wellbeing and sustainable development. It is also important that this is recognised to be a cross-party area of interest.

We welcome this effort to bring forward this critical area of policy.

2. What is your view on the policy objectives of the Bill, as set out in the Policy Memorandum?

We agree on the need to plan and act with the future in mind, both that of future generations and of the planet. We see that policy coherence can synergise policy outcomes across multiple areas and create efficiencies for government. We approve the aim for statutory action with regards to the Bill. We are not convinced that the only mechanism for statutory action is a Commissioner; as explored further below.

3. Which of the following best expresses your view on section 1, which requires public bodies to have due regard for the need to promote wellbeing and sustainable development?

We approve the intention that all public bodies have due regard for wellbeing and sustainable development. However, due regard alone will not be sufficient. It will be important to underpin the requirement with legislation requiring action across all levels of governance. We also feel that due regard could be more positively and strongly represented, using language such as “create aspirations and undertaken actions for sustainable development” (in line with the intentions of the SDGs).

4. What is your view on the definition of “public body” (in section 17(2))? Is there a need for statutory definitions of wellbeing, and sustainable development?

The definition of public body needs to include local government, and all those contracted to work with the public sector. Whilst the public sector is included in this Bill, there could be consideration that appropriate regulation also enforce compliance in the private sector. In addition, encouragement of civil society to take a holistic perspective on wellbeing and sustainable development would be welcome.

5. What is your view on the definition of “sustainable development” (in section 2)?

Our members feel strongly that we have moved beyond this definition of sustainable development. The Brundtland definition (1987) is important because it marks the time and agreement that initiated global discussion on a shared future living within environmental limits. However, it has since been superseded by evolved thinking on sustainable development. We moved beyond the three pillars of environment, economy and society to a more relational construct. As the notion of strong sustainability emerged, it was recognised that financial capital could not always be exchanged for natural capital; we cannot always buy our way out of natural destruction or ecological loss. The health and wellbeing of humans and natural ecosystems are interdependent and interconnected. The perspective on planetary boundaries demonstrated the extent of our negative impacts at a planetary scale (Rockstrom et al 2009). A more recent model combines the notion of planetary boundaries with a social ceiling and represents Raworth’s doughnut economics (Raworth 2012), indicating the safe and healthy limits within which we can survive. This history needs to be acknowledged since we have come far since the Brundtland definition.

Many of our members work with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but they realise that sustainable development is not the same as the SDGs. The SDGs frame the latest policy context. The SDGs are useful in that they represent a wide scope of areas and a holistic approach; they are universal; applying to all UN nations, sectors, scales and actors; and they integrate human and

environmental concerns. Since their launch in 2015, they have slowly been taken up by many actors, hence presenting a common language for discussion of sustainable development action and a shared suite of indicators by which to assess progress towards targets. The UN SDGs promote the symbol of strong sustainability and shift us from *human centred* to *nature respecting*; from *needs* to *rights*. Needs can be short term and hard to define. There is now more focus on *equity* and *inclusion*, and *dignity for all*, with *no harm to planet*; recognising the rights for choice, freedom and agency by poor or marginalised peoples.

Scotland's National Outcomes seek to embed the SDGs and frame the current work of government here. However, the multiplicity of SDGs has proved an implementation barrier. Some members noted that some groups or organisations only connect with one or two targets, even though the SDGs represent a holistic approach that requires attention to systematic interactions. The alignment of the work of government with the SDGs is currently less clear and we await the review on the NPF. However, we need to continue to engage with and shape national and global views on sustainable development as we shift into the final five years of the current SDG framework.

We need a focus on rights and greater equity within and across generations and across local and global contexts, whilst maintaining our impacts within environmental limits.

There are now many definitions and understandings of sustainable development. In some ways this plurality impedes shared understanding and action, but providing the principles are broadly understood, allowing people to identify with sustainable development definitions in context can be very powerful. We suggest this definition:

“Sustainable development is development that recognises the rights and wellbeing of people and nature in Scotland and globally; without compromising the rights and wellbeing of future generations and our natural world.”

6. What is your view on the definition of “wellbeing” (in section 3)?

Several possible principles and definitions were discussed by our members. Principles should include:

- Wellbeing should include planetary and ecological wellbeing
- Human wellbeing should be framed widely, including not only physical wellbeing but also mental wellbeing and connection to nature.
- Definitions should include wellbeing of adults, young people and children and equity across populations in Scotland and globally
- Because wellbeing can appear broad, care needs to be taken to report on it using sensible measures and indicators.

As well as individual well-being, our members noted that we need *collective* well-being. This means recognising social inequalities, and leaving no one behind; within Scotland and across the world. It also means considering the well-being of communities and sustainable places. It means supporting social capital and the fabric of society. It means facilitating the maintenance and development of the rich tapestry of cultures across Scotland. Finally, it includes the need to integrate human well-being with the well-being of nature surrounding them.

It is critical that any wellbeing legislation focus on ecological as well as human wellbeing. This includes the well-being of the more-than-human, of all and flora and fauna, of ecosystems and

habitats, of healthy ecosystem processes and of the planet. Nature should be supported in urban as well as rural areas, and productive places such as agricultural land and commercial forests, as well as in wild places.

Our suggested definition is:

“Individual and collective human well-being are interconnected with the well-being of nature. The achievement of well-being means that people have physical and mental well-being and are able to fulfil their potential, whilst ecosystems are flourishing, and the rights of future generations are protected.”

7. Which of the following best expresses your view on section 4, which establishes a Future Generations Commissioner?

We welcome a statutory mechanism, and the responsibilities of the Commissioner are clearly laid out. However, we suggest that other mechanisms could be considered. Phased or alternative approaches are suggested in the [Carnegie UK-commissioned options paper](#) and summarised in the paper drawn up by the Wellbeing and Sustainable Development Working Group, including representatives from Carnegie UK, Oxfam Scotland, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance Scotland (WEALL Scotland), Scotland’s International Development Alliance (SIDA), and others. These include:

- “Expanding Audit Scotland's mandate to scrutinise progress on well-being and sustainable development.
- Embedding well-being responsibilities within existing parliamentary committees or creating our new cross cutting committee to oversee long term outcomes
- Establishing an independent Advisory Council or a roundtable convened by civil society, academia, or government to champion and monitor progress
- Fostering joint working between existing SPCB supported bodies such as the Children and Young Peoples Commissioner, Consumer Scotland, and the public services ombudsman.”

8. Do you have views on the general function (as set out in section 5), powers, structure, and duties of the Commissioner?

We welcome the intention to provide strength for the Bill. However, we worry that a Commissioner will not have sufficiently strong powers and oversight to enforce the Bill, whilst also not having sufficient resource to provide awareness, analysis of current levels of policy coherence and training in good practice for public body staff and other stakeholders. We also feel that the appointment of a particular Commissioner who can strike a balance between encouragement and enforcement will be important.

9. Taking account of the Bill’s Financial Memorandum, what is your view on the financial implications (i.e. likely costs and savings) of the Bill?

The Bill would have costs in setting up the office of the Commissioner and training of public body staff to understand the duties in place, and in raising awareness for the public and other actors. However, it should create savings through enhanced policy coherence; savings could be made across

Commissioner offices by sharing some resources; and public body staff would deliver wider benefits from training with regards to sustainable development, policy coherence and systems thinking.

10. Do you have any other comments about the Bill?

Legislation needs to support learning for sustainability

The focus of Learning for Sustainability Scotland is on learning for sustainability: lifelong and across formal, non-formal and informal arenas. Such learning occurs in formal school, college and university settings, but also in continued professional development, in communities and in society as a whole, as individual behaviours, social practices and structures change across the lifespan.

Learning is key to sustainability transitions and the shift to a future context with healthy societies and ecosystems. Learning should underpin all activities to achieve wellbeing, and learning for sustainability should be maintained and strengthened in legislation. People who feel a sense of wellbeing are more able to benefit from education, and likewise education is an opportunity to fulfil one's potential and hence a route to achieve enhanced wellbeing.

Learning for sustainability focuses not only on human wellbeing but also on environmental wellbeing. Topics explored include issues around human poverty, hunger and social inequalities, but also how addressing these require recognition of the interdependence of human and ecological wellbeing and a focus on nature and climate change. The innovative pedagogies encouraged in learning for sustainability open opportunities to all, providing engaging options for those sometimes disenfranchised or struggling with education, such as marginalised groups or neurodiverse individuals.

Finally, the competencies supported through learning for sustainability include key knowledge, skills and capacities that can facilitate individuals, communities, institutions and companies to create human and ecological wellbeing. Learning for sustainability will be required to underpin actions and policies in all of these actors and sectors.

There will need to be detailed research to explore the effects on, for example, schools, colleges and universities; particularly when individuals and institutions are working hard and often stretched to meet a number of important professional duties.

We will need learning for sustainability in formal education 3 to 18 years to ensure that our future citizens and workforce understand the challenges and solutions that we face. In addition, we will need continued professional development – training for all responsible for public duties – and training and regulation and support for private sector.

SDG Network Scotland and Learning for Sustainability Scotland members understand the challenge of holistic planning and action. They also appreciate the need for 'carrot' as well as 'stick' approaches, which may be interpreted here as encouraging learning for sustainability, dialogical spaces to interpret and contextualise sustainable development and wellbeing approaches, sharing lessons learnt and monitoring and evaluation. This creates an active and positive learning cycle of action rather than a context of fear and confusion in public body staff, some of whom may be working hard and time poor in challenging contexts.

The Wellbeing and Sustainable Development Bill could provide the opportunity to enable public body staff, for example, through support by a Commissioner, to iterate good practice practices for wider integration of whole-system, policy coherent and holistic approaches.