House of Commons
Environmental Audit Committee

Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK: Government Response to the Committee’s Thirteenth Report

Nineteenth Special Report of Session 2017–19

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Environmental Audit Committee

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Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Environmental Audit Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 8890; the Committee’s email address is eacom@parliament.uk.

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Nineteenth Special Report

The Environmental Audit Committee published its Thirteenth Report of Session 2017–19, *Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK* (HC 1491) on 10 January 2019. The Government’s response was received on 9 May 2019 and is appended to this report.

Appendix: Government Response

The Government welcomes the Thirteenth Report of Session 2017-19, following the Committee’s oral evidence session on 23 October 2018 on Sustainable Development Goals in the UK: “Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK”.

The Committee published its report on 10 January 2019, which included nine recommendations for the Government to consider. The Government’s response to these recommendations is set out below.

Committee Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** We recommend that the Government appoint a minister with responsibility and accountability for combating hunger and food insecurity within the UK. They should work with civil society to explore the scale, causes and impact of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition; implement strategies for improvement, and monitor progress.

The Government is committed to supporting delivery of Goal 2: Zero Hunger. In light of the substantive and cross-cutting body of work being progressed, the Government feels that it is not helpful to appoint a Minister for this single issue. That said, we will consider what further steps could be taken to enhance how Departments work together to ensure a coordinated approach to addressing these matters.

The Government fully recognises the need to explore the scale and the drivers of food insecurity. However, we need to take action to address the current data limitations in this area before we can consider the need for and the scope of any new strategy so that we can be confident that it is based on robust evidence. This is why the Department for Work and Pensions has been working with a number of food security experts, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Office for National Statistics and the Scottish Government to introduce a new set of food security questions in the Family Resources Survey (FRS) from April 2019. This is one of the Government’s largest household surveys, and collects information on the incomes and living circumstances of over 20,000 families across the UK.

The new set of food security questions replicates the well-established and internationally recognised Adult Food Security Survey Module. This is used in the United States to compile household food insecurity statistics. From spring 2021, we will be able to monitor the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity at national level and for specific groups.
The Department for Work and Pensions is also taking action to identify how best to support vulnerable customers. Jobcentre managers already use their discretion to work with local food banks to ensure that customers are receiving all the statutory support for which they are eligible. There are currently plans to explore how Jobcentres can build on current good practice and make it as easy as possible for food banks to identify and refer back to the local Jobcentre any customers who may, for a variety of reasons, not be receiving the full formal support to which they are entitled. Information about each case referred will be gathered and used to identify key issues and in an effort to help shape future support and policy changes.

Alongside this, the Department for Work and Pensions will also be publishing its own review of existing published literature on the drivers of food bank use later this year. All information gathered will be used to shape future policy.

**Recommendation 2:** We recommend that targets for ending hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms are included in Single Departmental Plans (SDPs). To be effective, targets in the SDPs must include UK-wide metrics, for hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition, and set out specific mechanisms for action if performance is poor. Individual targets should make explicit links to Departments with responsibility for policies which contribute to the delivery of the primary goal, for example, reducing food waste (SDG12) and monitoring the living wage, in respect of goals 2.1 and 2.2.

The Government notes the Committee’s recommendations and recognises the importance of being able to demonstrate progress in these areas. Developing a better measure of food insecurity is an important first step. We want to better understand the drivers of food insecurity and identify the groups that are most at risk. Collecting information on food insecurity alongside other household data on income and living circumstances in the FRS will allow us to do that. In the shorter-term, the information that the Department for Work and Pensions hopes to gather from closer working with food banks should also help to identify some of the key issues experienced by vulnerable customers. We will carefully consider what we can learn from our customers’ experiences, as well as from what food banks tell us, and we will draw on all the evidence to help shape future work.

**Recommendation 3:** We recommend that the Government update its obesity strategy to take account of the close relationship between obesity, hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in the UK. We support the call from the Patients Association for Government to create a definition of under-nutrition which includes both underweight and overweight individuals, and a tool for identifying it. (Paragraph 58)

The Government has been clear that it considered a number of different policies when developing both chapters of the childhood obesity plan and has focused on the ones that are likely to have the biggest impact on preventing childhood obesity.

These policies were informed by the latest research and emerging evidence, including from debates in Parliament and various reports from key stakeholders including the Health and Social Care Select Committee. We have also captured early analysis from the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Obesity Policy Research Unit, which was established as part of the 2016 plan through £5 million investment over five years.
Many of the measures in both chapters of the plan will have an impact on improving diet and tackling obesity across all age groups. These include the soft drinks industry levy, sugar reduction and wider calorie reformulation programme, restricting promotions, and calorie labelling in restaurants, which will improve our eating habits and reduce the amount of fatty and sugary products we consume.

The Government remain committed to reviewing what more can be done and will continue to monitor progress and emerging evidence carefully. Where progress is not being delivered, we will consider what further action can be taken. The Environmental Audit Committee’s report makes a valuable contribution to this process.

The NHS defines malnutrition as “poor nutrition” and can refer to undernutrition and overnutrition. It is a complex issue and most patients diagnosed in England have other serious health and social problems. Most people who are malnourished will lose weight, but it is possible to be a healthy weight or even overweight and still be malnourished.

The Government recognises that diagnoses and detection is key which is why we continue to train all health staff to spot the early warning signs of malnutrition so effective treatment can be put in place.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) 2012 quality standard ‘Nutrition support in adults’ provides advice to the NHS to help identify patients who are either malnourished or at risk of malnutrition in hospital or in the community. It includes identifying people at risk of malnutrition and providing nutrition support, including dietary changes and artificial nutrition support given through feeding tubes (enteral nutrition) or directly into a vein (parenteral nutrition). The standard is available at: https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs24

To help tackle malnutrition in acute and community settings, NHS England published guidance on ‘Commissioning excellent nutrition and hydration’ in October 2015. The implementation of this guidance is a matter for the local NHS. The guidance is available at: https://www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/nut-hyd/

Recommendation 4: We recommend that the Government work with the Office for National Statistics to measure the potential impact that Universal Credit may have on rates of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms in pilot Universal Credit areas. To be effective this measure should account for the rates of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition before and after the implementation of Universal Credit and compare these rates with areas where Universal Credit has not been applied.”

The Government does not agree with the specific recommendation to compare rates of food insecurity in areas where Universal Credit (UC) has been implemented with areas where UC has not been applied. Such work cannot be undertaken because from December 2018 UC was rolled out across the UK. As a result, comparative areas no longer exist. In addition, the current UC claimant population is not representative of the future UC population nor is it directly comparable to existing legacy benefits, because UC has been rolled out to new claimants and those whose circumstances have changed. There would also be significant methodological and data collection challenges, including high costs, to overcome even if comparable populations were available.
The rollout of UC is, of course, continually monitored and fed back into programme development. Much of the research and analysis underpinning this work is publicly available and can be found on Gov.uk. https://www.gov.uk/search/advanced?group=research_and_statistics&topic=%2Fwelfare%2Fwelfare-reform

The Department for Work and Pensions publishes a monthly and quarterly breakdown of Universal Credit statistics which can be accessed here: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/universal-credit-statistics

In addition to the programme of continuous monitoring, the Universal Credit Evaluation Framework 2016 sets out evaluation plans for Universal Credit going forward, as well as setting out what DWP has done so far in terms of each of the themes set out in the 2012 Evaluation Framework: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536193/ad-hoc-report-34-universal-credit-evaluation-framework-2016.pdf

Understanding claimant experience and attitudes is an important part of DWP’s research and analysis programme and, as a result, the department has conducted a number of large scale claimant surveys and supporting qualitative studies. These studies are rigorously designed to ensure a representative sample of claimants is contacted and the experiences of all claimant groups are reported.

The Government has long acknowledged, however, that there were issues with the initial roll out of UC and it has listened to and acted on the concerns raised.

It has already made improvements to the initial UC assessment period, including removal of waiting days, advances of up to 100% of indicative first payments, extra support for disabled people and a 2-week Housing Benefit run on for new UC claimants to ensure they are supported until their first payment. Government support for Universal Credit will be over £2.5bn higher in 2023-24 because of decisions taken since 2016. This includes an extra £1.7bn a year which will increase work allowances by £1,000 in April 2019 meaning that 2.4 million families will be able to keep an extra £630 a year of their earnings.

As outlined in Recommendations 1 and 2, the information that the Department for Work and Pensions plans to gather from strengthened partnerships with food banks should also help us to better identify the key issues experienced by vulnerable customers and help to shape further support.

Recommendation 5: In the event that the UK leaves the EU, the Government must deliver on its promises that British food standards will be maintained. We welcome the Government’s intention to review food labelling to enable consumers to make more informed choices and believe that the final system should be accompanied by an awareness campaign.

The UK has world leading standards of food safety and quality, backed by a rigorous legislative framework; we will maintain these high standards once the UK leaves the European Union. The Government is committed to ensuring high food standards at home, and promoting high standards internationally. The Government is proud of our high standards of food safety and these will not be watered down when we leave the EU. We will remain global leaders in environmental protection and animal welfare standards,
maintaining our high quality produce for British consumers. Our aim is to have a food standards framework that protects consumer interests, maximises confidence, and facilitates international trade.

Defra is working closely with DHSC, the FSA, DExEU and the Devolved Administrations, to ensure that the UK’s world leading reputation for food safety and standards continues, after we leave the EU.

Those standards that apply to food and feed safety at the point of exit will be maintained. The government has ensured that there is a system in place to undertake robust scientific risk assessments and take evidence-based risk management decisions for future food and feed safety issues. The principles of protecting public health and maintaining consumer confidence through openness and transparency will be at the core of our approach.

Any future trade agreements must work for consumers, farmers, and businesses in the UK. We will not water down our standards on food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection as part of any future trade deals.

Consumers need to be confident in the food they buy through clear and accurate food labelling and information. We are committed to delivering informative food labelling and promoting robust food standards nationally and internationally, to protect consumer interests, facilitate international trade, and ensure that consumers can have confidence in the food that they buy.

We have an opportunity to review all food labelling when the UK has left the EU so that consumers have the information they need to have full confidence in the food they buy. The review of food labelling will involve a public consultation on changes we plan to make to the legislation and we will engage extensively with stakeholders throughout. Any changes resulting from the review will be clearly communicated to those affected.

**Recommendation 6:** We welcome Government’s commitment to put the SDGs “at the heart of the Single Departmental Plans”. However, the SDPs need to be explicitly linked to each SDG target, and mapped against underlying indicators. The Cabinet Office should be responsible for ensuring that no target is left out from the SDPs and should allocate accountability where required. It should facilitate cross-departmental working on targets where more than one department may influence the UK’s progress. Progress towards the SDGs should be aggregated into a single annual report by Government, as previously recommended by our predecessor Committee.

The Government is fully committed to the delivery of the Global Goals (also known as the Sustainable Development Goals) both at home and abroad. Single Departmental Plans sit at the heart of the Government’s planning and performance framework. As such they remain the most effective mechanism by which the Global Goals are embedded in what the Government does. Following the General Election in 2017, the 2018/19 Single Departmental Plans were the first through which departments were asked to identify explicitly how planned activity will support the delivery of the Goals. Through the 2019/20 planning process, Cabinet Office and the Department for International Development are committed to working closely with other Government departments to further improve the granularity of planning, allowing for more effective tracking of UK progress in supporting the delivery of the international targets and indicators. Such work will strengthen accountability and cross-departmental working around the Goals.
Departments are expected to report on their contribution to delivering the Goals in their Departmental Annual Report and Accounts. This provides external stakeholders with a means of tracking UK progress. The Cabinet Office continues to work with other Government Departments to strengthen the performance narrative contained within these reports. Reports for 2018/19 will be laid in Parliament in due course.

Further to Departmental Annual Reports and Accounts, the UK will publish a Voluntary National Review taking stock of progress later this year en route to 2030. This will reflect the breadth of activity taking place across the UK including the contribution of Government, civil society and business towards delivery of the Global Goals.

**Recommendation 7: We reiterate the recommendation made in our initial 2017 inquiry that Government should do everything it can to support partners (government agencies, local government, civil society, business and the public) to contribute towards delivering the Goals.**

As the Prime Minister has acknowledged, if we are to realise the aims envisaged by Agenda 2030 and forge a more prosperous and secure future for all the world’s people, it is vital that civil society, business and Government continue to work together to deliver the Global Goals (also known as the Sustainable Development Goals).

The UK Voluntary National Review will be an important step in showcasing work across the country to support delivery of Global Goals, and we are determined it will tell the story beyond Government. We are also committed to building on this milestone and ensuring we continue to closely collaborate with partners up to 2030, with Government playing a catalytic role.

Civil society has a vital role to play in both contributing to delivery of the Goals and in communicating their importance to keep up momentum for implementation. The Leave No One Behind Partnership, founded by CIVICUS, Project Everyone and Development Initiatives, with Department for International Development (DFID) support, is an example of how we engaged with the sector globally to communicate the Goals and strengthen data to track progress and identify who is at risk of being left behind. The Partnership has supported national dialogues with civil society platforms in thirty countries to help raise awareness of the Goals and encourage good practice for delivery.

The Government supports a number of initiatives that raise awareness of the Global Goals in schools. Last year, the Secretaries of State for Education and International Development launched the ‘Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning Initiative’ which enables children in the UK and around the world to connect and learn from each other. Excellent resources about the Global Goals are also provided by the ‘World’s Largest Lesson’, produced by Project Everyone in partnership with UNICEF.

Businesses and the Private Sector are crucial to the delivery of the Global Goals. This includes helping to bridge the financing gap of $2.5 trillion per year in developing countries, but also in telling the story of why the Goals are important and how businesses are helping. DFID has launched a National Conversation on how the public can invest to support the Goals. [https://www.gov.uk/guidance/about-the-national-conversation-on-investing-for-the-global-goals#about-the-national-conversation](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/about-the-national-conversation-on-investing-for-the-global-goals#about-the-national-conversation)
Last year, we also launched the World Benchmarking Alliance to rank the biggest companies in the world on their contribution to the Global Goals. DFID is also working with organisations like the UN Global Compact, who are doing important work to raise awareness of the Goals and their importance to business. DFID’s Minister of State, Lord Bates, and DFID officials have attended a number of their roadshow events across the country.

The Government is committed to building an even broader range of partnerships to support delivery of the Goals. DFID is exploring ways to develop relationships between HMG and top UK institutions that have the influence, expertise and resources to help deliver the Goals at home and abroad. DFID will offer to help them communicate their contributions so that the public are more aware of the Goals and feel part of the global movement to deliver them. We will also invite them to provide us with feedback on our approach to delivering the Goals.

Recommendation 8: ONS should continue to develop its metrics to cover all SDG indicators. Government and civil society must work with ONS to ensure that Government is able to work from timely, UK-wide metrics to measure its performance, with sufficient disaggregation to identify areas of need. It should consider the existing data to determine whether it is fit for current purpose, and to ensure that it covers the outcomes of actions, rather than just outputs. Government should also ensure that it establishes specific mechanisms for action if performance is poor. The Government should show leadership by introducing an SDG impact assessment as part of the cost-benefit analysis undertaken by Government, or for politically strategic events such as the Queen’s Speech and Budget.

The ONS wrote to the Environmental Audit Committee on 8 March to provide a response to this recommendation on matters for which it is responsible.

The ONS is independent of Government; headed by the UK National Statistician, John Pullinger. It is overseen by the UK Statistics Authority, which is an independent statutory body that operates at arm’s length from government as a non-ministerial department, reporting directly to the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Every UK Government Department is expected to set out which indicators they will use to track progress in the delivery of planned activity. The Single Departmental Plans on GOV.UK contain a range of indicators against which progress in delivering the Government’s agenda can be tracked. Through Single Departmental Plans, departments have been asked to explicitly identify how planned activity will support the delivery of the Goals. Cabinet Office and DFID continue to work closely with other government departments to ensure that progress in supporting the delivery of the Goals can be tracked more effectively.

Departments report publicly against their Single Departmental Plans and thus Goals through their Annual Report and Accounts. These are publicly available and provide the public with a means to hold departments and the Government to account.

Recommendation 9: Government must ensure that it engages with stakeholders, MPs and civil society groups in the Voluntary National Review Process. It must also fulfil its
commitment to bring the VNR before Parliament for scrutiny before it is submitted. Senior Ministers, civil society and Parliamentarians should be present when the VNR is presented at the High Level Political Forum in July 2019.

The Government is committed to ensuring the UK Voluntary National Review is inclusive, transparent and tells the story of the UK as a whole and the important contributions of civil society, business and others, as well as the role of Government.

DFID has frontloaded stakeholder engagement and taken a phased approach. The first phase has focused on better understanding the breadth of activity taking place in the UK. In early October, we launched a website sharing information about the UK’s Voluntary National Review and how to get involved. This includes inviting organisations and individuals to share case studies demonstrating their contributions to the Goals. To date, we have received over 200 contributions from a variety of stakeholders including charities, interest groups and universities. We continue to welcome contributions. We want to include a broad range of examples in the Voluntary National Review to tell the story of activity across the UK to deliver the Goals, including the important role of business and civil society. Given space constraints, unfortunately we will not be able to include all case studies. We are actively exploring how we can use this material to support wider activity and will follow up with organisations directly.

The second phase of engagement has centred on Goal-specific outreach by Government departments leading Goal-focused chapters. A summary of the key events and activities is available on the Voluntary National Review website: www.gov.uk/sustainabledevelopmentgoals.

The third phase of stakeholder engagement on the Voluntary National Review was through a series of sector-specific engagement events that will allow key organisations and groups to share their views on the Voluntary National Review.

Through these events, we have shared our emerging findings and sought feedback, including identifying opportunities to make further progress on the Goals in our journey to 2030. We held events with Parliamentarians (11 March), international development organisations (13 March), civil society (14 March), local delivery organisations in Leeds and Bristol (15 March and 18 March respectively), the private sector (19 March) and faith groups (20 March). To help inform the discussions at these events we published an Emerging Findings and Further Engagement document, there was also the opportunity to submit comments online. An event with Parliamentarians was held on 11 March and was open to all MPs and Peers with a letter notifying them of the opportunity. This enabled Parliamentarians to share their views and feedback during the drafting of the Voluntary National Review to ensure meaningful engagement.

We felt it was important for engagement to be undertaken while the Voluntary National Review report is under preparation, rather than at the end, when there is limited scope for refinement. There will, of course, be an opportunity for Parliament to consider the document after it is published. The report will act as a foundation for further conversation and debate on plans for our journey from the Voluntary National Review to 2030.

We continue working to raise awareness of the Global Goals alongside work to deliver the UK’s first Voluntary National Review. DFID Ministers and officials have spoken at events around the country with local businesses and civil society. DFID initiated the
#MyGlobalGoal campaign on social media which encouraged members of the public to make New Year resolutions linked to the Goals and reached almost 9.5 million social media users.

The Government looks forward to presenting its Voluntary National Review at the UN in July 2019. We are working to ensure the UK’s Voluntary National Review presentation is interesting and innovative and are considering how best to do this. We would like our presentation at the UN to represent a cross-section of activity in the UK and are exploring ways to ensure it involves a range of voices including the important role of business and civil society to supporting delivery of the Goals.