

# Sustaining our Future: A framework for moving towards a sustainable learning and skills sector



## Concept, vision and themes

### 1. Introduction

The learning and skills sector<sup>1</sup> is increasingly aware of the relevance of sustainable development to all aspects of the work, including leadership, teaching and learning, operations and partnerships. Increasing focus on localism and skills for a low carbon society, alongside reforms to the Ofsted Common Inspection Framework, point to an increasing need to focus on sustainability across the learning and skills sector.

This enabling Framework for sustainable development has been developed to support providers and strategic bodies to build on current practice, to support sustainable development practice and to bring collective strength and coherence to provider and cross-sector developments. The Framework will join up and co-ordinate the strategies and activities of sector bodies in helping providers to achieve real change in this area. LSIS has taken responsibility for developing the Framework, in partnership and consultation with providers and partners.

A summary of the concepts of sustainable development and their application to the learning and skills sector is given in Appendix 1.

### 2. The purpose of the framework

In summary, the framework aims to:

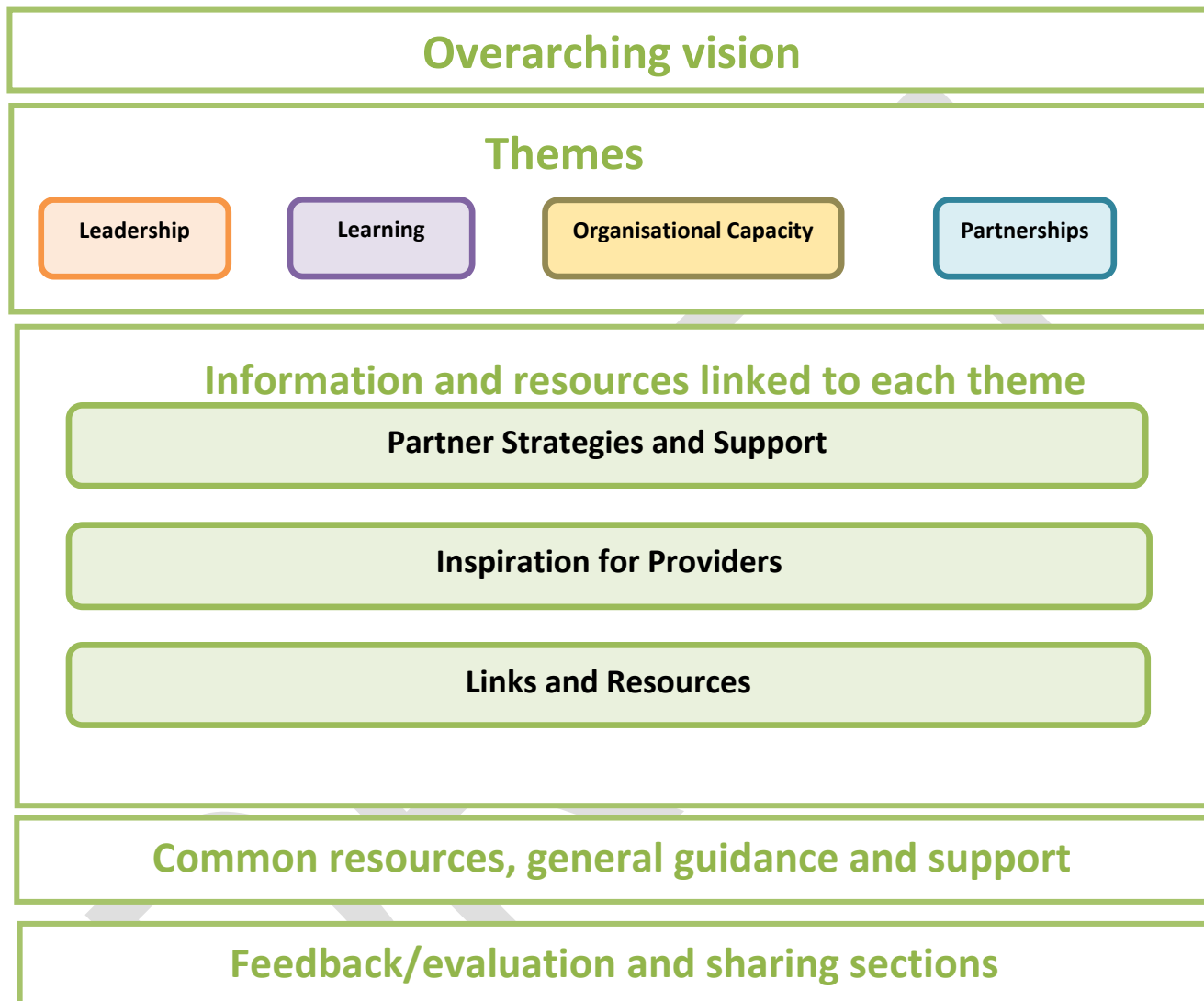
- A. **Build common understanding of what sustainable development is about**, what it means for the sector and why the sector should collectively respond to it.
- B. **Alert providers to the business benefits of being a sustainable organisation**, and how these benefits can be realised in an increasingly demand-led environment
- C. **Establish a common set of themes for action.**
- D. **Provide a catalyst for providers to develop new or enhance existing strategies and approaches**, through highlighting activities, case studies, online tools and resources.
- E. **Provide a focus for sharing** of ideas and experiences, and for collaboration between providers.
- F. **Promote and demonstrate coherence in sector bodies' responses** to the challenge.
- G. **Support providers and sector bodies to capture the impact of ESD work.**

A more detailed overview of the purpose of the framework can be found in Appendix 2.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the terms 'learning and skills sector' and 'providers' encompass the following types of organisation and the education and training they deliver: further education colleges (including land-based colleges), sixth form colleges, specialist colleges, ACL providers, work-based learning providers and offender learning. For the purposes of this paper, the 'learning and skills sector' also encompasses the strategic bodies that support providers and learners. These include funding, regulatory and representative bodies, Government Departments and those that provide support services to the sector.

### 3. The draft vision and themes

The Framework has **four** key components as indicated in the summary diagram below:



#### 3.1 The vision

The vision and themes form the foundation of the Framework. The vision will describe the sustainable learning and skills sector of the future and therefore must be realistic and achievable but at the same time present a challenge to the sector. The proposed vision of the framework is:

**A learning and skills sector which maximises and mainstreams environmental, economic and social sustainability.**

### 3.2 The themes

There are four key themes which are closely interconnected. There is no hierarchy between the themes but a clear, distinctive relationship between the first theme, leadership, and the other three.

*For each theme there are a number of 'key questions' to prompt and challenge providers to reflect on their practice.*

#### **Theme 1: Leadership**

##### **Strategic direction, organisational development and leadership**

Sustainable learning providers will be those whose vision, values and strategic direction reflect a commitment to positive economic, social and environmental change that reflects the global context at all levels of the organisation and throughout all of their activities.

They are likely to:

- have a senior team with members who both individually and collectively understand the challenge of sustainability and are dedicated to making a full contribution in what they do and how they go about it;
- develop coherent, comprehensive sustainable development strategies which encompass every aspect of business and operations and lead to the embedding of sustainable development into every part of their operations and into all of the learning they offer;
- demonstrate leadership in articulating and sharing the vision, in influencing and equipping others to respond, and in being exemplars which includes involving and communicating with staff, learners and stakeholders in the development and implementation of their vision and strategy for sustainable development;
- demonstrate responsibility for the interests, welfare, well-being and development of its learners, staff and local stakeholders affected by corporate policies;
- encourage learners, staff, trade union green representatives and stakeholders to innovate and implement sustainable development principles as part of 'bottom up' development;
- be proactive in assessing their performance, in recognising and sharing their successes whilst sharing and developing performance and practice through peer networking and development.

**Key questions: Leadership**

1. At what level does sustainable development feature in your mission and policies? Is sustainable development an 'add on' or is it part of how you do business?
2. Do you feel that you are reaping the rewards for your current sustainable development activity, do people know about it and can you clearly communicate it??
3. Who and where is responsibility taken for ensuring that sustainable development is recognised within other policies and programmes? Do you have a cross-organisational team driving sustainable development forward?
4. What level and type of engagement is there with staff, learners, recognised trade unions, and other stakeholders in relation to sustainable development?
5. What examples do you have of actions or improvements based on self-assessment or quality improvement? How are these monitored?
6. What evidence to you have of the impact of education for sustainable development on the knowledge, attitude and behaviour of staff and learners?

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## **Theme 2: Learning**

### **Developing capability and understanding in sustainable development through the whole learner experience**

The primary purpose of the learning and skills sector is equipping learners with the skills and knowledge to succeed and thrive in work and actively contribute to society as a whole. Developing capabilities and understanding in sustainable development is likely to require embedding the skills and knowledge needed into all curriculum areas and to look at the whole student experience to enable learners to:

- think and act systemically, taking an holistic perspective as to how they approach the decisions they make ;
- understand the various positive economic, social and environmental impacts that they can make through their lifestyles and work;
- participate in relevant learning, contextualised for specific curriculum and vocational areas;
- respond in ways that maximise the positive impact they can make to both their own labour market prospects and the communities of which they are part, through responsible and active global citizenship and democratic and civic participation;
- develop the generic skills to motivate, challenge and collaborate with others towards this end and be change agents in their workplaces, homes, social networks and local communities.

#### **Key questions: Learning**

1. To what extent do you provide opportunities for learners to engage with sustainable development issues? Is sustainable development embedded throughout the curriculum?
2. Are your staff comfortable exploring the issues of sustainable development with learners? Do they need further support or guidance on how to maximise the opportunities to link sustainable development with their area of expertise?
3. How do you maximise the opportunities for embedding sustainable development into the curriculum through the Qualification Curriculum Framework?
4. What evidence do you have on the influence of sustainable development on the type and range of qualifications offered?
5. How are national or international sustainability events and themes (e.g. Fairtrade Fortnight) recognised and used in your organisation? Do you take opportunity to use these events as learning opportunities?
6. To what extent, and how, does sustainable development stimulate learners to think of their studies in different ways? What evidence do you have of this and how do you monitor sustainable development learning?

### Theme 3: Organisational Capacity

#### Improving capability, practice and efficiency

Sustainable development needs to be embedded into all aspects of organisational practice and operations, taking this opportunity to reduce resource consumption and save money makes good business sense. To enable this to be effective requires a commitment to developing and supporting the workforce to work together to save the organisation money by the efficient and management of resources.

This will include:

- reduction of waste, waste management, energy use, consumption of resources and reduction of transport emissions;
- contributing to the health and quality of life of the local community through efficient and responsible approaches to resource use, energy, waste and transport;
- Implementing sustainable procurement practices to reduce the overall impact of your activities;
- reducing the carbon footprint of the organisation and reducing greenhouse gas emissions;
- sustainable approaches to the recruitment and management of the workforce that can address the socio-economic challenges of local communities, the region and the UK as a whole;
- embedding sustainable development into job descriptions, staff development programmes and in performance management.

#### Key questions: Organisational capacity

1. Saving energy, reducing paper consumption and reducing the amount of waste you produce all save your organisation money: are you realising these savings?
2. In what ways does day-to-day operational management of the organisation demonstrate and model effective sustainable development practices and are you maximising the associated learning opportunities?
3. How do manage, monitor and communicate your progress on operational efficiencies and **carbon reduction** ? Are you using this progress to link with the wider objectives of stakeholders in the communities within which you operate?
4. How do you ensure that all staff understand and integrate sustainable development principles into their work ? How is sustainable development included in the development and training of staff, and staff induction?
5. Can you enhance the learning environment through biodiversity plans to create a sense of wellbeing for staff and learning?

## Theme 4: Partnerships

### Working with communities and partners at local level to maximise impact

Sustainable development within the learning and skills sector needs to be developed within the context of the wider localities and communities in which providers operate in order to maximise impact. Working in partnership is also likely to grow your organisation's reputation and strengthen relationships with other providers and stakeholders within your community.

This could include:

- identifying, nurturing and maximising opportunities to work collaboratively with other providers on sustainable development;
- sharing learning and successes in responding to sustainable development, for example through local networks, committees and voluntary groups ;
- aligning sustainable development policy to the needs and priorities of the local area and communities, and to policies and strategies of key partners, including schools, Higher Education, local authorities and others;
- working with local communities and employers to support the development of sustainable communities and supporting staff and learners take the values of the organisation into the community.

#### Key questions: Partnerships

1. In what ways are your sustainable development strategy and operations aligned with those of partners and communities? Can you demonstrate the value you add to the community by producing citizens who can act in an environmentally sustainable way?
2. How are the needs and priorities of the local communities and employers reflected in your sustainable development approaches? How well are you responding to the future skills requirements of the sectors you support?
3. Who are your key partners in sustainable development and do you have a clear strategy on how best to work with them?
4. How are your priorities around sustainable development communicated to partners, local communities, employers and other stakeholders? Do you have a plan and share intelligence to understand the future context for your organisation's work?
5. Are you taking the opportunity to promote your partnership and community activity?
6. What impact has your engagement in sustainable development had on your partners and the local community?

Information and resources for each theme of the Framework are available during the testing phase of the Framework's development. These will include online tools and resources, case studies and peer support groups. It is intended that once the Framework is completed, information and resources will be brought together in an online portal. This will provide a means of accessing relevant sustainable development resources for the learning and skills sector.

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## Appendix 1

### Sustainable Development and Education for Sustainable Development.

#### 1. What is the sustainable development agenda about?

The terms ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustainability’ are regularly used, but what do they actually mean, and what do they mean for the learning and skills sector?

Our starting point is the common definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”<sup>2</sup>. This broad definition does not go very far in helping us to understand what the agenda really means for us. Commonly, sustainable development is understood in the context of economic, social and environmental needs and considerations that our thinking and actions should take into account, and the economic, social and environmental impacts that such thinking and actions can have.

Of course, we face pressing environmental challenges, and strategies to address those challenges, and in particular climate change, are critically important in their own right. The BIS Carbon Reduction Strategy and associated long-term targets for reducing emissions within further and higher education are therefore a critical element in the sector’s response to thinking and operating sustainably into the future, and will hold an important position within this framework.

Sustainable development seems an even more pertinent approach at the present time, when we face significant environmental, social *and* economic challenges as individuals, as a sector and as a nation. More broadly, we can see sustainable development as carrying with it the principle of a systemic approach to policies and services in the public sector and not least education and training. These will impact on all areas of our business; on curriculum design as much as estates and procurement.

Sustainable development approaches seek solutions to address the interconnected and global economic, environmental and social challenges facing our age. Although there is no universal agreement as to which solutions are best, a sustainable society could be characterised by:

- resource use which does not exceed the ability of the planet to replenish itself;
- a fair and equitable economic system;
- healthy, participating and just communities;
- a commitment to equality.

#### 2. Sustainable development and the learning and skills sector

The learning and skills sector<sup>3</sup> is becoming more and more aware of the relevance of sustainable development to what it does – to the skills it develops, to the learning that it offers, to the way that learning is delivered, and to the leadership and operation of organisations that deliver it. Significant policy developments such as the Skills for Sustainable Growth and reforms to the Ofsted inspection framework suggest an increased focus on resource efficiency, carbon reduction and sustainability in every area of providers’ business.

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<sup>2</sup> Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment & Development (‘The Brundtland Report’), Oxford University Press, 1987; [www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm](http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm)

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Discussions to date suggest there is growing support for approaches which will enable providers in the sector to individually and collectively respond to the agenda. An enabling framework or overarching strategy for sustainable development will aim to support both strategic bodies and providers in building on what they do already to support sustainable development. Such a framework will bring collective strength and coherence to providers' efforts. It will also serve to join up and co-ordinate the strategies and activities of sector bodies in helping providers to achieve real change in this area. LSIS has taken responsibility for developing the framework, in partnership and consultation with providers and partners.

### **3. Education for Sustainable Development**

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is learning that supports sustainable development. It aims to equip us to respond to the challenges of creating a sustainable society for our current needs and for the future. ESD takes a holistic approach to environmental, social and economic elements, although differential weighting might be given to each. It is participative learning founded on clear values and principles that supports the development of more sustainable communities, workplaces and individual consumption patterns. There is no one agreed definition but commonly accepted characteristics are that it:

- extends knowledge, skills and understanding;
- develops generic capabilities including adaptability, resilience and critical analytical skills;
- adopts systemic approaches;
- fosters dialogue;
- develops global perspectives;
- empowers learners to access and understand information, take part in decision making and make informed changes in their lifestyles and consumption.

Examples of ESD are:

- vocational skills development for the expanding renewable energy sector and the transition of existing sectors to low carbon; sustainable development learning integrated into vocational subjects;
- informal lifelong learning related to sustainability that takes in a huge range of topics such as climate change, environmental knowledge, global issues, reducing energy consumption, recycling, growing and cooking food, community involvement and activism;
- learning to develop global perspectives to advance understanding of the economic, social, cultural and environmental connections and interdependencies between local and global communities;
- learning to extend knowledge and understanding to empower adults from all groups to exercise their rights to access information, participate in environmental decision making and hold governments to account on matters that affect their lives.

## Appendix 2

### Purpose of the framework

- A. Build common understanding of what sustainable development is about**, what it means for the sector and why the sector needs to collectively respond to it. The sustainable development agenda often seems complex and confusing, with different prevalent conceptions and definitions, and there are a number of policy drivers towards sustainability, such as the Ofsted inspection framework and the Carbon Reduction Targets that apply to the sector.
- B. Alert providers to the business benefits of being a sustainable organisation** and how these benefits can be realised. In an increasingly demand-led environment, such business benefits are diverse and valuable and include cost benefits, efficiency savings, performance improvement, and being seen as the best choice for high-calibre, sustainability-aware learners, employers and staff.
- C. Establish a common set of themes for action.** There should be a set of areas, themes or issues that partners' and providers' strategies and activities should focus on, linked to areas of the sector's business that we agree need to be developed in a sustainable way.
- D. Provide a catalyst for providers to develop new or existing strategies and approaches** in support of each of those themes, through:
- **Signposting strategic organisations' responses to the agenda**, including strategies, programmes, resources, initiatives etc. that providers can consider and draw on;
  - **Case studies and examples** that can inspire providers to develop strategies in response to the themes;
  - **The development of online tools and resources** specific to the framework and to the development of thinking, strategy and action plans against each of the themes set out in the framework.
- E. Provide a focus for sharing of ideas and experiences, and for collaboration between providers**, through all of the above and through encouraging providers to grow the framework with their own suggestions, case studies and discussions.
- F. Promote and demonstrate coherence in sector bodies' responses** to the challenge of sustainable development and in the services they offer.
- G. Support providers and sector bodies to capture the impact of ESD** on individuals' knowledge, attitudes and action, communities, workplaces and local environments.