

To: Environmental Services Committee		Subject: SEPA's Environmental Strategy
From: Director of Environmental Services Director of Planning		
Date: 13 April 1998	Ref: 055mhlmr	

❖ Introduction

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) recognises that the development of an environmental strategy is an essential base on which a range of initiatives can be progressed in time. SEPA has now produced a draft environmental strategy on which comments have been invited from local authorities, primarily planning and environmental services functions. The draft document is designed to address national-level strategic issues, including the means by which the principles of sustainable development can be delivered. Specific responses have been requested in relation to three main points:-

- ◆ **Priority Environmental Issues** on a global and national scale.
- **Sustainable Development**, the raising of awareness in the wider community, particularly industry.
- **The 'Tools for Change'**, the five means by which SEPA proposes to implement the pursuit and achievement of sustainable development.

❖ Report

● **Priority Environmental Issues**

As previously indicated, these issues are identified separately at a global and national level taking into account current thinking at 'European' level. As a regulatory agency, SEPA has indicated the limit of its formal influence, although quite properly SEPA will have the ability and opportunity to influence government level policy and in advisory or consultative role. The stated priorities also accord with SEPA's previously published 'State of the Environment' Report. There is a detailed explanation of the priority-setting procedure which is logical, however, a proper explanation is required of the rating system used in Table Number 3, page 49, which indicates SEPA's 'level of control'. Otherwise, the priority environmental issues can be regarded as appropriate to Scotland.

● **Sustainable Development**

As a regulatory body operating at a national level, the influence which SEPA can exert to encourage industry and other bodies to recognise and develop the principles of sustainable development, is considerable. SEPA makes a firm and clear policy commitment towards achieving this aim, which must act as 'encouragement' to materials producers, service providers, waste producers/disposal agents, other regulatory and complementary bodies, etc.

However, it is considered imperative that this message and level of commitment must be emphasised in the intended summary of this strategic document, which will be issued in 'easy read' form, possibly in June 1998. It is considered critical that the widest community is aware and supports sustainable development in a practical way, as regulation on its own will fail to achieve long-term objectives.

♦ **Tools for Change**

SEPA recognises that a range of tools and techniques will be necessary to achieve sustainable improvements in environmental standards. The use of these tools etc., either individually or as a combination of methods, will vary according to circumstances. Furthermore, SEPA proposes to use methods which go beyond their regulatory responsibility level, presumably on the basis that prevention is better than cure. These methods can be summarised under the following headings:-

■ **Statutory Functions**

SEPA intends to pursue a policy of firm, fair and well-enforced environmental regulation. SEPA also advocates the acceptance of responsibility for environmental management systems to be placed firmly with industry. It is also recognised that the development of complementary approaches to environmental protection and enhancement is to be encouraged where appropriate.

■ **Education and Influencing**

Regulatory agencies require to prioritise the use of resources to perform specified statutory duties. However, education and other means of influencing the wider community is recognised as the means by which environmental improvements can be achieved and sustained on a long-term basis. Other organisations including local authorities, have a major role to play which offers opportunities for partnership, which would permit a pooling of resources and a more efficient and effective use of public resources. The current development of environmental indicators by SEPA must recognise simultaneously the needs of wider community and the strategic objectives of SEPA.

■ **Economic Instruments**

As an advisor to government, SEPA proposes to adopt a pragmatic approach to the use of economic instruments to achieve sustainable development. Examples of economic instruments could include the environmental tax on fuel, the landfill tax on waste disposal, trade effluent discharge costs, etc. The 'polluter pays' philosophy continues to be encouraged by SEPA.

■ **The Planning System**

The draft document shows a depth of understanding by SEPA of the role of the planning system, principally operated at local authority level, through National Guidance, Development Plans and Development Control. It is considered a priority at this crucial stage of finalising SEPA's environmental strategy, that strong representation is made to formally improve the quality of liaison initiatives and the level of integration between SEPA and the functions within local authorities which have complementary powers contained within statute, ie. Planning and Environmental Services functions. In addition, SEPA's role in overseeing operational standards within specific areas allows 'best practice' models to be identified and made available at a national level.

- Provision of Focused Advice

The Environment Act 1995 provides SEPA with a formal advisory role to government. To perform this role effectively requires a strong link with the needs of local communities when viewed in balance with the need for economic and industrial development. Local authorities are an essential element in this democratic process, notwithstanding the current role of European legislation on environmental standards and the role which will develop from the establishment of the Scottish Parliament.

- General Comments

The production of an environmental strategy is to be welcomed, including an unambiguous commitment to the principles of sustainable development. The declared emphasis on long-term education and planning systems as the means by which this aim can be achieved is also to be endorsed. SEPA's acknowledgement of the comprehensive role of local authorities and the development of more meaningful relationships and indeed partnerships, must be pursued at a national and local level. This would ensure a more effective use of scarce public resources and the provision of an integrated range of services to be delivered to the public and industry.

SEPA recognises that the entire approach to environmental enhancement is determined by financial resources and the subsequent need to prioritise statutory duties. However, local authorities operate under similar financial limitations, which emphasises the need to plan on a wider 'corporate' basis, to ensure maximum impact and value-for-money.

❖ **Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Committee:-

- Endorses the strategic approach taken by SEPA in the formulation of an environmental strategy.
- Authorises a suitable response to SEPA, on the basis of the points made in the above report, and in particular the role which local authorities must play in formally representing local communities at all stages of environmental management and regulation.

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