



Sustainable  
Development Commission



# Sustainable Lives

**What will sustainable  
lifestyles look like?**

A provocation by Alan Knight, SDC Commissioner



Why we need

# positive visions

of sustainable lifestyles

**“ We might recycle, insulate our lofts and use fewer carrier bags, but we are far from living sustainable lives. Despite all the policies, conferences and expertise on sustainable development, we aren’t yet able to describe what low carbon, one planet, poverty-free lifestyles – that are accessible to everyone – could look like.**

And when we try, we get it wrong by overselling the romantic alternative lifestyle or set sterile targets that mean little to citizens lives or businesses. We need to be better at painting a compelling, inspiring picture of a sustainable future.

The good news is that sustainability will happen. My confidence comes from the word – unsustainability is, well, unsustainable! Sooner or later something will happen, the rubber band will snap, the tipping point will tip or the pan will boil over! The excessive use of stuff, over production of carbon, growing poverty and decline in wellbeing will tip us over the edge.

The choice we face is how much effort do we invest to make the transition from unsustainable to sustainable? We could let nature and physics do it for us which will mean famine, death and disease, or do we allow economics and public policy to shape the transition? The choice is ours.

Yet many people are overwhelmed by a sense of negativity and hopelessness from the narrative about today’s problems. Therefore policies that enhance lifestyles, rather than undermine them, will naturally be adopted more readily. It is in the DNA of humans to constantly seek better lives.

Sustainability can help, not hinder, this desire. I believe we should see sustainability as a tool to enhance quality of life and devote creativity to providing lifestyle choices that deliver both a sustainable world and a good life.

# Visioning sustainable lifestyles

I don't believe we can achieve sustainable lifestyles without a clear vision of what the mountain summit we are being asked to climb towards, looks like.

Science increasingly shows us the scale of the challenge. And we have a growing list of targets – such as targets to reduce greenhouse gases, to eradicate global poverty, to improve health – to steer us towards sustainability.



being seen as telling others how to live their lives. Work to visualise and describe sustainable lifestyles could also appear too idealistic, elitist or middle class.

Will narrowing the gap between rich and poor, in a more equitable society and world, meet resistance from those fearful of losing their current lifestyles? And if we use less 'stuff', how will we keep the economy going?



These are important, but I argue they need to be complemented with a narrative around what matters most to people – their lifestyles. What do people think sustainable development really means for them? How will it shape their lives? Where can sustainability help people live happier, more fulfilled lives?

Creating lifestyle visions surfaces tensions. Some, including politicians, fear 'nanny statism' – the fear of



## Creating a narrative

Creating a picture of a sustainable lifestyle is not science. It might not even be accurate. The narrative may be no more than tabloid journalism but that may be its value – tabloid journalism is good at communicating complex ideas to many people in an engaging and compelling way.

Here I start to outline the shape of such a narrative with a set of 10 key principles of what a sustainable lifestyle could look like (see overleaf). My purpose is to be a provocation to stimulate the thinking, talking, connections, collaborations, research, development, investment, policy and action necessary to create the changes for people to live sustainable lives. I see it as a strawman to be debated and discussed and serve as a foundation to encourage interested parties (government, business, communities and individuals) to imagine what future lifestyles will look and feel like in a sustainable society.

Through my own work with companies and the Sustainable Development Commission, we have learned that corporate and public policy is the main lever of change

to help people make more sustainable choices. By road mapping lifestyle choices, we are taking control of the inevitable transition from unsustainability to sustainability by using innovation, economics and public policy to drive the change.

In some areas action is already underway to drive the right changes but there are important gaps that few are yet facing up to including the excessive amount of 'stuff' we use and the current lack of alignment between economics and the working of nature.

We now need a mature debate on what low-carbon, sustainable societies in the 21st Century look like. The Sustainable Development Commission is committed to exploring the questions of how a sustainable economy will work and what kind of sustainable lifestyles we will be leading. Please join with us to create the solutions for a sustainable future."

**Alan Knight**

*Commissioner for Business and Sustainable Consumption  
Sustainable Development Commission*

# Ten principles of sustainable lifestyles

Imagine we achieved modern lifestyles for all 9 billion people on the planet by 2050, where we used only one planet's worth of natural resources; every country achieved its carbon targets; and problematic health trends, like obesity and depression, are brought under control.

How would someone in that world describe the differences between their lives and the lives we lead in our unsustainable world? I suggest such a conversation would cover ten key principle differences. These are:

- 1 I manage my own self-esteem and health**
- 2 I live within my financial limits.**
- 3 The products I buy help local and international trade.**
- 4 I only use clean and renewable energy.**
- 5 I am active in a vibrant community.**
- 6 I live in a high trust society in which I talk with, rather than at, people.**
- 7 I have found the right balance between technology and simplicity.**
- 8 My leaders (political and business) have courage.**
- 9 I use much less stuff, but get the same level of service from the stuff I buy and use.**
- 10 The true value of nature is protected by economics.**

This paper is a provocation. **Do you agree with these principles?** Should they be phrased differently? Is the idea of sustainable, modern lifestyles even achievable? If not, what's your vision for 9 billion sustainable lifestyles?

Join the debate at [www.sd-commission.org.uk/forum\\_public](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/forum_public)