Recommendations to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government

Education for Sustainable Development for Local Authorities

Sustainable Development at Local Level
Following the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, 178 countries committed to Agenda 21 to take action globally and locally to promote sustainable development (Department of Education et al. 2007). Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 placed the responsibility for co-ordinating local sustainable development firmly at the door of local governments throughout the world.

Ireland’s National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) is currently under review and the revised strategy, when published, will provide an opportunity to give further strategic direction to implementation of sustainable development at local level. To fully implement the NSDS and meet their obligations, local authorities need to understand the concepts of sustainable development and their own role in instigating it. The creation of County and City Development Boards (CDBs), following a process of local government reform in the late 1990s, provide for a context, mechanism and an agreed strategy conducive to the governance of local sustainable development. Education is essential in this process.

Education for Sustainable Development
The role of education in achieving sustainable development through providing the knowledge, skills and values to adapt was recognised at the 2002 World Summit in Johannesburg. The United Nations has also acknowledged the importance of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) by declaring the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development which started in 2005 and runs till 2014. Its aim is to incorporate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning (Department of Education et al. 2007).

Education for Sustainable Development in Local Authorities
Comhar SDC recently commissioned Sean O’Riordain to conduct research on the role of CDBs in advancing the sustainable development agenda at local

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level. While the report acknowledges that the CDB process has helped to advance the sustainability agenda at local level, particularly in relation to social inclusion, there is still a need for improved awareness, training and capacity building within local authorities. One of the key recommendations identified the need for a sustainable development component in relevant training programmes for local authority staff and elected representatives. The report recommended that Comhar SDC and the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government should examine the options for integrating sustainable development into appropriate training and education programmes for local government officials and elected members in the context of the renewed National Sustainability Strategy.

Comhar, together with EPA has already had some initial discussions with the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) about the opportunities for incorporating sustainable development into the IPA training modules and programmes and IPA has acknowledged that is some scope to do this.

Comhar SDC considers that the following considerations are relevant to integrating sustainable development into existing training programmes:

- Information on sustainable development must be presented in a way that is accessible and meaningful for the audience. Sustainable development can promote greater holistic understanding as it links various issues together to present a joined up view of development.
- ESD within local authorities needs to be approached as a long-term issue. It should feed into other sustainability programmes, such as the greening of the council.
- ESD requires participatory decision-making and active learning. The main aim should not simply be about raising awareness and providing information and knowledge. ESD is about generating the values, understanding and convictions which will result in participative democratic actions and changes in behaviour to promote a more sustainable society.

Recommendations

- Sustainable development (including in relation to financing and procurement) should be integrated into local authority training programmes. The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, together with County and City Managers Association, should play a lead role in implementing this objective.
- Local authorities should integrate a sustainable development component into their own internal training and induction programmes for local authority staff and elected representatives.
• Training programmes for local authority staff and elected representatives should embed the core principles of sustainable development. The EPA, Comhar SDC, other relevant stakeholders and training bodies, such as, but not exclusively, the IPA, should work towards identifying the relevant opportunities and means of delivery of such training. In the long term, sustainable development should be embedded in all local authority certificate, diploma, degree and masters courses.

• The IPA should consider including sustainable development as a cross-cutting issue in Conferences aimed at specific staffing groups within local authorities, e.g., Directors of Service

• Efforts should be directed at training that provides specific practical application for local authority staff and elected officials. Training should be targeted for different levels and different sectors.

• Embedding sustainable development into local authority training requires both short and long term objectives. The revised NSDS should set short and longer term targets for delivery of appropriate training and education programmes for local authorities.