Sustainable Development in Northern Ireland

Sustainable Development as defined in the Brundtland Commissions Report is ‘development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’

The Sustainable Development Goals
The concept of The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s) originated at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012, where the objective was to produce a set of universally applicable goals that would build on The Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s) and integrate the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainable development. This resulted in the creation of 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 subsequent targets which must be met by 2030. The goals and targets are detailed in the UN document ‘Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’. The UK adopted the Sustainable Development Goals in September 2015 to replace the MDG’s.

What are the Sustainable Development Goals?
NI Sustainable Development Strategy
Northern Ireland’s Sustainable Development Strategy vision statement is ‘a peaceful, fair, prosperous and sustainable society.’ The Strategy was published in May 2010 and is regarded as a highly enabling document, intended to ‘ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations.’ (UNCED, 1992). The Strategy aligns with the priorities within the Programme for Government and has been heavily influenced by the need to develop Northern Ireland’s economy. Outlined in the Strategy are Priority Areas for Action, Strategic Objectives, Guiding Principles and Targets, as well as key challenges to achieving sustainability.

Focus on the Future: Sustainable Development Implementation Plan 2011-2014
The Sustainable Development Strategy contained a commitment to publish an implementation plan setting out how the Executive would achieve its strategic objectives. This Implementation Plan was published in April 2011 and allocates lead responsibility for the achievement of each of its 32 strategic objectives to the most appropriate Government Department. Currently, until May 2016, the lead on Sustainable Development in Northern Ireland lies with the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Statutory Duty
Since April 2007 district councils have a Statutory Duty to act in a way that will contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in Northern Ireland.

Recommendations
- The upcoming elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly will involve a reduction in Government Departments and new allocations of departmental functions. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will take on OFMDFM’s responsibility for Sustainable Development. The current Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy and Implementation Plan are now out-dated, therefore a revised strategy is imperative to keep sustainable development at the forefront of Government objectives.
- The Sustainable Development Goals should form the core of any review of these important documents as the UK is a signatory on the SDG’s, and the UN Document ‘Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ calls on all member states to develop national strategies on the SDG’s as soon as practicable.
- The achievement of the SDG’s that focus predominantly on the environment could be advanced by the full and proper implementation of existing legislation in Northern Ireland e.g. The Water Framework Directive, The Waste Framework Directive. More than half of the SDG’s have an environmental focus or address the sustainability of natural resources.
- A Government Minister should be given specific responsibility for advancing Sustainable Development in Northern Ireland based upon the SDG framework.
- Best practice Sustainable Development projects and initiatives should be showcased to demonstrate the multiple benefits and encourage uptake of sustainability principles.
- Political parties should endorse and adhere to the SDG’s as collective commitment will be required to ensure their effective implementation.