

# Summary of Findings

This summary presents the key findings of the review by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment of New Zealand's progress on sustainable development. It also highlights the opportunities and challenges ahead for sustainable development in New Zealand. Detailed analyses that support these findings are contained in the Commissioner's main report.

The report was primarily written for New Zealanders. However, it will also be of interest to international readers. For those less familiar with New Zealand, two matters of context are important. The first is that the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment is independent of Government, empowered under the Environment Act 1986 to act as New Zealand's environmental watchdog or ombudsman (see [www.pce.govt.nz](http://www.pce.govt.nz) for more information). The second is that this report is aimed at galvanising New Zealand's will to stride out down the sustainability road. To some readers it may seem overly critical of progress to date. From an international perspective New Zealand may be considered to be clean and green. However, as many New Zealanders know, this is a fragile image, one that owes more to our low population density than to New Zealand doing things very differently from other nations.

New Zealand has most of the ingredients necessary to evolve its environmental, social and economic policies to deliver the qualities of life we aspire to and would wish for our children and their children:

- innovative people
- a robust democracy
- a developed economy
- abundant environmental resources
- a love of 'team play'
- a growing sense of who we are
- a low population density.

Thus, New Zealand can and will make the transition to a more sustainable pathway.

## Sustainable development – what is it?

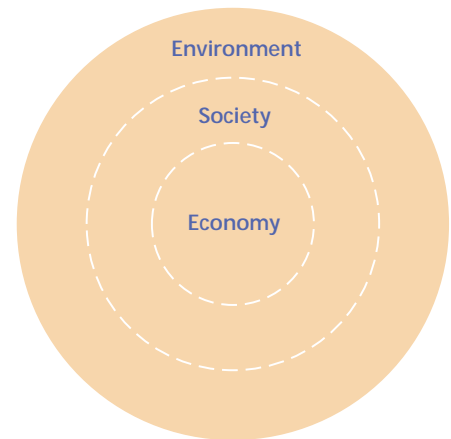
Sustainable development recognises:

- the finite reserves of non-renewable resources and the importance of using them wisely and, where possible, substituting them with renewable resources
- the limits of natural life-supporting systems (ecosystems) to absorb the effects of human activities that produce pollution and waste
- the linkages and interactions between environmental, social and economic factors when making decisions, emphasising that all three factors must be taken into consideration if we are to achieve sustainable outcomes, particularly in the long term
- the well-being of current and future generations as a key consideration.

At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, New Zealand and many other nations adopted the 27 principles that constitute 'Agenda 21'. These principles encourage the integration of economic, social and environmental interests to guide decision making towards sustainable development.

A number of models have been designed to represent the integration of environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. The one that the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment supports is the *strong sustainability* model (see figure 1). This recognises the limits within which an economy and society must operate if we are to function in a sustainable way.

Figure 1 Strong Sustainability



In this model the economy is a sub-set of society (i.e. it only exists in the context of a society), and many important aspects of society do not involve economic activity. Similarly, human society and the economic activities within it are totally constrained by the natural systems of our planet. The economy may expand or contract, and society's expectations and values may change over time, but to function in a sustainable way we must not exceed the capacity of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities.

Measuring progress towards sustainable development is complex because it involves the measurement of a mix of biophysical and ecological realities as well as human values and aspirations. If sustainable development is to be a widely accepted concept and implemented by all sectors of society, it needs to reflect not only society's developmental interests, but also the ecological limits which determine whether those interests are sustainable.

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*It is only in recent years that central government has made any significant commitment to developing a New Zealand Strategy on Sustainable Development.*

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## Progress on sustainable development in New Zealand

In the period following the Earth Summit New Zealand had the opportunity to become a leading light on sustainable development, given its relatively low population density, overall environmental quality, and its predominantly agricultural and marine-based economy. Instead, sustainable development has not progressed in New Zealand in a coordinated and meaningful fashion over the past ten years. Successive governments have largely ignored the Agenda 21 commitments made in 1992 and have not provided the leadership necessary to support and guide sustainable development in New Zealand. It is only in recent years that central government has made any significant commitment to developing a New Zealand Strategy on Sustainable Development.

Many participants in this investigation highlighted the important role that education for sustainable development plays in raising awareness and changing behaviour across all sectors of society. However, progress in implementing education for sustainability has been slow.

The Government has introduced, or has under consideration, a number of strategies and legislation that contribute to various aspects of sustainable development (see figure 2). In some cases the links between the individual strategies and sustainable development are not clear (see figure 3). It would have been more logical to have in place a sustainable development strategy before all the other related strategies were considered. Nevertheless, the production of several environmental, social and economic strategies in the last two years shows great promise for the implementation of sustainable development in the future if they are properly co-ordinated.



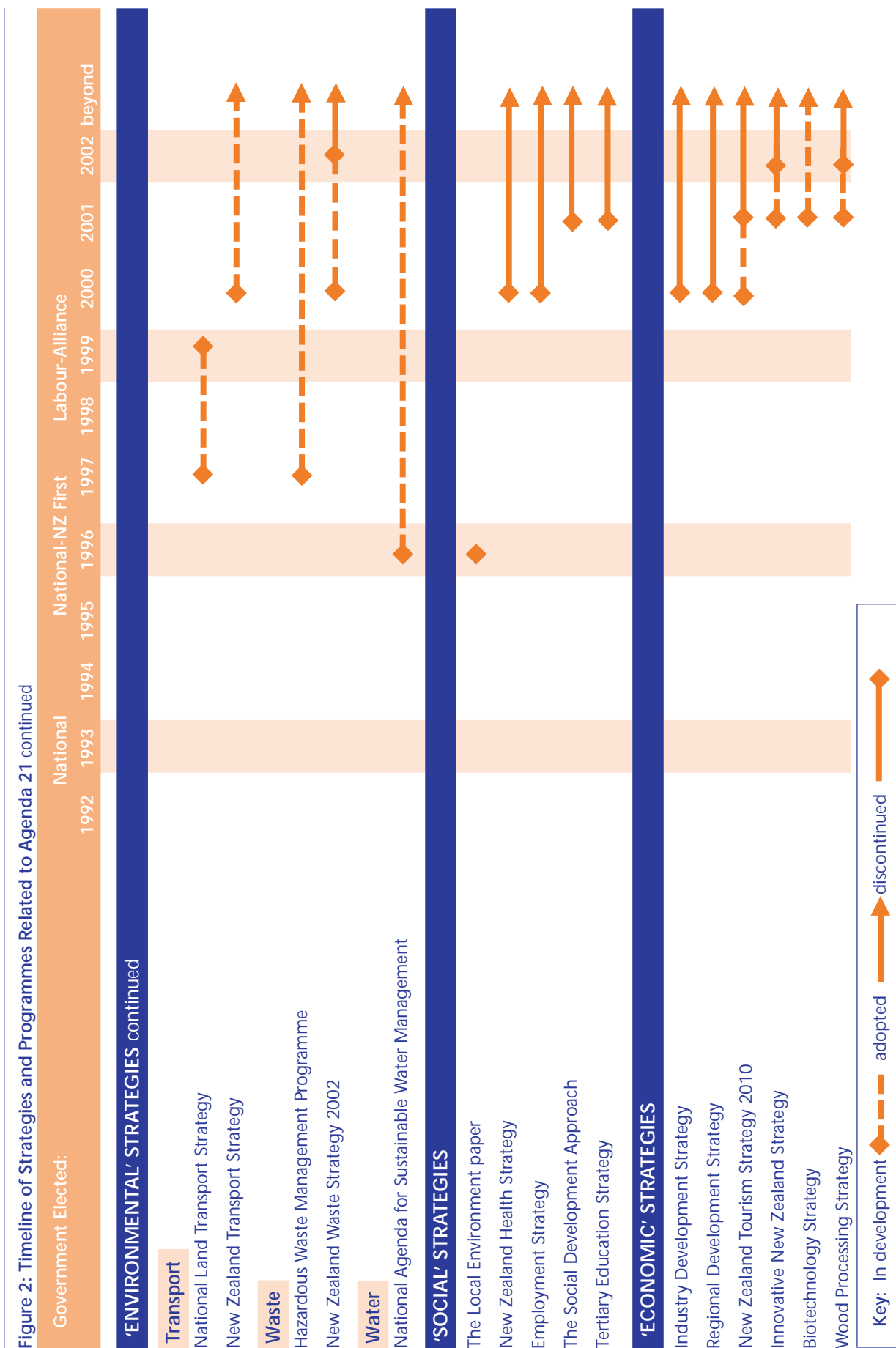
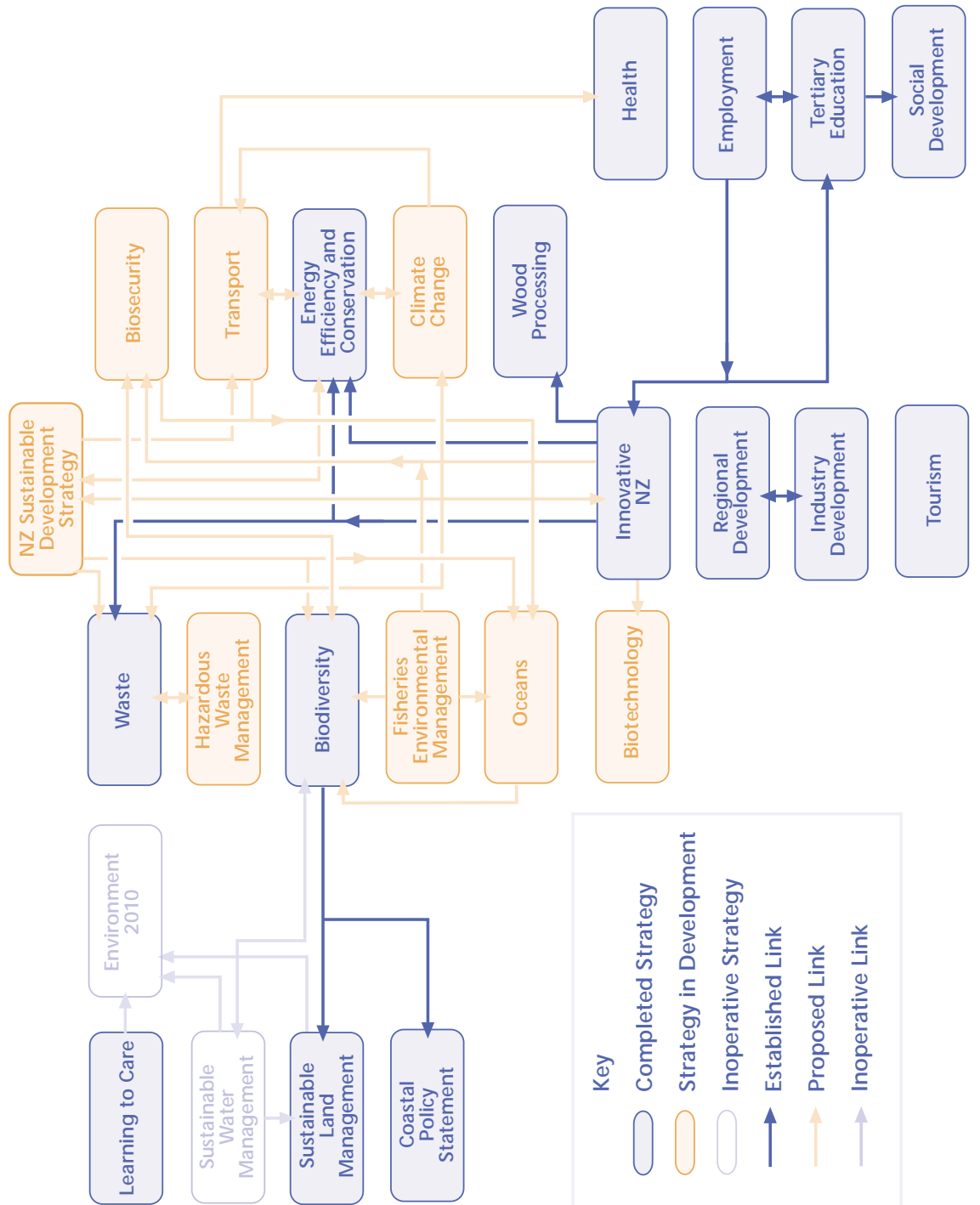


Figure 3: Linkages Between Government Strategies



A set of criteria (or expectations) was drawn up at the outset of this review as a means of assessing progress on sustainability in New Zealand. This was necessary because of the absence of any Government policy objectives or targets for sustainability against which performance could be determined. Table 1 summarises the findings of this review against those expectations.

**Table 1: Summary of The Findings of This Study Against Expectations**

Expectations	Findings
<p>1. A national strategy for sustainable development has been established, including clear goals, objectives and targets.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposals to develop a New Zealand Sustainable Development Strategy (NZSDS) were announced in August 2001.</li> <li>• The Government has already decided that the NZSDS will include elements of existing initiatives. These include the development of waste, energy, biodiversity, oceans and other strategies, together with a set of key principles.</li> </ul>
<p>2. Appropriate legislative and institutional arrangements are in place to give effect to Agenda 21.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statutes with provisions that refer to sustainable development or management concepts are generally only those dealing with the management of natural resources or local authority responsibilities.</li> <li>• No single agency or group of agencies has the responsibility for coordinating or overseeing the implementation of sustainable development in New Zealand.</li> </ul>
<p>3. Evidence exists that sustainable development has been widely adopted and implemented by central and local government agencies, and other sectors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Since 1992, successive governments have failed to adopt and implement broad-based sustainable development policies or programmes.</li> <li>• Among local authorities the implementation of sustainable development is variable. Some local authorities have wholeheartedly incorporated sustainable development into their policies and practices, while others regard it as outside their core statutory responsibilities.</li> <li>• A number of community groups have embraced the concept of sustainable development and initiated local actions.</li> <li>• Some businesses and business organisations have recognised the benefits associated with a more sustainable approach to consumption and production.</li> <li>• It is encouraging to note that funding from the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology is being made available for research into sustainability.</li> </ul>

Table 1: Summary of The Findings of This Study Against Expectation *continued*

Expectations	Findings
4. A framework of sustainable development indicators has been established.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work is currently underway to develop a set of sustainable development indicators that combine socio-economic indicators with environmental performance indicators.</li> </ul>
5. Barriers to achieving sustainable development goals have been identified and are being addressed.	<p>A number of barriers to sustainable development have been identified, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• various conflicting and confusing interpretations of the term 'sustainable development'</li> <li>• 'silo-thinking', particularly in the public sector</li> <li>• inertia or complacency arising from New Zealand's clean and green image</li> <li>• the emphasis on economic growth as the primary consideration</li> <li>• lack of coordinated leadership</li> <li>• the large scale of some issues make them too difficult to deal with</li> <li>• lack of opportunities to publicly debate sustainability issues</li> <li>• low awareness of the linkages between economic, social and environmental considerations, and the need for people to take responsibility for avoiding adverse consequences of their actions on the environment.</li> </ul> <p>It remains to be seen whether these impediments will be addressed in the proposed NZSDS.</p>
6. Sustainable development influences social, economic and environmental policy-making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• So far, there is little evidence of Agenda 21 principles having influenced the integration of environmental, social and economic policy-making.</li> <li>• When the Government announced in August 2001 that it intended to produce a NZSDS, it did so on the basis that the principles of sustainable development should underpin all of the Government's economic, social and environmental policies. The success or otherwise of this goal cannot be assessed until the NZSDS is completed and put into effect.</li> </ul>
7. Public awareness programmes and other initiatives have been introduced to promote sustainable development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Ministry for the Environment has undertaken a number of initiatives to promote sustainable development, as has the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development and a number of other businesses, local authorities and community organisations.</li> </ul>

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A stocktake of the Commissioner's investigations over the last decade has highlighted a number of problems exacerbated by 'silo' thinking within government agencies (i.e. focusing only on narrow goals and failing to recognise and take into account the linkages between economic, social and environmental interests). These include:

- poorly integrated decision making
- inadequate cooperation and communication between sectors and agencies
- lack of structural and management incentives to work towards a more collective public good.

Another point emerging from the stocktake relates to the sequencing of strategies and legislation that affect sustainable development. While the major environmental management Act (the Resource Management Act) was in place by 1991, a number of substantial and important strategies relating to sustainable development have been initiated only within the last few years (see figure 2). This indicates that policy initiatives were more likely to be driven by reactive responses to specific problems, rather than by broader policy (sustainability) needs.

Other sectors, including individual local authorities, business organisations and community groups have made progress with their own initiatives. They have endeavoured to incorporate sustainable development principles into their policies and activities, and have encouraged others to do likewise. It is the 'local initiatives' dimension of sustainability thinking and action that has made the biggest contribution to awareness of sustainable development in New Zealand.

## Future challenges for New Zealand

The challenges and opportunities for progressing sustainable development in New Zealand can be categorised under three headings:

- establishing a vision and framework for sustainable development
- implementing sustainable development
- monitoring and reviewing progress towards sustainability.

### Establishing a vision and framework

To make sustainable development meaningful and generally acceptable in the New Zealand context, the concept has to be supported by a strong vision and clear goals established through effective public participation processes. Sustainable development needs to be relevant to, and demonstrate benefits for, all sectors of New Zealand society as well as the ecosystems that we rely on and value.

Leadership in all sectors is critical for any significant progress to be made on sustainable development. Leadership influences the vision and changes necessary to implement sustainable development. Examples of sustainable development initiatives and effective leadership are highlighted in the main report.

The Government has identified one of its major economic objectives is to return New Zealand's per capita income to the top half of the OECD rankings and maintain that standing. A major challenge for the Government will be to meet its economic and social objectives while also maintaining or improving environmental conditions, including the health of ecosystems on which so much of our wealth creation activities depend. The economy-environment linkage is

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strategically very important for New Zealand, as is maintaining the life-supporting capacities of ecosystems, and valuing natural assets in their own right, independent of their ability to supply human ends.

The continual emphasis by successive governments on economic *growth* as a priority has the potential to accelerate us towards unsustainability if it simply means escalating energy and materials consumption, waste and pollution problems. Instead, emphasis should be shifted to *development* that improves quality of life, produces less waste, adds more value to goods and services, and manages in a sustainable way rather than 'quarries' resources.

### Implementing sustainable development

Current trends in consumption of energy and natural resources, production of waste, growth in urban areas, biodiversity losses and biosecurity threats, land-use and water issues in both rural and urban areas, and air quality in urban areas are all signs that New Zealand is not functioning in a sustainable manner.

Ongoing leadership in all sectors has an important part to play in making progress on sustainable development. Effective leadership is needed to influence, coordinate, support and achieve results that will make a difference. Small groups working in isolation can achieve a lot in their own particular areas of interest. However, at a strategic level a more meaningful and overall shift towards sustainability is more likely to occur when there is a combined effort led by sustainability 'champions'. Sustainability is not something that a government department, local authority or other public

agency has sole responsibility for making happen, although each one has significant leadership and guidance roles.

Sustainability is achieved when organisations, businesses, communities and individuals all take responsibility for the amount of resources they use, the energy they consume, the waste they produce, and the impacts they may have on biodiversity within a supportive and responsive policy framework.

Values, cultural and ethical frameworks are all critical underpinning elements to the implementation of sustainable development. Tangata whenua have strong cultural and spiritual connections with the environment, natural resources and places that need to be respected and provided for. The choices people make, the actions they take and, therefore, the rate of progress that is made towards sustainable development are all influenced by people's underlying values and beliefs. Sustainable development requires different attitudes and ways of thinking (e.g. holistic, systemic) about the nature of wealth, how to maintain natural capital, quality of life and the things that people value.

### Monitoring and reviewing progress

Decisions about ecological sustainability rely to a large extent on good information, which in turn is the product of good monitoring and research.

Work is already under way to develop a set of sustainable development indicators for New Zealand. Among other things, sustainable development indicators need to be useful to local authorities that are likely to have increased responsibilities, under the Local Government Bill proposals, to plan for the sustainability needs of their communities. Such indicators must also be meaningful to businesses, communities,

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and the providers and consumers of goods and services.

The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment intends to undertake a further review of New Zealand's progress on sustainable development during 2006/07.

This will include progress on commitments made by the Government at the Earth Summit in 1992 and those that will be made at the WSSD in 2002. Stakeholders at the preparatory meetings leading up to the WSSD have called for 'action, not more talk'. The 2006/07 review by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment will focus primarily on New Zealand's response to such a challenge.

### Recommendations

Responsibilities for sustainable development policies and actions come under a range of Ministerial portfolios and local government functions in the environmental, social and economic areas. For this reason, where a recommendation refers to the need to coordinate policy in all three areas, it has been directed to the Prime Minister. In other cases, recommendations have been directed to the relevant Minister or Ministers, or to local government.

### Vision and framework for sustainable development

1. That, as part of the development of the proposed New Zealand Sustainable Development Strategy, the Prime Minister develops a range of policy, legislative, economic and voluntary measures designed to progress the implementation of sustainable development. These measures should include:
  - a. a position (or vision) statement outlining the goals and objectives of the Government's policy on sustainable development

- b. a timeline for meeting objectives and measurable targets
- c. a timeline and processes for reviewing the position (or vision) statement and associated goals and objectives
- d. adoption of Agenda 21 principles into current and future environmental, economic and social legislation reviews.

2. That the Minister of Local Government, in consultation with Local Government New Zealand, develops guidelines for local authorities on preparing long-term community plans dealing with environmental, economic, social and cultural sustainability, as proposed under the Local Government Bill. Such guidelines should be consistent with the principles of Agenda 21.

### Implementation, monitoring and review of sustainable development

3. That the Prime Minister should establish an advisory body responsible for overseeing and coordinating the implementation of the Government's proposed New Zealand Strategy on Sustainable Development, including:
  - actively promoting activities and education programmes that will increase public awareness of sustainable development
  - reviewing government departments' performance in working individually and collaboratively to meet sustainable development goals and objectives
  - providing support and guidance to local government and non-government organisations to ensure effective implementation of sustainable development at the local community level
  - encouraging sustainable development initiatives and partnerships among central and local government, private sector and non-government organisations

- reviewing sustainability research priorities, capacities to undertake research and mechanisms for the application and adoption of the research
  - monitoring, reviewing and reporting on progress towards sustainable development goals and objectives
  - encouraging local authorities to regularly review and report on the effectiveness of resource management policies and plans, as well as the proposed long-term community plans under the Local Government Bill, in achieving the goals and objectives of the proposed New Zealand Strategy on Sustainable Development.
4. That the Minister of State Services, in consultation with the Minister of Local Government and Local Government New Zealand, identifies the capacity and capability issues associated with implementing sustainable development, and introduces methods to improve skills in integrating environmental, social and economic policy analysis and implementation.