

Life after MAFF

the government's green progress

One year on from the creation of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, how are things shaping up? Has DEFRA succeeded in putting environment higher up the government's agenda for the second term? To mark the Department's first birthday, Green Alliance has asked leading figures from business and environmental NGOs to give an honest account of the government's green progress.

“green alliance...

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Green Alliance is one of the UK's foremost environmental organisations. An independent charity, its mission is to promote sustainable development by ensuring that the environment is at the heart of decision-making. It works with senior people in government, parliament, business and the environmental movement to encourage new ideas, dialogue and constructive solutions. For more information and details about joining us, go to www.green-alliance.org.uk

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Happy birthday to DEFRA?

Rebecca Willis charts the government's green progress

It's exactly a year since the creation of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). It's also a year since Green Alliance published a set of open letters to the Prime Minister, from green leaders within NGOs, think-tanks and business*. The letters voiced concern about the perceived sidelining of environmental issues within a rurally-focussed department, and the artificial barriers between other important policy areas – transport, energy, industry, planning. But we saw opportunities, too – the appetite for change in the countryside, fuelled by the foot-and-mouth crisis; an energy review which had the potential to put climate change centre-stage; and a new focus on resource productivity – increasing the environmental efficiency of the UK economy.

A year on, how has DEFRA fared? You can't fault the level of activity. We've had a renewed look at waste issues, a major review of energy policy, helpful changes in the tax regime and a promise to tackle public procurement – to name but a few initiatives. But, as this new collection shows, this is still a government that is profoundly cautious about its environmental policy. It prefers incrementalism to the innovation needed to bring about a step-change in environmental thinking and action. And it is too easily blown off course when the going gets tough – as the fuel tax protests and the road lobby show all too clearly.

“this is still a government that is profoundly cautious about its environmental policy”

The challenge has never been greater. This September, world leaders will gather at Johannesburg for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, to try to forge a way forward for tackling environmental and social issues on the world stage, against a backdrop of growing pressure on the environmental resources – land, water, climate – that are vital to wellbeing.

The UK must play its part – at Johannesburg and at home. It's time the UK government honoured Blair's promise to “reawaken the environmental challenge as part of the core of British and international politics”, by refocusing on policies which acknowledge, and attempt to tackle, the scale of the challenges we face. This collection offers a blueprint for the future. A new policy for food and farming, focussed on stewardship of the countryside. An energy strategy which brings about a step-change in energy efficiency and renewable energy, without resorting to expensive and damaging nuclear power. A planning system which offers communities a genuine say over the future of their surroundings. A transport system which – in the inimitable Labour phrase – works for the many, not the few.

As DEFRA lights the candle on its first birthday cake, colleagues across every government department should be joining to acknowledge the vital work it does – and to offer their support in realising the opportunities for sustainable development at Johannesburg and beyond.

Rebecca Willis is director of Green Alliance.

* Dear Prime Minister: Open letters on green goals for the second term is available to download from www.green-alliance.org.uk/publications

Delivering change in the countryside

Fiona Reynolds sets out the challenges facing DEFRA

It would be difficult to imagine a more challenging first year for DEFRA. From an inauspicious birth subsumed by the catastrophe of foot and mouth disease, meeting expectations across its wide-ranging portfolio was always going to be tough.

DEFRA has set out with the right intentions. Its aims and objectives are both contemporary and deliverable and will lead to a marked improvement in people's quality of life, but whilst it has been quick to develop its strategies and direction, it has been slower in delivery. It is here that the major challenges lie for the Department.

DEFRA now has some significant opportunities to make a step change in performance. In particular, the work of the Curry Commission on the future of farming and food provides the Department with the chance to hit the ground running in its second year. Implementing the Commission's recommendations will bring a welcome momentum to delivering a new approach to our use of land, reconnecting it with people and the wider environment and economy – the foundations for which were laid eighteen months ago in the Rural and Urban White Papers.

The lessons learned from the first year show the Department is not yet fully fit for its new purpose. Perhaps the most important lesson is that success in policy and delivery is closely allied to DEFRA's organisation and behaviour, both internally and externally. DEFRA's ability to work across Government, draw in new partners beyond Government and harness the public mood for change, will ultimately govern its success. Delivery on the Rural White Paper and the future of farming requires new approaches and a shift in culture. A few significant initiatives with other Government Departments on areas such as rural employment, skills, housing or transport, to name but a few, would be hugely encouraging. It also has a vast array of Non-Departmental

Public Bodies and Executive Agencies to inform, guide and deliver its policies. Many of these reflect the needs of the past such as boosting agricultural production and not of the future. Reformed or retargeted to deliver DEFRA's new objectives, these bodies could deliver on what DEFRA alone cannot.

“DEFRA's ability to work across government will ultimately govern its fate”

Having given itself the sobriquet of Department for sustainable development, DEFRA's success lies as much in the hands of other parts of government as its own ministers. This is a serious challenge, especially on issues such as transport and planning, where there are fears the Government is moving in the wrong direction. Its important contribution to improving public health will also go unfulfilled unless DEFRA succeeds in winning support from the whole of government for measures to prevent ill health, such as improved nutrition and healthier lifestyles.

DEFRA has the advantage that many of its activities could and indeed should inspire public imagination and support. The countryside matters – for its own sake, for its economic contribution and for the millions who live or work in it or enjoy what it offers. The acid test for the new Department is a recognition beyond its doors of the value and importance of the countryside to us all and to the Government's overall policy priorities.

Fiona Reynolds is director general of the National Trust.

What future for food and farming?

Graham Wynne says everyone agrees about what should happen next

Debate about food and farming continues to be dominated by the issue which was in part responsible for MAFF's demise and DEFRA's creation – the foot and mouth crisis. During DEFRA's first year, the focus has moved away from 'fire-fighting' and towards the bigger policy picture. But there is no question that the political fallout from foot and mouth – the disruption caused by the delayed General Election and the need for huge compensation payments to farmers – will continue to concentrate minds within the Department.

DEFRA's biggest success has been in reaching out to a wider group of stakeholders than its predecessor department. MAFF was criticised for being in hock to the big producer lobbies. DEFRA Ministers have been working hard to create a broader and more inclusive agenda - one that begins to reflect the interlocking strands of the rural economy and the rural environment. Despite occasional atavistic responses, the fixation on mass food production at lowest cost is starting to recede. Certainly at the top levels of the Department, there appears to be commitment to the vision of a diversified and vibrant rural economy underpinned by a healthy environment; and a genuine desire to see public money redeployed to deliver public benefits.

The Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food chaired by Sir Don Curry, which reported to the Government in late January, provided timely stimulus for this transformation. The Curry Report said little that was radical or new but, importantly, found consensus between representatives from the retail, farming, environment and consumer sectors. It is the most coherent blueprint for the reform of the agriculture industry so far produced. One of the core proposals is to reduce food production subsidies and increase the amount of public support going to farmers for managing the environment. This, in turn, depends on match funding from the Treasury, and reformists are holding their breath to await the outcome of the current Spending Round. Margaret Beckett needs to convince Gordon Brown that investing money now will produce a more sustainable countryside with benefits in the future to society and the public purse. Otherwise, a central recommendation of the Curry Report will be dead in the water. The new money should be sold as an essential pre-requisite to restructuring and not, as the Treasury might perceive it, simply another cash handout to farmers.

“the fixation on mass food production at lowest cost is starting to recede”

DEFRA's creation offers a golden opportunity to re-energise and re-shape the rural agenda - in the words of Curry, to reconnect farming with the rest of the economy and the environment. Implementation of the Commission proposals is the acid test for the new Department and Margaret Beckett's response to date has been encouraging. But to succeed, the DEFRA ministerial team needs to meet three simultaneous challenges: to overcome resistance to change from traditional vested interests; to convince Treasury sceptics that the resources for Curry implementation will be wisely spent; and to foster a departmental culture of innovation and delivery. Failure should not be countenanced. The countryside cannot be allowed to continue on its spiral of decline.

Graham Wynne is chief executive of RSPB.

Are we doing more with less?

Robin Bidwell says the government must lead the way on resource productivity

Resource productivity is a crucial underpinning to many of our sustainable development goals: if we can 'do more with less' we can increase prosperity without increasing the damage. The last twelve months has seen considerable progress in this area.

We have seen two reports from the Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) - Resource Productivity and Energy Policy - with a third, focussing on waste, on its way. The Chancellor made some encouraging moves in the Budget: on contaminated land, combined heat and power, green technologies and sulphur-free fuel, as well as some new transport-related measures. There are signs that further measures may be on the way, including higher landfill tax, and further support for new, less damaging energy sources. In January we saw the amazing success of the innovative CO₂ emission reduction auction.

Measures such as these will help to bring about changes in the market and encourage the supply and purchase of more eco-efficient energy and products. But we need to focus more on the demand side and less on the supply side, other than well-targeted support for innovation.

“progress will require political courage and a degree of risk-taking”

We need to change the behaviour of consumers, householders (there are ideas for incentivising waste minimisation), vehicle owners and energy producers. It has been shown that supporting recycling, for example, is a complete waste of effort unless there is a strong, sustained demand for recovered materials.

Above all, Government must lead the way. The public sector is a major purchaser of goods and services and it must give a clearer message that energy and resource efficiency will be a major purchasing criterion. A working party has been established under Margaret Beckett to address this issue, but there is a huge institutional inertia and even opposition to this essential area for reform. Progress will require political courage, a degree of risk-taking and the breaking of a whole lot of public sector shibboleths. It must be done.

Many of the measures needed for improved resource productivity will have trade and competitiveness implications. This means we must act more closely with Europe in the design of Europe-wide measures; and we must communicate more clearly across government and industry about the measures under discussion. The howls of pain that greet each end-of-life directive suggest no-one is paying attention to proposals that have been in the making for around ten years.

So what will success look like for this government?

- A rewriting of the public procurement rules that requires all public procurers including local authorities to take account of the whole-life impact of energy use, other resources used and waste production
- A more coherent policy agenda designed to reduce energy use in buildings and transport in order to help meet Kyoto and go towards the Royal Commission's 60% target
- Getting a grip on waste: each of us need to see waste disposal as a serious cost so that we personally make choices to reduce it at source; a more serious landfill levy - and incinerator levy - will help if it impacts on householders; end-of-life regulations will prove valuable if implemented effectively; but we need more innovation and determination.

Like the fuel tax, measures designed to encourage behaviour change are unlikely to have wide popular support: we will need to communicate such actions with greater clarity of purpose if we are to achieve the necessary culture change.

Robin Bidwell is chairman of ERM.

Time for action on waste

Peter Jones wants DEFRA to be bold

Environment has never been a happy resting place for this Government. Granted, it has been serious about carbon – but carbon policy is bedevilled by an incoherent framework between the various actors, with think tanks, regulators and departments all missing each other's cues and colliding on stage and off. The parallels between carbon and its poor relation – waste – are uncanny. Despite the importance of good policies to tackle waste, DEFRA, on its first birthday, finds itself in limbo as it waits for the PIU to come up with the goods.

We've already got a waste strategy, so why this malaise? In fairness, it is not entirely down to DEFRA. There is a need for strong commitment to intellectual leadership on the waste issue, which requires the buy-in of the entire Cabinet. Like carbon, waste is complex, because it cuts across departmental boundaries – and complexity scares politicians.

The waste industry has been clamouring for an increase in the landfill tax, as a key market driver to resource efficiency and improved behaviour. Yet the Treasury sits on its hands, citing the need for the PIU to come up with the answers. Where is DEFRA on this? Where is the commitment to a Green Tax Commission? Where are the promised millions that local authorities need to finance their waste policy?

There appears to be no over-arching vision or sense of urgency for the zero option – fridges, for example, and a lot of ducking and diving behind impacts on international competitiveness. But under current policy, DEFRA is resorting to a subsidy culture, inefficiently applied through over-worked municipalities at a substantially greater cost than an approach based on producer responsibility.

In fairness, industry could have been far more proactive. The current culture encourages trade associations to institutionalise negativism, and to regard environment as a threat rather than an opportunity. Environmental taxes are propounded as bad news, although many blue chips recognise that the real issue is how the transitional economics of moving to a resource efficient economy are going to be managed -through a framework of carrots as well as sticks.

DEFRA needs to refocus on that agenda, and needs Cabinet support as a matter of urgency. The crunch point will be 2004/5 when the pincer movements of Landfill Directive and Integrated Product Policies meet. Agreements between government and supply chains on how employment and inflationary pressures inherent in this transition are to be managed and communicated should be key. They should focus DEFRA on the question of 'front-end' supply, not just 'back-end' municipal waste, where it has found a comfortable niche.

The environment expects and deserves more. It is ironic that government is committing a higher proportion of GDP to areas which many believe lack the infrastructure to measure outcomes (such as health and education) – whereas, on the environment, major players in industry are keen to provide the necessary capital investment in abundance - if only the political signals were clearly transmitted. To dither, as we have in the last four years, will damage the economy in the next ten.

Peter Jones is director for external affairs at Biffa Waste Services.

“Like carbon, waste is complex, because it cuts across departmental boundaries – and complexity scares politicians”

Downhill since Kyoto?

Matthew Spencer assesses progress on climate change

When John Prescott, the self-anointed ‘walking, talking man’, charged about the Kyoto conference centre in 1997 he brought early diplomatic success to a young Labour Government still finding its feet on the world stage. This generated an internal momentum that was used to push through the main policy achievements of Labour’s first term – the endorsement of the 20% manifesto target and the birth of the Climate Change Levy, despite aggressive opposition from industry.

Five years on and that momentum has gone. The Government is failing to deliver in areas that are key to climate change: its ten year transport plan has crashed and burned, greenhouse emissions actually rose in 2001, and the UK is still struggling on renewable energy, despite a commitment in the 1997 manifesto for a ‘new and strong drive’ on renewables.

The UK’s international leadership on climate has been dented by the refusal of senior ministers to criticise US energy policy. At a recent G8 meeting, Margaret Beckett went as far as praising the US Administration’s climate plan, which her own officials calculated would result in a 25% increase in US emissions, and which is bitterly opposed by Democrats.

“in offshore wind the British tortoise might actually be able to overtake the Danish hare”

Labour’s 2001 manifesto did contain the tantalising commitment ‘to press ahead with a radical agenda for the development of low carbon economic growth’, but there is little to show for it. In reality government policy has consistently reinforced the strength of the carbon intensive power sector, giving £142 million in subsidies to the coal industry since April 2000. Just one agency of government, the DTI’s Export Credit Guarantee Department, has single-handedly wiped out half of the UK’s Kyoto savings by

subsidising fossil fuel projects overseas which it admits will result in the emission of 13.3 million tonnes of carbon a year.

However perhaps the biggest sin of the Government in the last year has been its cynical attempt to use the debate around climate change to create the conditions for the building of new nuclear power stations. Brian Wilson has led the charge, claiming that ‘there is naivety in paying lip service to Kyoto targets on the one hand and countenancing the disappearance of the nuclear industry on the other’ In doing so he skilfully ignored the advice of the PIU energy report which shows no significant increase in 2020 carbon emission from its three non nuclear scenarios.

The PIU energy report made it clear that renewables are ‘the most important priority amongst zero carbon supply options’. Following the recent slow-down in the offshore wind sector in Denmark there is now a real opportunity for the UK to become a world leader in marine renewable energy development. The British tortoise might actually be able to overtake the Danish hare. It will require the government to stop focussing on the failures of the past and set a higher renewables target for 2020 than the timid one suggested by the PIU. It will meet some resistance from the conventional energy industry, just as the Climate Change Levy did, but it will prove that Labour is genuinely committed to the delivery of a low carbon economy.

Matthew Spencer is director of the Climate & Energy Campaign at Greenpeace UK.

Buying green

Alan Knight says it's time for government to put its money where its mouth is

Seeing tropical timber in the headlines yet again has given me a definite feeling of déjà vu. Ten years ago, this was the issue of the moment for major retailers. In 1991, B&Q had no clear idea about where our timber was coming from, let alone how it was produced. When questions were asked we simply didn't have any proper answers. This time it is Government procurement processes that are under attack, and, once again, the campaigners are on strong ground. It is clear that timber from unsustainable sources is being bought with the Government's money.

Identifying the problem is easy. Knowing what to do about it is more difficult. But, looking back, it is clear to me that we only made real progress at B&Q when we instigated a major change management process, led from the top of the company and encompassing our buyers, our suppliers and our stakeholders.

I want to stress three aspects of this process. First, it was a practical 'hands on' process. We had to understand the whole timber purchasing chain before we could talk sensibly to our suppliers about our new requirements. Specifically, we had to be able to track timber right back to the forest, and not allow the activities of 'middle men' to be used as a smokescreen. Second, we had to talk to all the people who mattered, in person. Writing letters and sending them specifications was not sufficient. They had to know that we were serious and we had to get them engaged as individuals in the process. Third, we had to have a simple, crystal-clear process of deciding what did and did not meet our criteria. For this reason we chose to adopt Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) certification as a requirement for all our timber purchases (though we have since made a few limited concessions in certain areas).

“timber from unsustainable sources is being bought with the Government's money”

I believe that the Government will need to consider adopting a similar approach if it is to achieve its stated aim of ensuring that Government procurement of timber and timber products comes entirely from sustainable and legal sources. The people making procurement decisions, and their suppliers, should regard themselves as a positive and engaged part of the process, and not as victims of it. They must know that the Government understands the issues in detail, that it means what it says, and that the demands being made of them are not unreasonable. They will also need the clearest possible guidance, in the form of a credible certification and chain of custody system, as to what is and is not acceptable.

I recognise that this is a formidable challenge and suspect that it is a task that a government is not necessarily equipped to handle. But these are all issues that the business community has largely succeeded in managing, so there is at least a model to follow. I see this as an important test case and a learning opportunity for the whole of green procurement. If we cannot achieve sustainable procurement of timber, where there is a clearly-identified issue, high public awareness and an accepted certification process, I believe we will struggle with more complex issues.

Alan Knight is head of social responsibility at Kingfisher plc.

All at sea

Robert Napier argues for some joining up to protect our oceans

Labour's 2001 election manifesto declared, "we will work to improve marine ... conservation overseas and in the UK". This was music to the ears of WWF, whose Oceans Recovery Campaign challenges the Government to put the marine environment higher up the political agenda. But what is the scale of the problem and how much progress has the Government actually made?

Our seas provide us with a major source of nutrition, as well as supporting many jobs and industries and as much as half of the UK's biological diversity. Yet around two-thirds of our fisheries are exploited to their limit or beyond. Tonnes of pollution are discharged into the seas annually and many wetlands will be lost due to sea level rise and development this century.

In response, the UK's approach to marine management has been piecemeal, with no national vision or policy for the marine environment. The lack of a strategic framework for planning and managing our seas means that regulation falls to different sectors, where environmental considerations may be incidental.

That's the bad news. But the good news is that at last the folly of such poor stewardship is being realised. The Government is beginning to respond to the challenge.

“we need a strategic framework for planning and managing our seas”

At a ministerial conference in Bergen earlier this year Michael Meacher was one of nine other environment ministers who agreed a series of actions with far reaching consequences for the North Sea. These include:

implementing an ecosystem approach to the management of the North Sea; pushing for the review of the Common Fisheries Policy this year to 'integrate environmental protection into the principles, objectives and operational procedures of fisheries management'; reducing the accidental capture in fishing nets of marine mammals to less than one per cent of their estimated population; and requesting the EU to identify areas to be closed permanently or temporarily to fishing to help fish stocks recover.

The Ministers also agreed to designate within eight years a network of well-managed marine protected areas and to prioritise cooperation in planning and managing marine activities through spatial planning.

In May the Government published its first Marine Stewardship Report, setting out its principles, and identifying future steps, for the management of the marine environment. Its approach is broadly innovative, moving away from a piecemeal sectoral focus towards the analysis of overarching marine policy. It starts to set a framework under which marine resources can be managed strategically. However, realistic timetables with tough deadlines must be developed and the process should be properly resourced.

But WWF expects more than this. By 2006 we are pushing for an integrated marine act for the sustainable management of the marine environment. While the Marine Wildlife Conservation Bill currently before Parliament will, if successful, fill a gap, it's not sufficient to address the wider sustainable exploitation of the seas. WWF believes more comprehensive legislation should provide the basis for an ecosystem-based approach to the planning and management of our seas. A single piece of primary legislation could establish a spatial planning mechanism and rationalise the available management tools, simplify and update existing regulations and ensure they complement each other.

Meeting the challenge to protect wildlife populations, fish stocks, industries and coastal communities has just begun.

Robert Napier is chief executive of WWF-UK.

A government in denial?

Stephen Joseph says that transport policy has a long way to go

There is little disagreement between environmental groups, the media and the government: transport is now a make-or-break issue. The appalling press for Stephen Byers showed as much. We would say that some of this is undeserved. Putting Railtrack into administration was the right thing to do, since we need an efficient railway as an alternative to cars and lorries and Railtrack was not going to deliver one, even though getting to a not-for-profit company is proving to be long winded. Certainly, focusing on delivering better public transport is the right thing to do, even if achieving it after decades of neglect and fragmentation is going to be difficult.

However, that deals with only one aspect of the environmental problems arising from transport, and the rest of the Government's record so far is very mixed. A good strategy on future energy sources, "Powering Future Vehicles", has been followed by Budget action to promote hydrogen and other fuels and by green fuel challenges. The Government has also, in the face of media opposition, reformed company car tax, promoting fuel efficiency and reducing incentives for driving.

But if everyone carries on using cars, even efficient ones, there will still be significant congestion and community impacts and potentially more carbon dioxide, at least in the short to medium term. And if roads are built to accommodate more cars, there will be impacts on the countryside and communities, and more greenfield development. Mr Byers did reject the Hastings bypasses, which would have been environmentally damaging, and also some damaging local road plans, in welcome contrast to Lord MacDonald's strong support for roads.

On the central issue of traffic and roads, however, the Government is in denial. The Ten Year Plan claims that it can reduce congestion – through some local charging but also through road building – while real motoring costs fall by 20% over 10 years through increased fuel efficiency. This is misleading nonsense. Reduced motoring costs will, if they happen, be used to drive bigger, thirstier vehicles longer distances, as has happened in the US. Road building will not solve congestion, and many of the schemes coming up through the various "multi-modal studies" threaten nationally important landscapes and habitats as well as valued green spaces around cities. The studies have actually shown that charging and other restrictions on car use are more effective at solving transport problems than road building, if linked to improved alternatives. Such demand management is inevitable, but the Government seems unable to admit this and is failing to support local councils that are doing it.

The same applies to aviation, where the Government seems to have bought completely the industry view that ever-increasing air travel is inevitable and economically beneficial and therefore must be catered for. Air travel is a major contributor to climate change and is also responsible for local noise and pollution; its economic benefits have been exaggerated and its various subsidies hidden.

“demand management is inevitable, but the Government seems unable to admit this”

So an acid test for this Parliament is – to set some clear limits to the growth in air and road traffic, and to reject any proposals for new roads and airports that would breach those limits.

Stephen Joseph is director of Transport 2000.

Treat the cause, not the symptom

Tony Hawkhead wants a healthier approach to sustainable communities

As the Prime Minister packs his bags and heads off for Johannesburg, it's tempting to wonder what he'll be taking with him. What can Britain offer to the world by way of leadership on sustainable development?

Of course he will spell out his vision – a vision of a sustainable society which is vibrant, healthy and safe, where people respect their environment and where individuals and enterprise prosper. He will no doubt say that a sustainable society is one in which everyone can provide for themselves through work, where we have the insurance of a well-funded NHS, where our streets are safe and free of crime. Of course he'd be right, but not completely right.

A sustainable society is, undoubtedly, one that is fairer, safer, more prosperous. In trying to get there, however, we are too wrapped up in treating the symptoms to tackle the cause. Sustainability is not about how much more is spent looking after the sick or locking up the young. In a more sustainable Britain, the NHS would be just as focused on prevention as cure. We would be closing young offenders' institutions, not opening new ones.

“In a more sustainable Britain, the NHS would be just as focused on prevention as cure”

So why haven't we got this now?

If the Prime Minister really wanted to put the environment at the heart of Government, he wouldn't have started by tucking sustainable development into a corner of what used to be MAFF. DEFRA is the confused result of a rural reshuffle and is

still trying to unravel this muddle for itself. It has given itself a core objective of co-ordinating sustainable development policy across Government. This would be a neat trick if it could pull it off. But of course it can't. The Treasury rolls on with business as usual. It is clear that a single spending department cannot be the champion of sustainable development. Sustainability is not a flag to fly from the mast – it's the glue that holds the ship together. It has to be built into the very fabric of government.

The Government's - or at least the Chancellor's - priorities are clear. And perhaps the environmentalists should wait their turn – after all, there are real issues like poverty and exclusion to sort out. But this misses the point, and misses a huge opportunity to improve the standard of living for millions of people. The environment matters to everyone. It matters most, however, to those people who have least.

Switch to renewables and increase recycling and those people will no longer live in the shadow of power stations or incinerators. Invest in public transport and those people will be able to travel to work, access public services and breath clean air. Regenerate green spaces and those people will be able to take exercise, feel good about where they live and know that their children can play in safety.

It is time to write sustainability into the core script of this Government's war on poverty. Now is the time for a commitment to social and environmental justice. The Chancellor's last budget had a single focus – health. I want to see the next with an equally clear focus – a healthy environment. That is a real vision to take to Johannesburg.

Tony Hawkhead is chief executive of Groundwork.

Reporting progress

Michael Kelly on the need for a level playing field in corporate responsibility

Many happy returns to DEFRA? Maybe a qualified happy birthday. Whilst the new Department is far better placed to consider sustainable development than DETR and MAFF ever were, the last year has seen a great missed opportunity in the form of the Company Law Review, and we will only see the effects of that in the long term. On the plus side, though, we have seen the birth of the Carbon Trust, an organisation that promises to punch far above its weight.

The Company Law Review has recommended that environmental reporting be discretionary. This is not going to get us far beyond the existing level of reporting. We need far more consistency to be of real value to all stakeholders. It also needs to be applied to all enterprises, including government, to ensure that operations that do pay greater attention to these areas are suitably rewarded – and those that do not are likewise highlighted.

Those of us who are in the business of developing environmental management systems in enterprises really do look to government for some leadership here. But the Deputy Prime Minister, responding to the environmental audit committee, set a target to begin introducing an EMS ‘where deemed efficient and cost-effective’. We really do need a stronger signal.

Of course, the Company Law Review was independent – and DTI are the lead Department – but this does not mean that DEFRA do not have a huge burden of responsibility, both in what government is doing for itself and what it is asking business to do. Good company practices abound, but there are still a number of bad businesses that get away with doing too little.

In contrast, the Carbon Trust, which also became operational last year, has a very clear mandate, strong leadership and a board of directors who are all respected figures in their own right. It has been sensibly funded and given the freedom to determine the most efficient way of delivering the changes needed to shift us all towards a low carbon economy. The Trust’s ability to undertake the equivalent of venture capital investment in emerging technologies, allowing early, or at least earlier market adoption of currently untried technologies, is unique and very welcome.

The ethos of the Carbon Trust feels right. In many cases, the solutions are already known, and it is a matter of persuading or advising businesses on their adoption. The early work around the different levers that are needed to ensure that the UK is in a position to meet its obligations under the second and subsequent round of reductions under the Kyoto protocol is thorough.

At the end of the day, the acid test for government in this second term is whether the eventual cut of 60 percent of greenhouse gas emissions will be adopted. That really would put sustainable development at the heart of all government policies.

Michael Kelly is director of environmental management at KPMG.

“the acid test is whether the eventual cut of 60 percent of greenhouse gas emissions will be adopted”

Beyond corporate voluntarism

Charles Secrett calls for mandatory standards

New Labour has a problem. A big problem. No 10 and the DTI bend over backwards to empower corporations to pursue money, almost come what may. Liberalised markets must be allowed to rule ok, because that is good for business. And what is good for business must be good for UK plc. Right? Think again.

Companies are governed by specific legal duties to shareholders, and a culture of selfishness born from fierce competitive pressures. That means maximising profits above all else. The result is continuing environmental degradation and social distress, justified outrage at lily-livered government, lots of bad publicity - and precious little Boardroom action.

Despite the evidence, the Prime Minister insists that voluntary restraint, voluntary accountability and voluntary good corporate citizenship alone will redress the balance between profitability and responsibility. Tony Blair, in his October 2000 speech to the Green Alliance and CBI, called on the top FTSE 350 companies to publish annual environmental and social reports by the end of 2001. What a simple task. Yet only a pathetic 25% managed the challenge.

“Labour should deliver, as companies don’t”

Companies have no general legal responsibilities to other stakeholders, such as communities affected by operations, which cover adverse environmental and social impacts. This must change. Labour should deliver, as companies don’t. And, they must go further than the useful, but limited, amendment

to the Financial Services Regulations, which stipulates that pension funds should declare how much ethical considerations affect their investment decisions (without making such environmental and social funding criteria compulsory).

The huge number of voluntary guidelines that urge best corporate practice mean little in the market place. Friends of the Earth knows of at least 350, from the UN’s Global Compact downwards. The sound of CEOs rushing to sign up is only matched by the silent speed in which these meaningless charters are consigned to the basement archives. The fact is that voluntary doesn’t work. Laws do.

There is nothing like statutory accountability and liability, covering harm to the environment or human health, to concentrate the executive mind to clean up a company’s act. Labour’s long awaited Company Law Review should argue this case, and be implemented through appropriate statutory and fiscal changes.

The challenge for Labour is two-fold. First, to advocate a new Treaty on Corporate Accountability and Liability at Earth Summit Three, incorporating legal rights for citizens, environmental and social duties on corporations, and binding rules to ensure high standards wherever companies operate. Second, at home, Labour should endorse a Private Members’ Bill, drawn up by FOE, the New Economics Foundation and Amnesty, to ensure mandatory environmental and social reporting, transparency and liability. The only businesses threatened by such just measures will be the cowboys - who shouldn’t be in business anyway.

If Labour want WTO adjudicated rules, to guarantee company rights to trade and to market access, then communities and countries must have mandatory rights of redress and compensation over company wrong-doing.

Both Mr Prescott and Mr Meacher have sensibly declared that if companies don’t or can’t deliver basic sustainability requirements on their own, then they should be mandated to. The PM should listen. In this century, profitable business is going to depend on practising the highest environmental and social standards. That really will be good for UK plc, and the environment and communities everywhere.

Charles Secrett is director of Friends of the Earth.

No permission for planning proposals

Kate Parminter worries that reforms will undermine sustainable development

The land use planning system is one of the most important means that the government has at its disposal for protecting and improving the environment. If you had to choose any function of government which really grappled with sustainable development from day to day and year to year, it would be planning.

But of course DEFRA isn't in charge of planning. In the meantime the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions – and now the new Office of the Deputy Prime Minister – has embarked on what looks set to be the most fundamental review of the comprehensive land use planning system since its creation more than half a century ago.

At CPRE, we're worried by the slow pace at which DEFRA appears to have got engaged with this review of planning, given its leading roles as environmental guardian and promoter of sustainable development. We're also deeply concerned by the Government's initial proposals.

“there remains a wide gulf between urban renaissance rhetoric and reality”

We accept the need for reforms, although we believe that some of the problems of delay which plague the existing system are due to a lack of staff resources rather than to inherent flaws. We welcome some of the government's proposals – the ones which would make the system more open, better understood by people, and prevent developers from adopting tactics which abuse it (such as twin tracking of planning applications).

But the plan to remove the right of local public inquiries to consider the need for major infrastructure projects at a given location, such as power stations, big port extensions and new runways and air terminals, greatly worries us. So does the proposal to abolish county structure plans, and concentrate instead on regional planning by bodies which are remote from communities and, at present, unelected. The notion of business zones, with no planning permission needed for new business development, seems like a strange retreat of ideas from early Thatcherism. And why won't the Government heed the arguments made for a limited third party right of appeal, which would allow grants of planning permission to be scrutinised by an independent inspector when they are most likely to be questionable?

Labour's first term saw some real gains in this area. By far the most important planning initiative was the very welcome radical revision of the Planning Policy Guidance on Housing (PPG3), which aimed to ensure that the bulk of new homes were supplied by brownfield development and building conversions rather than greenfield estates. Bringing about a real urban renaissance is central to achieving sustainable development in the UK but there remains a wide gulf between renaissance rhetoric and reality. The Government will come under strong pressure to let greenfield restraint rip due to a combination of soaring house prices and fairly low output of new homes – so there's work to be done in consolidating the gains of the first term.

There is one definite, planning-related achievement which is DEFRA's – the requirement for an environmental impact assessment to be carried out, and consent obtained, before uncultivated land is ploughed up. Implementing this – as required by an EC directive - has taken far, far too long, and it has been introduced in a pretty minimalist way – but at least it is here at last.

Kate Parminter is director of CPRE.

Global thinking, local implementation

Rowland Hill says that ‘local sourcing’ won’t solve anything

After the June 2001 general election, the old superministry, the Department for the Environment, Transport & the Regions, was rushed into Number Ten for major political surgery. The patient received a new heart of ‘food and agriculture’, and the awkward limbs of transport and regional government were amputated. A year on, how is the patient doing?

Lets start with the what George Bush senior called the ‘vision thing’. If you need to consider foreign policy in years, industry in decades and education in generations, how should you regard the environment? Certainly beyond electoral terms. The vision, aims and objectives which currently sit at the top of DEFRA are actually quite comforting, and were consulted on widely. We all know, however, that what counts is the right actions on the right issues.

On the issues of food production and the countryside, some sterling work on identifying the issues has been done through the report of the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming & Foods. So far so good. Now we come to the right actions, which, apart from the inevitable reform of subsidies, appear to rely on very Old Labour thinking - ‘The Buy British Policy’, but now presented with green credentials as ‘locally produced foods’.

“sustainable development has to be built on our interactions with the rest of the world”

This isn’t a new idea. Indeed, it’s an approach that’s been used throughout the last two hundred years of our history to try to protect domestic lace making, wool, shoe and cotton fabric production; and more recently steel, car and clothing manufacturing. Spot any success stories there? Me neither.

Sustainable development has to be built on our interactions with the rest of the world. The strategy has to be about global trade based on internationally implemented standards on human rights, animal welfare and environmental protection. Take, for example, WWF’s forestry and marine stewardship schemes, or the Ethical Trading Initiative. This is the way forward. If British food production can flourish within this global ‘level playing field’, either because of better quality or local preference, that’s great. But it shouldn’t be the main objective. At the moment, I fear that DEFRA maybe pointing in the wrong direction, going down the path of a Good Life dream of island self sufficiency.

What about the rest? Michael Meacher may well have suffered a politically fatal wound trying to climb one of his fridge mountains, but other than that, not much has changed. We’ve still got the continued execution of complex legislation in complicated ways. I believe producer responsibility can work, I believe emissions trading can work - but not in their current surreal forms. The irony is that a blueprint for this type of legislation does exist in the Treasury’s company car tax reform, which is deceptively clever stuff. It financially discourages ‘bad’, positively encourages ‘good’, is progressive over time, modifies behaviour, yet recognises current lifestyles – and, very importantly, is simple to understand and implement. Brilliant!

DEFRA have had a reasonable start – but we mustn’t get sidetracked into protectionism. Global thinking and effective local implementation are the keys to sustainable development.

Rowland Hill is environmental affairs manager for Marks & Spencer.