



House of Commons
Environmental Audit Committee

**Sustainable
Development Goals in
the UK: Government
Response to the
Committee's Ninth
Report of Session
2016–17**

**Third Special Report of
Session 2017–19**

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Environmental Audit Committee

The Environmental Audit Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider to what extent the policies and programmes of government departments and non-departmental public bodies contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development; to audit their performance against such targets as may be set for them by Her Majesty's Ministers; and to report thereon to the House.

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are David Slater (Clerk), Nina Foster (Second Clerk), Nicholas Davies (Committee Specialist), Ian Cruse, (Committee Specialist), Dr Fedra Vanhuysse (Committee Specialist), Ameet Chudasama (Senior Committee Assistant) and Baris Tufeki (Committee Assistant).

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Third Special Report

The Environmental Audit Committee published its Ninth Report of Session 2016–17, on the *Sustainable Development Goals in the UK*, HC 596 on 26 April 2017. The Government's response was received on 21 November 2017 and is appended to this report.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

The Government welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Environmental Audit Select Committee's report of the 2016–17 session on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, otherwise known as the Goals) in the UK, which was published on 26 April 2017. The Committee made 11 recommendations, which were broad and wide-ranging, reflecting the nature and reach of the Goals.

At the UN General Assembly in September 2016, the Prime Minister pledged to 'drive forward the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals'. We continue to stand by this pledge at home and overseas. The UK was at the forefront of negotiating the Goals and we are determined to be at the forefront of delivering them too. Our experience as a world leader in development meant we were well placed to work with the global community to create goals that tackle the challenges that continue to face the world; extreme poverty, global instability and conflict, mass migration, climate change and gender inequality. These are universal challenges, to which responses must take account of the national circumstances of each country, to support effective implementation at home and amplify impact internationally.

The Government is fully committed to promoting and implementing the Goals – both as part of our continuing commitment to being a key player in strategic international development and through our own domestic policy agenda. In the UK, we believe the most effective way to do this is by embedding the Goals in a department's Single Departmental Plan. Such plans inform and direct the priorities of departments throughout the year. Responsibility for the Goals being met in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on devolved issues lies with their respective administrations. Although methods to implement the Goals may differ across the administrations of the UK, they all share the visions inherent in the Goals. We are still at an early stage of implementation and will monitor this going forward.

However, the Government alone cannot deliver the Goals. Partnership and multi-stakeholder participation in the process is also essential – from citizens, from civil society groups, from business. No one partner has the answer, and no one organisation has the solution to meeting the many challenges that we face. We encourage businesses, civil society organisations and individuals to also pick up the baton for promoting and delivering the Goals in the UK.

The Government is grateful for the Committee's work on this important agenda and our response to each of their recommendations is set out below.

Response to the conclusions and recommendations

Awareness and engagement

1. Raising awareness and encouraging engagement with the Global Goals will increase the number of people and organisations able to contribute towards meeting them. However, few people in the UK know about the Goals. Other countries and organisations have shown there are plenty of opportunities to make the Goals more widely known and understood. By contrast, the UK Government seems uninterested in raising the profile of the Goals, having undertaken no substantive work to promote them domestically. A focus on action abroad has left a doughnut shaped hole in the UK. This has to change. The Government should work with the BBC and other national media to launch a national campaign to raise public awareness of the Goals, and provide the public with ways to get involved and make a contribution. This could take place as part of Red Nose Day and Comic Relief, and link with charities working in the UK and overseas. The Government should look at possible changes to the national curriculum to provide ways for young people to become agents of change and engage with the Goals. This would form part of a national conversation about the Goals with a view to enshrining them in law, so that future Governments put sustainable development at the heart of every new legislative proposal. (Paragraph 25)

The Government is fully committed to promoting and delivering the Goals, and published a report on 28th March outlining our work domestically and internationally on Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. The report includes ample examples of the work each government department is undertaking to help deliver commitments within its policy areas, bringing much welcome publicity to this area. A copy of the report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agenda-2030-delivering-the-global-goals>

The Government is committed to increasing domestic engagement with the Goals, and is considering how best to promote the Goals as they are embedded in the Single Departmental Plans of each Government department.

Young people - in the UK and overseas - are vital to achieving the Goals as they are the generation most affected by the Goals, and we are working to increase their knowledge and engagement in development issues to help them become agents of change. The national curriculum already provides opportunities for pupils to be taught about these issues, and teachers are free to expand upon topics if they choose to. The geography curriculum, for example, gives pupils an understanding of 'how human and physical processes interact to influence and change landscapes, environments and the climate; and how human activity relies on the effective functioning of natural systems'. As part of the science curriculum pupils are taught about the importance of a healthy lifestyle including exercise and a healthy nutritious diet. They are also taught about: the Earth's water resources; evidence, and uncertainties in evidence, for anthropogenic causes of climate change; the Earth as a source of limited resources and the efficacy of recycling; ecosystems, including positive and negative human interactions with ecosystems; and renewable and non-renewable energy sources used on Earth. The design and technology curriculum teaches pupils to understand the skills needed to design and make products working in a range of contexts including their local community, industry and the wider environment. They also, for example, need

to understand developments in design and technology, its impact on individuals, society and the environment, and the responsibilities of designers, engineers and technologists. The PE curriculum aims to ensure pupils lead healthy active lives, providing them with opportunities to compete in sport and other activities that help build character and embed values such as fairness and respect. The Citizenship curriculum will teach pupils to recognise the importance of peace, justice and strong Institutions by developing a sound knowledge and understanding of the role of law and the justice system in our society and how laws are shaped and enforced. Citizenship also helps build sustainable cities and communities through lessons covering diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the UK and the need for mutual respect and understanding.

In addition, areas such as health and well-being and combating climate change can also be covered as part of the non-statutory subject of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education which schools are encouraged to teach as part of their duty to provide a broad and balanced curriculum. Schools are free to draw on the PSHE Association's programme of study which covers ages 5 to 18, and is based on three core themes: Health and Wellbeing; Relationships; and Living in the Wider World.

Global learning also equips children and young people with the knowledge and critical thinking skills to engage with key global challenges such as poverty, gender inequality, human rights and climate change, all of which are highlighted in the Goals. The Global Learning Programme (GLP), designed to improve teaching and learning about global issues for pupils aged 8 to 14, has achieved unprecedented reach and impact in schools across the UK through four models aligned with the devolved educational contexts in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. To date, a total of more than 8,000 schools across the UK have gained access to training and resources on global learning through the GLP to help them embed global learning as regular practice in the classroom and as a whole-school approach.

Other initiatives include 'Connecting Classrooms', which is a programme funded by DFID and the British Council, provide UK schools an opportunity to link with a school overseas. The programme aims to support the development of young people's core skills for life and work in the 21st century and offers teachers and school leaders professional development, opportunities to share good practice with international counterparts and a range of other support to help them embed core skills in their teaching practice and school curriculum. The programme operates in 37 countries and, as of June 2017, has engaged 12,531 unique schools, trained 31,481 teachers and 13,431 school leaders and worked with 754 policy makers.

2. Several businesses are already engaging with the Goals and looking at how the private sector can contribute to this ambitious agenda. The Government has said that it sees value in international business benchmarks that promote responsible business behaviour and may support them, if there is sufficient evidence that they work. We recommend that the Government commissions research on the costs and benefits of utilising business league tables and report back to this Committee on its findings when it has them. The Government should also support other initiatives designed to raise awareness of the Goals among the business community. Voluntary action by businesses and raising awareness within the business community will not of itself ensure meaningful progress on the Goals. The Government needs to look at what measures are needed to support those companies who are already engaged,

and incentivise or require others to do likewise. Action on the EU circular economy package, or waste policy, linked to SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production is a good example of this. (Paragraph 26)

The Government sees value in the development of business league tables/benchmarks where there is a convincing and specific rationale for them. For instance, the Government supported the development of the Corporate Human Rights Benchmark, a business-led initiative that seeks to rank the world's largest companies on their approach to human rights and how they respond to serious allegations. The business case for such an initiative was made by the private sector to Government who subsequently provided support for its development.

We do not believe that research into business league tables linked to the Goals should necessarily be undertaken by Government, but rather that there is a role for Government in supporting appropriate initiatives generated and designed by the business community itself. As such, we have provided a grant to the World Benchmarking Alliance (Aviva, UN Foundation, Index Initiative and Business and Sustainable Development Commission) to carry out a consultation around how an SDG Index could be established. This index would comprise of a series of benchmarks which would rank the world's biggest companies against the extent to which they are helping to achieve the Goals. The consultation was launched during the UN General Assembly in September.

The UK's industrial strategy will set out our approach for creating a strong and sustainable economy that works for our people, places and businesses. Collaborative and innovative partnerships will be key parts of this sustainable economy. For example, the "Inclusive Economy Partnership" is a new initiative built on collaboration between Government, business and civil society. It is designed to capitalise on the increasing appetite of big business to address issues of social inequity within the UK. It creates a place where government can focus the energy and expertise of business around priority social challenges, leading to tangible commitments of how they can help tackle issues like financial inclusion, transition to work and mental health for people across the UK. The initiative is a cross departmental collaboration between the Cabinet Office, DCMS and BEIS.

The Government recognises that businesses can potentially make a wide contribution toward the achievement of the Goals. As we develop our approaches on responsible business and improving corporate governance, we will consider how best to promote the Goals and support businesses to engage with them.

Measuring, monitoring and reporting

3. Progress on developing measurement frameworks for the Goals is too slow. We recognise the progress of the Office of National Statistics to date and commend its efforts to engage with stakeholders and draw on non-official data sources as a way to fill the "data gap". However, it is now almost two years since the Government adopted the Goals. During that time we have seen delays from both the Government and the ONS. Delays to the ONS's work means delays to the UK's achievement of the Goals. We are concerned about the amount of time it is taking to develop the national indicators given the ONS "contributed directly" to the development of the global indicators between March 2015 and March 2016. It should be a priority for the ONS to establish

an early baseline from which we can judge the Government’s future performance against the roadmap it sets out. Perfection should not be the enemy of the good, so we recommend that the ONS focus its efforts on ensuring it meets its autumn 2017 deadline to report on the Goals to the United Nations. The ONS requires secure and sustained funding to carry out its job in relation to the Goals, and the Government should set out how much funding the ONS will receive at the start of every Parliament. (Paragraph 40)

The Government has always provided the Office of National Statistics (ONS) with the funding required to meet its commitments. At Spending Review 2015, budgets to 2020 were agreed and the ONS was specifically provided with funding for the development, monitoring and reporting of indicators for the Goals on behalf of the UK.

The ONS should respond directly to the Committee on elements of the recommendation relating to its own responsibilities. 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.

High quality official statistics will play a key role in monitoring progress towards the Goals, and national statistical offices have “committed to contribute their expertise to measure Goals in a professional, independent and impartial way”¹.

4. However, we are concerned that the Government appears to have changed its mind about the ONS developing a set of national indicators. This suggests an attempt to bury data which will be seen by the public - and us - as going against the spirit of the Goals. This would undermine UK leadership on the Goals. If this is the case then two years of work by the ONS will have been wasted by the Government. It means there will be no aggregate scorecard or baseline against which to measure progress towards the Goals. This will harm public accountability and moves the country away from achieving the Goals. We can see that integrating the indicators into the Government’s Single Departmental Plans will ensure they are taken seriously by individual departments. But the move risks reducing the level of engagement and participation from non-government bodies and it increases the temptation for the Government to cherry-pick indicators and focus on areas where it is performing well. It is also not clear how well equipped Government departments are to ensure proper data disaggregation and therefore focus on the hardest to reach groups in society. The Government must clarify urgently in its response to this report whether the ONS will report on national progress towards the Global Goals. It must also ensure a timely and transparent release of information that monitors progress against the indicators. We expect these to be produced and managed in line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics to ensure confidence in their implementation. (Paragraph 41)

As outlined in our response to the International Development Committee, the Government believes that the Goals do not require a separate coordinating mechanism and are using existing mechanisms to embed and track delivery of the Goals.

1 Report of the 63rd plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians: https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/2015/CES_89_Add.1-E.pdf

Single Departmental Plans are an established process to focus Government's efforts on important issues and we are confident they will facilitate the delivery of the Goals. The Goals are an integral part of other departments' work and embedding the Goals in Single Departmental Plans will enable progress against them to be reported publicly in departments' Annual Report and Accounts. This will enable progress towards the Goals to be scrutinised by parliament and the public.

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office has asked departments to update their Single Departmental Plans to take account of the Government's new programme, and we will work with departments to ensure Goals are embedded within these.

The Cabinet Office is working with the Government Digital Service (GDS) to ensure that the published Single Departmental Plans are accessible and integrated within GOV.UK and provide the public with a sense of departmental performance in key areas. This will include departmental activity that contributes to delivery of the Goals. The Government intends that updated SDPs will be made available later this year.

5. A key part of increasing awareness of the Goals will be using data to “paint a picture” about the UK’s progress against the Goals. The ONS has indicated a willingness to provide a narrative on the data it collects. The ONS could be much more ambitious, especially in working with business. We recommend that it should hold an open competition seeking ideas for how the results could be branded and communicated and look for partnerships with organisations who have expertise in communications and marketing, as well as working with stakeholders, effectively to communicate its findings in an accessible way and promote them to the widest possible audience. (Paragraph 42)

As set out above in response to recommendation 3, the ONS is independent of Government and 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. The ONS should respond directly to the Committee on this recommendation.

6. The Voluntary National Review is an important process to help member states publicise and measure progress towards the implementation of the Global Goals. A large number of developed and developing countries have already participated in or put themselves forward for the VNR. We are disappointed that the Government has not yet participated in this process but we are heartened by the Prime Minister's statement about the importance of a transparent reporting framework. In order to show international leadership and demonstrate the UK's continuing commitment to implementing the Goals in the UK, we recommend that the Government volunteer to participate in the national review as soon as practically possible - ideally in 2018. (Paragraph 43)

The Government supports the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process as a way of reflecting on the implementation of the Goals and sharing lessons learnt with other countries. The Government is pleased to report that the UK will put itself forward for a VNR in 2019.

Implementation

7. Despite adopting the Sustainable Development Goals and committing itself to working “tirelessly for the full implementation of [the Goals] by 2030”, the Government has shown little interest in, or enthusiasm for, implementing the Goals in the UK. The Government, worryingly, seems to regard the Goals as simply the Millennium Development Goals Mark II, and shows a marked reluctance to take this forward as a domestic agenda. Since the abolition of the independent Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) in 2011, Governments have failed to prioritise sustainable development. While this Government is making big claims about what it can do to implement the Goals on the international stage our inquiry has revealed that it is doing very little at home, leaving a doughnut-shaped hole in place of efforts to implement the Goals in the UK. The fact that Cabinet-level Ministers were not willing to appear before us (a break with the past) is a worrying sign that this issue has been downgraded in Government. There is no voice at the top of Government speaking for the long-term aspirations embodied in the Goals. There is no strategy or vision to achieve the Goals in the UK. Without strong and maintained leadership from the top, the Government is unlikely to achieve the cross-government working and policy coherence that the Goals are designed to produce. To address this accountability gap the Government should appoint a Cabinet-level Minister in the Cabinet Office with strategic responsibility for implementing sustainable development, including the Goals, across Government. The Government should also assign a Minister in the Treasury to help co-ordinate national implementation of the Goals, so that economic and fiscal policy is joined-up with efforts to implement the Goals. The Treasury should assess the need to create pricing mechanisms to correct the market failures which the Goals represent. (Paragraph 59)

The Secretary of State for International Development has policy oversight for the delivery of the Goals, supported by the wider DFID Ministerial team. Secretaries of State across Government are responsible for the delivery of the Goals in their respective areas. The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Minister for Government Resilience and Efficiency in the Cabinet Office have an important role in ensuring a coordinated cross-government approach to the delivery of the Goals, supporting both DFID and other government departments to collaborate on Goal implementation. Within the civil service, planning for the delivery of the Goals is embedded into the Single Departmental Plan for each department. In their Single Departmental Plans, each department outlines how planned activity will support the delivery of the Goals. Departmental reporting against Single Departmental Plans includes evidence of progress in implementing the Goals, allowing DFID and the Cabinet Office to track delivery.

8. The Government should keep its promise to publish a report setting out how it intends to take an integrated, cross-government and policy-coherent approach to implementing the Goals in the UK and how it will bring together the elements of the updated Single Departmental Plans that support the Goals. It should do so by summer 2017. The Prime Minister should take personal responsibility for ensuring the report is implemented. She should publically endorse timely and regular Government updates, through a Cabinet Committee set up for this purpose, on progress to achieve the Goals in the UK to Parliament and to the public in an annual report. As the UK leaves the European Union, demonstrating a deep and meaningful commitment to

meeting these global commitments domestically would send a powerful signal about the Government's ambition for a "Global Britain" in which no one is left behind. (Paragraph 60)

The Government is fully committed to delivering the Goals, and, as mentioned above, published a report on 28th March outlining our work domestically and internationally on Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. A copy of the report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agenda-2030-delivering-the-global-goals>

In addition, Single Departmental Plans, showing how planned activity will contribute to the delivery of the Goals, are made available on GOV.UK. Single Departmental Plans set out each department's medium-term objectives, including how departmental activity will deliver the Goals. They enable a department's contribution to delivery of the Goals to be reported publicly in Departments' Annual Report and Accounts, and enable progress to be scrutinised by parliament and the public.

9. In a resource constrained economy it is logical that the Government should do everything it can to support partners (government agencies, local government, civil society, business and the general public) to contribute towards delivering the Goals. Some multinational businesses, for example, are already taking a lead on tackling the Goals in areas where we might have expected Government to do so. Partnering with these organisations would increase the Government's chances of achieving the Goals and reduce the burden on Government. However, we have seen little evidence that it is doing this in the UK. The Government should immediately establish an SDG Partnership Working Group with the Cabinet Minister responsible, representatives from business, civil society and local government and develop and publish a strategy by 2018 setting out how it will support all stakeholders to contribute towards meeting the Goals in the UK by 2030. (Paragraph 61)

Each Government Department works with their partners and stakeholders to deliver the priorities set out in their Single Departmental Plans and the Goals. For example, the Inclusive Economy Partnership, mentioned above, which is built on collaboration between Government, business and civil society, to capitalise on the increasing appetite of big business to address issues of social inequity within the UK. Given the wide ranging nature of the Goals, the Government considers that exploiting existing departmental engagement structures and relationships is the most effective mechanism to engage stakeholders on Goal issues. Many more examples of the partnership work taking place across Government can be found on each Department's GOV.UK page. We will continue to use these existing platforms to engage with stakeholders.

10. The Government has said that it wants to utilise existing government infrastructure to deliver the Goals. However, we believe there is a need for an independent scrutineer of progress made by this Government and subsequent Governments on domestic implementation of the Global Goals. The Government should establish an independent advisor on sustainable development in the form of a new statutory public body advising the responsible Minister and the Prime Minister. This should be modelled on the independent Committee on Climate Change. It should be run by a committee with members drawn from academia, business, and civil society and independently chaired. Utilising the data collected by the ONS it could produce regular audits on the

progress towards achieving the Goals and provide evidence-based advice on what the Government could do to promote sustainable development and progress towards the Goals. (Paragraph 62)

The Government does not believe that an additional independent advisor is required to advise on the Goals and produce regular audits on progress towards the Goals.

As set out above, every Government Department has a Single Departmental Plan that sets out their priorities, within which the Goals relevant to the Department's work are embedded. They enable progress against the Goals to be reported publicly in Departments' Annual Report and Accounts, and enable progress to be scrutinised by parliament and the public. The Government will use these existing mechanisms to deliver and monitor the Goals. This is in line with the UN Resolution.

11. The Government should work with public institutions such as local government, the NHS and police to create partnerships to deliver the Goals. Public services such as the NHS and the police will be key to delivering the Goals, by creating a healthy society and resilient communities, respectively. The Goals offer economic opportunities for businesses, but also for public services, in particular the health service. The Government should embed the Goals into the mandate of public services, such as the NHS. (Paragraph 63)

Each Government Department is responsible for embedding delivery of the Goals in the full range of policies and activities for which they are responsible. Single Departmental Plans provide an effective framework through which departments set out their planned work and in particular how they will contribute to cross-governmental commitments such as the Goals, working with partner organisations.

The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 places a requirement on commissioners to consider the economic, environmental and social benefits of their approaches to procurement. To help commissioners implement the act, government continues to take steps, taking on board the recommendations of Lord Young's 2015 review. This includes: publishing measurement and impact case studies; supporting the Social Value Awards (run by Social Enterprise UK and Interserve); and developing guidance materials with the Crown Commercial Service.