

# **An integrated approach to defining sustainable development criteria in spatial planning:**

***A framework for accommodating the characteristics of 'place' and the aspirations of local communities in rural sustainable development assessment***

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**Edited version of a report to the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee and English Heritage by**

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**A full version of the original report 'The sustainable development of dispersed settlement in the High Weald AONB', October 2007, can be found at [http://www.highweald.org/downloads/publications/cat\\_view/390-publications/129-research-/283-settlement.html](http://www.highweald.org/downloads/publications/cat_view/390-publications/129-research-/283-settlement.html)**

## **1. Introduction**

1.1. The challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to manage pressures for change so that we protect what is valued but also guide the evolution of settlements both within their specific historical trajectories and so that they perform better against a wide and carefully considered range of sustainability criteria. Spatial planning / rural development policies in the UK - and most other parts of Europe - are now framed in the context of, and with the express objective of achieving, sustainable development. One of the key issues for rural areas like the High Weald AONB with dispersed settlement characteristics is to register those characteristics as a significant criterion for sustainable development that should be deployed in the formulation and implementation of policies. An understanding of character and the processes which have shaped the settled landscape to date could form an important component of a new approach to achieving sustainable rural and peri-urban settlements.

## 2. Sustainable communities / localities in the UK – an overview

2.1. For the past 60 years rural planning policies in England have been restricted to variations of key settlement policies, whereby development has been concentrated in larger villages and small towns, thereby overlooking strong regional distinctions and taking no account of the character of settlement in dispersed regions. Such fixed and narrow notions, and correspondingly singular policy responses, have had negative effects on some rural communities / localities that have not been identified as having key functions. These negative effects have included pricing people on lower incomes out of the local housing market, eroding local services and preventing development that might provide employment for local people. In the main it has led to rural settlements in dispersed areas (and smaller settlements in nucleated areas) becoming progressively *less* sustainable both socially and economically as restraint policies have compounded problems of:

- lack of *employment* opportunities for local people;
- lack of *affordable homes* for people on low incomes;
- erosion of *local facilities and services* in villages, including shops, health care, child care and training, particularly for those young and elderly people who are socially and physically isolated. (see, for example, Shorten, 2001; Owen, 1996)

Such an approach can also conflict with the aim of reinforcing locally distinctiveness - specifically the protection of dispersed settlement patterns - and of promoting high-quality and locally-sensitive development.

2.2. 'Village-centric' planning policies implemented since 1947 have already distorted the inherited settlement pattern and created new landscapes and new settlement patterns in some parts of England. While in 'Midland England' this policy might have had relatively restricted negative impacts - by and large simply making 'villages' into larger villages - in dispersed settlement areas such as the Weald it has converted loose clusters into artificial nucleation without addressing consequential issues such as infrastructure, settlement hierarchy and, indeed settlement function. One consequence of key settlement policies in dispersed areas, for example, has been a 'densification' of non-nucleated clusters and thus an overburdening of their infrastructure.

2.3. Despite this, planning policy at a national and local level continues to encourage the concentration of development in service centres and settlement cores. Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas introduced in 2004 re-emphasises the key settlement approach based on the premise that building close to existing services is sustainable because it improves access to those services. However research has shown that people are strategically disobedient (Shorten, 2004; 2006). Proximity does not determine use of services. People have connections and loyalties to services and places that are independent of the settlement in which they live.

2.4. But it is important to note here that key settlement policies, which have determined rural settlement policies and their resultant patterns throughout the UK

since the Second World War, were not originally introduced as a means to reduce CO2 emissions, or even to cut down on travel by motor car, but rather to reduce the costs of supplying services and utilities to rural settlements. It was assumed, for example, that the unit costs of infrastructure such as electricity and water would be reduced if housing and employment development were concentrated in larger settlements such as market towns.

2.5. In the past five years central government has focused on the notion of sustainable communities as a principal driver of policy in many fields. In 2003, the Communities Plan (Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future) set out a long-term programme for delivering sustainable communities in both urban and rural areas (ODPM, 2003). Specifically, in 2004, government introduced Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas, which called for “policies to sustain, enhance and, where appropriate, revitalize country towns and villages (including the provision of affordable housing) and for strong, diverse, economic activity, whilst maintaining local character and a high quality environment” (ODPM, 2004).

2.6. Ironically, this welcome advance in the importance of sustainable development in rural policies, is working to the disadvantage of some smaller rural communities / localities. These smaller communities are generally considered by planners to be ‘unsustainable’, despite the fact that there is now strong evidence for:

- smaller more remote settlements and networks of settlements being able to perform better against a range of sustainability indicators;
- employment growth in rural areas being double that in urban - rural districts now outperforming and also converging with urban areas;
- much of this growth being part-time and self-employed, driven by home-based workers;
- more positive and locally-attuned policies and strategies seeking to inform rather than react to change;
- rural settlements having a tendency to do better against long term sustainability criteria such as food and energy security.

2.7. A particular problem for smaller rural settlements is that the recent international concern about the effects of climate change has galvanised central governments across Europe – including the UK Government - into adopting policies that reduce CO2 emissions as a priority above all others. While this is clearly an extremely important aspect of sustainability, an exclusive focus on reducing CO2 emissions threatens to overwhelm and relegate other crucial aspects of sustainability, particularly the social, economic and cultural sustainability of rural communities, but also other characteristics of environmental sustainability –specifically the historic character of dispersed settlement and the local distinctiveness of different places. To be effective in promoting sustainable rural communities / localities, rural policies must take an holistic and integrated approach to the pursuit of sustainable development.

2.8. There is currently no agreed definition of what a rural sustainable community / locality is; indeed, the pursuit of such a definition might well be a fruitless endeavour. Instead, it might be more appropriate to answer the question: 'How might continuous improvement in the sustainability of existing, specific rural communities / localities be secured?' This might well yield diverse community / locality-specific policy responses. Such an approach might be more relevant to the problems actually experienced by rural communities than the potentially monolithic response that might result from the quest for the utopian notion of 'the sustainable rural community'.

2.9. In October 2005 the Commission for Rural Communities, the body charged with advising Government on sustainable rural communities, commissioned five consultants (Banister; Bryden and Bryan; Levett; Owen; and Shorten) to prepare separate papers addressing the question: "what do we mean by 'sustainable rural communities?' from different perspectives. The following conclusions from the work are relevant to the present project.

- Sustainability is a multi-faceted concept and it is unlikely that all such facets could be encompassed within a single definition. The core idea of sustainability is simultaneously to make life better for people and maintain the planet's life support system, noting that the aim is to achieve both, not just to trade one off against the other.
- The narrow focus on reducing CO2 emissions and concentrating new development in larger settlements has led to *reduced sustainability in some rural communities*. Such policies are based on the assumption that they will create the conditions whereby more people will be closer to jobs and services and so reduce the need to travel. But this policy has failed, mainly because cheap motoring has enabled people to be far more mobile.
- The environmental sustainability of rural communities continues to be reduced as the environmental burden of contemporary lifestyles is potentially greater than that of urban communities. Increased car usage is one of the main causes of environmental 'unsustainability' and there is a close link between private mobility and declining public services and affordable housing.
- National criteria for sustainability such as those contained in the 45 'Quality of Life Indicators' produced by the Audit Commission (2005) or the 68 indicators of sustainable development produced by the UK Government (HM Government, 2005) provide a checklist for measuring progress towards sustainability. However, the criteria / indicators are not particularly relevant to the assessments of sustainability made by individual rural communities. They are difficult to apply because (a) they impose a 'one-size-fits-all' checklist on all localities and (b) they give undue weight to quantifiable indicators and fail to provide a measure of the more qualitative facets of sustainability that are important to rural communities. Remarkably neither makes any explicit reference to the quality of the built environment or the historic value of built and natural environments.

2.11. In recent years the CCRI has undertaken several research contracts with a direct bearing on the concept of sustainable rural communities / localities. One such

contract, for Defra, involved the development of a scenario for the delivery of services to rural communities in 2015 (CCRU, 2005). A major finding with implications for the present study was that by 2015 there will have been a process of even (!) greater polarisation between the majority of people in rural communities (with good incomes, good health, personal transport and home-based access to the Internet) and the minority (with lower incomes, poorer health, no personal transport, and without access to the Internet). At the inter-parish scale there will be considerable unevenness in service delivery reflecting their variable endowment of social capital and community leadership. Clearly, this implies that some rural communities will have become *less sustainable* by 2015 and might well need targeted support.

2.12. Drawing on these and other studies, a sustainable development framework for a spatial planning / rural development policy would include consideration of the dimensions – or variables - set out in Figure 1.

- **reduced carbon footprint**, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, energy efficient buildings, reduced travel by car, opportunities for locally generated renewable energy
- **sustainable consumption of resources and relationship with the natural world**, conservation of natural resources, valued habitats and special features, promotion of biodiversity and connectivity, minimised waste production at source and increased opportunities for reuse and recycling within settlement
- **improvement of environmental quality**, including water quality, air quality etc
- **development of community empowerment**, building up social capital for self governance, active community-led planning and development, including opportunities for active participation by under-represented groups – based on communities with a diverse social structure and mix of age groups
- **decent services and facilities**, including access to affordable homes, education, health and social care, exercise, arts and recreation, shops, etc.
- **diverse economic base**, with local employment opportunities, with support for people on low incomes unable to take advantage of employment opportunities
- **locally distinctive built / natural surroundings**, including improved design quality, and locally, as well as nationally, valued history and culture

Figure 1: Dimensions of a sustainable development framework for rural policy

2.13. This framework should not be viewed just as a list; it is important to stress the need to address the connections between these variables of sustainable development in preparing and implementing rural policies. And it is important, particularly in the context of the present project, to recognise that the relative significance of these

dimensions of sustainability will differ between different rural communities / localities and might well change through time.

### **3. Proposing an integrated framework for identifying criteria for sustainable development**

3.1. So much for a general overview of the broader issue of the sustainability of rural communities / localities; how might this relate to an approach to sustainable development which reflects the character of a locality through spatial planning / rural development policies?

3.2. Figure 2 attempts to show diagrammatically the relationship between the different kinds of criteria that might be applied in such policies. It is important at the outset to acknowledge the importance of identifying consistent dimensions or variables of sustainable development - essentially to agree the *scope* of sustainability. For this to be meaningful in public policy terms there must be agreement about what falls within that scope, otherwise it would be impossible to secure agreement to policies from a wide range of interested parties; different interests in policy making and implementation cannot choose what they believe should be included within – or excluded from - the scope of sustainability. And that scope should be interpreted holistically in two senses; it should include social, economic, environmental and cultural dimensions of sustainability and it should look for the connections between these dimensions.

3.3. There are probably three kinds of sustainability criteria that need to be addressed in preparing and implementing spatial planning / rural development policies that can be tailored to the character of an area.

1. First, there are sustainability criteria that should be addressed in *all* public policy. These 'generic' criteria might be derived from national / government policy statements such as the 'Quality of Life Indicators' promulgated by the Audit Commission in 2005 (and set out in outline in Appendix 1 as an example), recognising that most such statements are selective and partial. Clearly, if they are to be applied in all situations there must be a substantial degree of common agreement about their validity and appropriateness. But they might also need different application in different English Regions, even before the local factors captured by the following two kinds of criterion.
2. Second, there are sustainability criteria that derive from a 'type' of situation or setting, whether a type of locality, such as an area of dispersed settlement, or a type of community, such as former coalmining communities. These will implicitly be responding to the historic trajectory / attributes of an area or community, such as the woodland industry / transhumance / farming trajectory of the High Weald. Logically, these criteria should be consistent across each type.

3. Third, there are 'local' sustainability criteria that are specific to an individual community / locality. They might respond to the particular characteristics and culture of the built or natural environment of that locality and / or to the needs and aspirations of members of the local community.

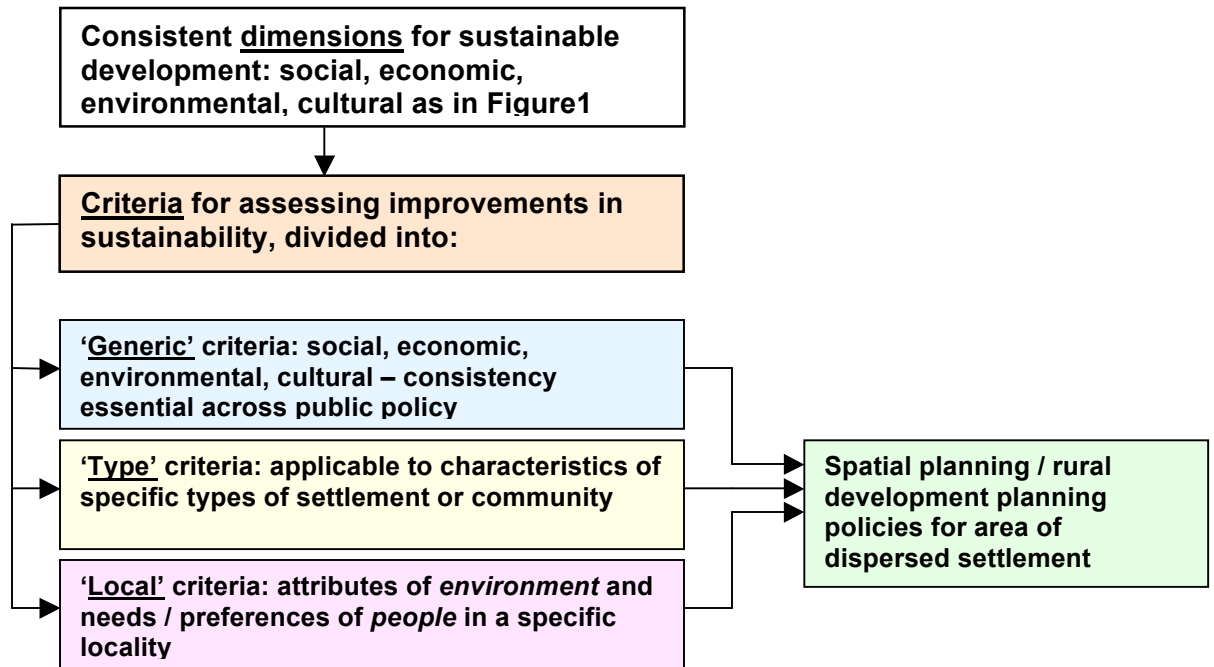


Figure 2: 'Model' of sustainable development criteria for application in spatial planning / rural development policies for a landscape of dispersed settlement

3.4. In the formulation of any spatial planning / rural development policy, the challenge is to combine the most appropriate *mix of criteria* from each of these three sets. In 'special' or even unique settings such as the High Weald AONB it might well be appropriate for the criteria to be more weighted towards the 'type' criteria than would be the case in most policy situations.

3.5. In recent years it has become common practice for public policy to make reference to - indeed, in many cases to be founded on - what are termed here 'generic' criteria for sustainability; the identification and application of these criteria has been the subject of extensive research and practice. It is a well-trodden field and the present project does not pursue the examination of these criteria further. It is important to re-emphasise, however, that matters relating to historic or cultural aspects of built or natural environments rarely figure in lists of these national criteria. The UK Sustainable Development Strategy (HM Government, 2005) lists 68 indicators (see Appendix 2) of progress towards sustainable development, yet not one of them refers explicitly to the built environment, let alone to any historic or cultural aspects of the built environment. This might be considered surprising in the context of the 10 guiding principles for sustainable spatial development adopted by the Council of Europe's Member States, one of which was: 'Enhancing the cultural heritage as a factor for

development' (European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional Planning, CEMAT, 2002).

3.6. There is an urgent need for matters relating to the built environment – and specifically to its historic and cultural attributes - to attain a higher profile and be accorded greater weight amongst sustainable development criteria at the UK national level. This might be addressed through concerted action by representatives of historic landscapes, such as the High Weald AONB.

3.7. To a much lesser extent, the identification of 'local' criteria specific to an individual community / locality is also beginning to be incorporated into policies. This is being achieved most noticeably in predominantly rural areas through the preparation of community-based plans, such as Parish Plans of which some 1,500 have been prepared in recent years. Techniques for identifying the needs and preferences of the local community are being honed all the time and a great deal of research has been conducted into the development and application of these techniques. It is important that policies recognise the diversity and specificity of individual rural communities / localities and avoid a 'one size fits all' or national / county / district stereotype approach.

3.8. Local distinctiveness should be fostered as a criterion of sustainability and, within a district or county-wide framework, policies and proposals should be tailored to the needs of specific communities / localities wherever this is appropriate. There is a need, therefore, to have a place-specific perspective that encompasses aspects of sustainability peculiar to real, individual places. Coverage of historic or cultural aspects of built or natural environments is more commonplace amongst these 'local' criteria than amongst 'generic' criteria, but tends to be patchy and dependent on the interests and motivations of the leaders of the various initiatives. Again, although the identification of these local criteria is a crucial issue and could be addressed in a future research initiative. One important matter that must be noted in relation to sustainability criteria that derive from local communities is the tendency of those communities to select criteria different from, and sometimes in conflict with, criteria applied by policy makers and interest groups. The identification of 'self-determination by local communities' as a criterion for sustainability is a double-edged sword.

3.9. There is a need to focus on providing pointers towards the identification of 'type criteria that can be derived from specific types of setting; an approach to identifying this kind of sustainability criteria seems to be almost entirely undeveloped. It is not possible within the confines of the project to undertake a detailed analysis of what might be included as 'type' criteria for an area of dispersed settlement – or to construct a meaningful typology of such criteria. However, the criteria might be organised under a number of sub-headings as set out in Figure 3.



- **Origins and evolution** – the historic processes of change and continuity by which land use and dispersed settlement has reached its current form
- **Settlement pattern** – the type, spatial distribution and density of buildings and groups of buildings throughout a defined area, including the size and hierarchy (both morphologically and functionally) of hamlets, villages and small towns
- **Landscape character** – the physical, archaeological, historic, visual and other experiential attributes of landscape, such as its geomorphology, soils, natural vegetation cover, field patterns, settlement patterns, roads and communications, territorial patterning, boundary features such as hedgerows, etc.
- **Buildings in their setting** – the functional, spatial and visual relationships between buildings and their landscape
- **Buildings** – the consistent attributes and characteristics of individual building types and the layout of groups of buildings, including function, style, construction, materials and architectural details
- **Land management practice** – types of agriculture and woodland management practised, past and present,,
- **Characteristics of the local community** – the changing socio-economic profile of the inhabitants, visitors and other users of the area
- **Traditional skills** related to the particular characteristics of the landscape and land management practices

Figure 3: Possible sub-headings for ‘type’ criteria for sustainable development in landscapes of dispersed settlement

3.10. Work already undertaken in landscape character assessment for example, AONB Management Plans, historic landscape characterisation and the characterisation of historic farmsteads provides some indication of how the development of such ‘type’ criteria might be initiated. It is crucial to emphasise, however, the difference between (a) criteria and (b) the description of characteristics of an area. Criteria must be capable of being used in evaluation and decision-making; this means that they must be expressed in a form that embodies value judgment as well as a descriptive.

3.11. One of the key challenges to safeguarding the characteristics of landscapes of dispersed settlement such as the High Weald AONB is to register their significance in the statutory planning system. The High Weald AONB Management Plan, a statutory document under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) 2000 produced jointly by local authority partners identifies the dispersed historic settlement pattern of farmsteads and hamlets as a fundamental component of character but this is yet to be fully reflected in relevant LDFs. The nub of the issue here, though, is the established antipathy to dispersed settlement in British planning practice, but also arguably in wider British culture. It is important to articulate clearly and persuasively the

observation that dispersal is a 'normal' feature of many historic settlement patterns and landscapes across relatively large regions, not merely in local areas; contrary to 20<sup>th</sup> century public perceptions, it may even be *the* norm.. Those landscapes have already proven their sustainability over centuries; they have endured (although admittedly until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the context of their relationship to traditional agriculture; the challenge now is for dispersed settlement to maintain its resilience in the context of new rural lifestyles). In order to safeguard their character, their characteristics might be most effectively addressed as sustainable development criteria – 'type' criteria – within development plan documents and / or supplementary planning documents as part of the reformed English planning system. The rhetoric attaching to the recent reforms of the planning system promise a 'spatial planning' approach that is more integrated and more flexible and, at least theoretically, more capable of delivering improvements to sustainability interpreted as an holistic concept. This should provide a more fertile seedbed for the development of a more reasoned and sympathetic consideration of the continuing value of historic forms of dispersed settlement. We are still waiting to see, though, whether this rhetoric will be matched in practice.

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## **Appendix 1: The Audit Commission quality of life indicators**

Explicitly within the context of the 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy (HM Government, 2005), the Audit Commission, together with ODPM, Defra and MORI, produced a national set of indicators, embracing social, economic and environmental issues, to measure the quality of life in local areas in order to help local communities become more sustainable. These indicators make no distinction between urban and rural communities. The set includes 45 key measures that help to 'paint a picture' of the quality of life in a local area. They are arranged under 10 headings.

### **People and place**

1. Priorities for improvement in the local area, as defined by local residents.

### **Community cohesion and involvement**

2. The percentage of residents who think that people being attacked because of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion is a very big or fairly big problem in their local area.
3. The percentage of residents who think that for their local area, over the past three years, community activities have got better or stayed the same.
4. Election turnout.

### **Community safety**

5. The percentage of residents surveyed who said they feel 'fairly safe' or 'very safe' outside a) during the day and b) after dark.
6. a) Domestic burglaries per 1,000 households, b) Violent offences committed per 1,000 population, c) Theft of a vehicle per 1,000 population and d) Sexual offences per 1,000 population.
7. The percentage of residents who think that a) vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property or vehicles, b) people using or dealing drugs, and c) people being rowdy or drunk in public places is a very big or fairly big problem in their local area.
8. The number of a) pedestrian and b) cyclist road accident casualties per 100,000 population.

### **Culture and leisure**

9. The percentage of the population within 20 minutes travel time (urban – walking, rural – by car) of different sports facility types.
10. The percentage of residents who think that for their local area, over the past three years the following have got better or stayed the same a) activities for teenagers, b) cultural facilities (for example, cinemas, museums), c) facilities for young children, d) sport and leisure facilities and e) parks and open spaces.

### **Economic well-being**

11. The percentage of the working-age population that is in employment.
12. a) The number of Job Seekers Allowance claimants as a percentage of the resident working age population and b) percentage of these who have been out of work for more than a year.
13. a) The total number of VAT registered businesses in the area at the end of the year and b) the percentage change in the number of VAT registered businesses.
14. Job density (number of jobs filled to working age population).
15. The proportion of the population living in the most deprived super output areas in the country.
16. The percentage of the population of working age that is claiming key benefits.
17. The percentage of a) children and b) population over 60 that live in households that are income deprived.

### **Education and life-long learning**

18. The percentage of half days missed due to total absence in a) primary and b) secondary schools maintained by the local education authority.
19. The proportion of young people (16-24 year olds) in full-time education or employment.
20. The proportion of working-age population qualified to a) NVQ2 or equivalent and b) NVQ4 or equivalent.

21. The percentage of 15-year-old pupils in schools maintained by the local authority achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C or equivalent.

### **Environment**

22. The proportion of developed land that is derelict.
23. The proportion of relevant land and highways that is assessed as having combined deposits of litter and detritus.
24. Levels of key air pollutants.
25. Carbon dioxide emissions by sector and per capita emissions.
26. Average annual domestic consumption of gas and electricity (kwh).
27. Daily domestic water use (per capita consumption).
28. The percentage of river length assessed as (a) good biological quality and (b) good chemical quality.
29. The volume of household waste collected and the proportion recycled.
30. a) The percentage area of land designated as sites of special scientific interest (SSSI) within the local authority area in favourable condition and b) the area of land designated as a local nature reserve per 1,000 population.

### **Health and social well-being**

31. Age standardised mortality rates for a) all cancers, b) circulatory diseases and c) respiratory diseases.
32. Infant mortality.
33. Life expectancy at birth (male and female).
34. The percentage of households with one or more person with a limiting long-term illness.
35. Teenage pregnancy, conceptions under 18 years, per 1,000 females aged 15-17.

### **Housing**

36. The total number of new housing completions.
37. Affordable dwellings completed as a percentage of all new housing completions.
38. Household accommodation without central heating.
39. The percentage of residents who think that people sleeping rough on the streets or in other public places is a very big or fairly big problem in their local area.
40. The percentage of all housing that is unfit.
41. House price-to-income ratio.

### **Transport and access**

42. The percentage of the resident population who travel to work a) by private motor vehicle, b) by public transport and c) on foot or cycle.
43. The percentage of the resident population travelling over 20 km to work.
44. The percentage of residents who think that for their local area, over the past three years, that a) public transport has got better or stayed the same and b) the level of traffic congestion has got better or stayed the same.
45. Estimated traffic flows for all vehicle types (million vehicle km).

## Appendix 2: The UK Government Sustainable Development Indicators

Sub-headings for the 68 indicators of progress towards sustainable development

1. Greenhouse gas emissions	35. Demography
2. Carbon dioxide emissions	36. Household and dwellings
3. Aviation and shipping emissions	37. Active community participation
4. Renewable electricity	38. Crime
5. Electricity generation	39. Fear of crime
6. Household energy use	40. Employment
7. Road transport	41. Workless households
8. Private vehicles	42. Economically inactive
9. Road freight	43. Childhood poverty
10. Manufacturing sector	44. Young adults
11. Service sector	45. Pensioner poverty
12. Public sector	46. Pensioner provision
13. Resource use	47. Education
14. Energy supply	48. Sustainable development education
15. Water resource use	49. Health inequality
16. Domestic water consumption	50. Healthy life expectancy
17. Water stress	51. Mortality rates
18. Waste	52. Smoking
19. Household waste per person	53. Childhood obesity
20. Bird populations	54. Diet
21. Biodiversity conservation	55. Mobility
22. Agriculture sector	56. Getting to school
23. Farming and environmental stewardship	57. Accessibility
24. Land use	58. Road accidents
25. Land recycling	59. Social justice
26. Dwelling density	60. Environmental equality
27. Fish stocks	61. Air quality and health
28. Ecological impacts of air pollution	62. Housing conditions
29. Emissions of air pollutants	63. Households living in fuel poverty
30. River quality	64. Homelessness
31. Flooding	65. Local environment quality
32. Economic growth	66. Satisfaction in local area
33. Productivity	67. UK international assistance
34. Investment	68. Wellbeing