

Possible Commissioning of a New Collaborative Research Centre on Sustainable Behaviours: ESRC and DEFRA Consultation Document

A CONTRIBUTION FROM FORWARD SCOTLAND

Introduction

Forward Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the ESRC and DEFRA consultation on the possible commissioning of a new collaborative research centre on sustainable behaviours. We are happy to have this response placed in the public domain, and invite questions or further discussion on any issues raised in this document. We would also like to be kept informed of developments with this proposal by receiving further communications on the centre.

Forward Scotland supports action for sustainable development through practical projects and research. Our mission is to champion innovative approaches to sustainable development. We work to inspire a culture where the benefits of sustainable development are understood, valued and achieved. To do this we promote sustainability in the widest sense, in ways that change people's perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, while also achieving economic vitality, social wellbeing and a good quality environment for all.

Our response is based on 11 years of experience promoting sustainable development in Scotland, and of managing and delivering grant schemes which have supported a significant number of communities, social enterprises and other organisations to contribute to sustainable development in a number of areas.

In addition to our core initiatives, Forward Scotland engages in coordinated activities with other stakeholders through our membership of various policy networks, including the Sustainable Development Education (SDE) Policy Network, Scottish Sustainable Development Forum (SSDF) and Sustainable Development Research Network (SDRN). In particular, we support the response submitted as part of this consultation from the SDE Policy Network.

Overall Comments on the Proposal

Forward Scotland would like to make some general comments on the proposals outlined in the consultation document.

Where a centre could add greatest value

Forward Scotland believes that a culture change towards the pursuit of sustainable development is required urgently in order to contribute to the improvement of a range of issues; not least the mitigation of the effects of climate change, closing the gap of social inequalities and improving societal wellbeing. We are concerned that the proposed research centre would generate a great deal of information but little in the way of practical action.

It is our experience that there is already a great deal of existing research in this area but that it is dispersed across a wide range of disciplines and institutions. Evidence from academic and commercial research in areas such as health psychology, consumer behaviour and social marketing should be drawn from. In Scotland, the University of Stirling is one particular hub of leading research in this field, housing the Institute of Social Marketing¹.

We are concerned that creating another centre to generate more research is not the best use of resources. We therefore believe that a **prime purpose of this centre should be to gather and collate existing research and translate it into practical action.**

We broadly support the justifications for establishing a centre, but **the centre should be focused on sustainable behaviours**, as environmental behaviours are not necessarily inherently sustainable. On a practical level, engaging with people on sustainable behaviours can be easier, as it is possible to also motivate people with interests in social and economic aspects of life. The centre also needs to ensure that its activities are genuinely applicable to the whole of the UK and not just England.

We are concerned that the strategic areas identified follow the current economic paradigm of creating solutions through market forces. We would therefore expect to see a strategic area that seeks to challenge this and establish, through research based evidence, whether this is indeed the most effective way of creating solutions.

Key areas on which a centre should focus

It is widely recognised that improvements can be made to consumption and production patterns in ways that raise quality of life and wellbeing as well as economic efficiency, and competitiveness. We believe that there is a growing desire among individuals, communities, businesses and the public sector to choose more sustainable products and services. A range of voluntary and mandatory instruments to steer demand for goods and services in more sustainable directions are increasingly being developed and implemented. However, these are often unconnected and fragmented. A holistic assessment of the plethora of instruments and initiatives in use is required. Through this clear policy guidelines can be developed taking account of best practice and the opportunity to test and introduce new, innovative approaches.

Policy development in the context of behavioural change is a notoriously complex and difficult area because of the wide variety of different, interlinking and often subjective factors that lead people to make particular choices, or to behave in particular ways.

Sustainable consumption therefore is not something that can be readily imposed by governments. It has to be achieved by individuals, households, communities, businesses as well as governments making informed decisions. While government can set the framework to encourage more sustainable consumption, it has to be implemented by

¹ www.ism.stir.ac.uk

individual stakeholders through changing behaviour and purchasing patterns. In this context there is a need to create conditions that improve the capacity to choose, use and dispose of goods and services more sustainably.

Examples of successful activities from Forward Scotland's experience

Forward Scotland works with a range of public and private sector partners to promote the adoption of responsible policies and practices by businesses. The company is a partner of the VIBES (Vision in Business for the Environment in Scotland) scheme, which awards companies that achieve economic benefit from embedding sustainability into their policies and practices. Our experience of working with VIBES would suggest that businesses can be motivated to change their behaviour but this is usually driven by financial or regulatory benefits rather than moral sentiment.

Forward Scotland has experience of facilitating behaviour change within the Local Authority setting. We held workshop with a number of Local Authorities to discuss the SPP10: Planning for Waste Management publication during the consultation period. Indeed the Forward Scotland website is named in the publication as a source of further advice in this area.

Forward Scotland also has a strong track record in research and development. Recent work in 2005 includes the mapping of skills and opportunities within the renewable energy, waste and natural heritage sectors in Scotland, and an analysis of skills and capacity-building requirements for the development of sustainable communities. The results of these studies have helped to inform the Scottish Executive's green jobs strategy for Scotland, *Going for Green Growth*, as well as the Scottish Sustainable Development Strategy, *Choosing our Future*. This led us to conclude that there needs to be more specific schemes dedicated to increasing capacity. As a result we are currently working on providing Community Learning Accounts to enable communities to increase their capacity and ability to make informed decisions.

Conclusion

Forward Scotland largely supports the proposal for a Collaborative Research Centre on Sustainable Behaviours as outlined in the consultation document. However, we believe that to avoid duplication the centre must focus on collating existing research and formulating ways in which research can be translated into practical projects. We firmly believe that governments should focus on creating the conditions to enable behaviour change through support for innovation & practical demonstration and converting the lessons learned into the mainstream.

As a result we have developed a range of skills and experiences that we are striving to apply in order to meet the emerging challenges of sustainable development in Scotland. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and we look forward to contributing to the work of DEFRA in promoting sustainable development. We would be pleased to meet with you if clarification or further detail is required.

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