



UN Sustainable Development Goals: Integration into UK Policy Debate on 22 November 2018

Summary

This House of Lords Library Briefing has been prepared in advance of the debate due to take place on 22 November 2018 in the House of Lords on the motion moved by Baroness Suttie (Liberal Democrat), “that this House takes note of the progress made across government departments in integrating the universal sustainable developments goals into domestic policy in preparation for the United Kingdom’s voluntary national review presentation at the United Nations in September 2019”.

In 2015, UN members states, including the UK, adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets. The goals cover issues ranging from poverty and gender equality to waste reduction and achieving sustainable consumption.

The UK Government welcomed the adoption of the SDGs and associated targets, with the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, calling for “world leaders to meet their promises”. The Department for International Development is the lead government department on implementing the SDGs. Other departments are required to embed the goals in their single departmental plans (SDP) and associated reporting mechanisms. The Cabinet Office has a role in coordinating domestic delivery of the goals through the SDP process. The Office for National Statistics is responsible for reporting the UK’s data for the SDG global indicators to the UN.

As part of the UN’s review and monitoring process, member states are encouraged to conduct “regular and inclusive [national] reviews”. The national reports are produced in the form of voluntary national reviews (VNRs). Countries deliver their VNRs to the UN on its progress, successes and challenges, and will have this discussed by other states and stakeholders. The UK Government has stated that it will be delivering its VNR to the UN in July 2019. The Government has launched an online platform for businesses and civil society to submit their contributions to the VNR.

This briefing provides a summary of the SDGs and an overview of the UN’s monitoring and review process. It then briefly describes the UK Government’s implementation and reporting mechanisms and summarises the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee’s report on the issue. The final section provides information on the UK’s preparations for the VNR.

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I. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

I.1 2030 Agenda

In September 2015, UN member states attending an extraordinary summit of the UN General Assembly adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets.¹ The goals cover issues ranging from poverty and gender equality to waste reduction and achieving sustainable consumption and production patterns. The SDGs are the successors to the millennium development goals (MDGs) agreed in 2001: eight goals with 18 associated targets for human development, most of which had a target deadline of 2015.²

The SDGs and associated targets are contained within a final outcome document adopted at the summit called *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.³ The document set out a commitment to work “tirelessly for the full implementation” of the agenda by 2030.⁴ At the “core” of the agenda was the pledge that “no one will be left behind”.⁵ On 1 January 2016, the 17 SDGs officially came into force.⁶

I.2 Overview of the Sustainable Development Goals

In summary, the 17 SDGs are:⁷

- **Goal 1:** No poverty, in all its forms, everywhere.
- **Goal 2:** Zero hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
- **Goal 3:** Good health and well-being for all at all ages.
- **Goal 4:** Quality education that is inclusive and equitable and to promote life-long learning opportunities for all.

¹ United Nations, ‘[Sustainable Development Goals Agenda](#)’, accessed 7 November 2018.

² In July 2015, the UN published its final assessment report on the MDGs. It acknowledged that there was still a long way to go. However, the then UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, asserted that the MDGs had “worked at all levels” and had “saved millions of lives and improved conditions for millions more around the world” (United Nations Economic and Social Council, ‘[Lessons from Millennium Development Goals ‘Springboard’ for Future UN Agenda: Ban](#)’, 6 July 2015).

³ United Nations, [Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), October 2015.

⁴ *ibid*, p 6.

⁵ *ibid*; and United Nations, [Global Sustainable Development Report 2016](#), August 2016, p 3.

⁶ United Nations, ‘[Sustainable Development Goals Agenda](#)’, accessed 7 November 2018.

⁷ United Nations, ‘[About the Sustainable Development Goals](#)’, accessed 7 November 2018.

Further details on each of the SDGs can be found in the UN’s guide, ‘[About the Sustainable Development Goals](#)’ (accessed 7 November 2018); and the House of Commons Library briefing, [The Sustainable Development Goals and the Post-2015 Development Agenda](#) (28 September 2018). The House of Commons Library briefing also provides further information on the MDGs.

- **Goal 5:** Gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- **Goal 6:** Clean water and sanitation for all.
- **Goal 7:** Affordable and clean energy for all.
- **Goal 8:** Decent work and economic growth, full and productive employment for all.
- **Goal 9:** Promote inclusive and sustainable industry, foster innovation and build resilient infrastructure.
- **Goal 10:** Reduced inequalities within and among countries.
- **Goal 11:** Sustainable cities and communities that are inclusive, safe and resilient.
- **Goal 12:** Responsible production and consumption.
- **Goal 13:** Urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
- **Goal 14:** Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources.
- **Goal 15:** Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems.
- **Goal 16:** Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies; provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
- **Goal 17:** Revitalise the global partnership between governments, the private sector and civil society to implement the sustainable development agenda.

1.3 Implementation and Monitoring Mechanisms

The September 2015 summit established a shared political commitment on the part of UN member states to implement the SDGs.⁸ Goal 17, entitled Partnerships for the Goals, states:

A successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society [...] Review and monitoring frameworks, regulations and incentive structures that enable such investments must be retooled to attract investments and reinforce sustainable development. National oversight mechanisms such as supreme audit institutions and oversight functions by legislatures should be strengthened.⁹

The key political mechanism identified by the 2015 summit was the UN's high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF).¹⁰ It was

⁸ United Nations, '[High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#)', accessed 8 November 2018.

⁹ United Nations, '[Goal 17: Revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development](#)', accessed 7 November 2018.

¹⁰ United Nations, '[High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#)', accessed 8 November 2018.

established in 2012, and it is the “main UN platform providing political leadership and guidance on sustainable development issues at the international level”. The HLPF has a central role in the follow-up and review framework of the 2030 agenda and the SDGs at the global level.

The forum meets every four years at the level of heads of state and heads of government under the auspices of the General Assembly, to provide “high-level political guidance on the agenda and its implementation, identify progress and emerging challenges and mobilise further actions to accelerate implementation”.¹¹ The next HLPF is scheduled to be held in 2019. The forum also meets every year at ministerial level under the mandate of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).¹² At each session, the ECOSOC discusses a set of goals and their interlinkages, with a view to facilitating an in-depth review of progress made on all goals over the course of a four-year cycle, including with respect to goal 17.¹³

As part of its follow-up and implementation mechanisms, the 2030 agenda stipulated that reviews at the HLPF would be informed by an annual progress report on the SDGs, to be prepared by the Secretary General, and a quadrennial global sustainable development report (GSDR), which “aims to strengthen the science-policy interface”.¹⁴ In addition, regular, voluntary, state-led national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the HLPF. The following sections of this briefing provide an overview of these reports.¹⁵

Sustainable Development Goals Report

The annual progress report is based on the UN’s global indicator framework, data produced by national statistical systems and information collected at regional levels.¹⁶ It provides an overview of the world’s

¹¹ United Nations, ‘[High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#)’, accessed 8 November 2018; and [Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), October 2015, p 39.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ United Nations General Assembly, [Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 29 July 2016: Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the Global Level](#), 18 August 2016, p 2.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p 3.

¹⁵ *ibid.*; and United Nations, ‘[High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#)’, accessed 8 November 2018.

¹⁶ United Nations, [Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), October 2015, p 39; and United Nations, [The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018](#), June 2018, p 36. The regional groupings are: sub-Saharan Africa; northern Africa and western Asia; central and southern Asia; eastern and south-eastern Asia; Latin America and the Caribbean; Australia and New Zealand; Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand); Europe; and North America. The global indicator framework was developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) and adopted by the General Assembly on 6 July 2017. A list of the indicators can be found at: United Nations, [Global Indicator Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and Targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), May 2018.

implementation efforts to date, highlighting areas of progress and areas where there are remaining gaps.

The 2018 report, published in June 2018, found that progress had been made in many areas of the 2030 agenda. It highlighted that:¹⁷

- The proportion of the world's workers living with their families on less than US\$1.90 per person a day declined from 26.9% in 2000 to 9.2% in 2017.
- Globally, from 2000 to 2016, the under-5 mortality rate dropped by 47%, and the neonatal mortality rate fell by 39%.
- Rates of child marriage had continued to decline around the world. In southern Asia, a girl's risk of marrying in childhood had dropped by over 40% between 2000 and 2017.
- From 2000 to 2016, the proportion of the global population with access to electricity had increased from 78% to 87%, with the absolute number of people living without electricity dipping to just below 1 billion.
- By 2018, a total of 108 countries had national policies and initiatives relevant to sustainable consumption and production.

However, the report found that in some areas progress was “insufficient” to meet the agenda's goals and targets by 2030; this was especially “true for the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups”.¹⁸ Summarising its findings, the report stated that:

Conflict and climate change were major contributing factors leading to growing numbers of people facing hunger and forced displacement, as well as curtailing progress towards universal access to basic water and sanitation services [...] While some forms of discrimination against women and girls are declining, gender inequality continues to hold women back and deprives them of basic rights and opportunities.¹⁹

The report's findings included:²⁰

- The proportion of undernourished people worldwide had increased from 10.6% in 2015 to 11.0% in 2016. This translated to 815 million people worldwide in 2016, up from 777 million in 2015.

¹⁷ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, '[The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018](#)', accessed 8 November 2018; and United Nations, '[The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018](#)', June 2018.

¹⁸ United Nations, '[The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018](#)', June 2018, p 3.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, '[The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018](#)', accessed 8 November 2018; and United Nations, '[The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018](#)', June 2018.

- In 2015, 2.3 billion people still lacked a “basic level” of sanitation service and 892 million people continued to practice open defecation.
- In 2016, 91% of the urban population worldwide were breathing air that did not meet the World Health Organisation air quality guidelines; more than half were exposed to air pollution levels at least 2.5 times higher than that safety standard.
- Based on data between 2000 and 2016 from about 90 countries, women were spending roughly three times as many hours in unpaid domestic and care work as men.

Global Sustainable Development Report

The GSDR aims to “strengthen the science-policy interface and provide an evidence-based instrument” to support policy makers in “promoting poverty eradication and sustainable development”.²¹ A comprehensive, in-depth report will be produced every four years to inform the HLPF, convened under the auspices of the General Assembly. The next report will be published in 2019. Each year, scientists who work on the report are also to be invited to the HLPF, convened under the auspices of the ECOSOC, to provide scientific input into the discussion.

It was agreed by member states that the report would provide guidance on the state of global sustainable development from a scientific perspective to help address the implementation of the 2030 agenda and to highlight emerging trends and actions.²² Member states requested the creation of an independent group of scientists to draft the GSDR. The independent group of scientists is appointed by the Secretary General and comprises 15 experts representing a variety of backgrounds, scientific disciplines and institutions, ensuring geographical and gender balance. In January 2017, the then Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, appointed the independent group of scientists to draft the first of the quadrennial series of GSDRs that review the 2030 agenda.²³

The group will be supported by a task team co-chaired by six bodies: the United Nations Secretariat; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO); United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD); and the World Bank.

²¹ United Nations, [Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), October 2015, p 39; and United Nations, [Global Sustainable Development Report](#), accessed 8 November 2018.

²² United Nations, [Global Sustainable Development Report](#), accessed 8 November 2018.

²³ A complete list of the scientists appointed can be found at: United Nations, [Experts, Eminent Scientists to Draft Report on Sustainable Development Ahead of Global Review Set for 2019](#), 3 January 2017.

Voluntary National Reviews

The 2030 agenda stipulates that the monitoring and review process be “voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and shall provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders”.²⁴ It states that the process will take into account “different national realities, capacities and levels of development”, and will “respect policy space and priorities”. As part of this follow-up process, the agenda encourages member states to “conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels”.²⁵

These national reports are produced in the form of voluntary national reviews (VNRs). They serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the HLPF, meeting under the auspices of ECOSOC.²⁶ The UN has issued guidelines for VNRs.²⁷ However, they are intended to be flexible and allow for adaptation to national circumstances.²⁸ The VNRs are presented at the annual HLPF in the ministerial segment.²⁹ A member state delivers a report on its progress, successes and challenges, and this will then be discussed by other states and stakeholders. One hundred and eleven VNRs have been presented at the HLPF since 2016, with a further 51 due to be presented in 2019.³⁰ The United Kingdom is scheduled to present its VNR in July 2019.³¹

The UN states that VNRs make “possible the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 agenda”.³²

²⁴ United Nations, [Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), October 2015, p 39.

²⁵ *ibid*, p 38.

²⁶ United Nations, ‘[High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#)’, accessed 8 November 2018.

²⁷ United Nations, [Handbook for Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: 2019 Edition](#), November 2018.

²⁸ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, [Voluntary National Review Reports: What Do They Report?](#), July 2018, p 2.

²⁹ United Nations, ‘[Voluntary National Reviews Database](#)’, accessed 8 November 2018.

³⁰ United Nations, [Handbook for Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: 2019 Edition](#), November 2018, p 4.

³¹ House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, ‘[Letter from Lords Bates re UN Sustainable Development Goals](#)’, 29 November 2017. Section 3 of this briefing provides further information on the UK’s preparations for the VNR process.

³² United Nations, [Handbook for Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: 2019 Edition](#), November 2018, p 8.

2. Integration of the Sustainable Developments Goals in the UK

2.1 UK Government Response

During the intergovernmental negotiating process on the 2030 agenda, the UK Government stated that it would seek to build support for “ensuring an ambitious and implementable framework” to underpin the post-2015 development agenda.³³ David Cameron, the then UK Prime Minister, had played a key role in the development of the SDGs and associated targets by co-chairing a UN high-level panel, which was established by the Secretary General in 2012 to explore the post-2015 development agenda.³⁴

In an address on the closing day of the 2015 summit of the UN General Assembly, which adopted the 2030 agenda, David Cameron called for “world leaders to meet their promises” on aid spending and for governments “to be held to account” for the implementation of the global goals.³⁵ He stated:

Achieving these goals will take action, not words. I’m proud that the UK has met our 0.7 percent commitment, and I call on others to follow.

[...]

We’ve been making promises on aid for years. Now, let us deliver on those promises. The world is watching.³⁶

Responding to a House of Lords debate on the SDGs on 17 September 2015, Baroness Verma, the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for International Development, said that the UK considered the SDGs to be a “major step forward” from the MDGs because they were “universal and comprehensive” and were underpinned by the principles of “leaving no-one behind”.³⁷ For the UK, she said this meant that “no target should be considered met” unless it had “been achieved by all segments of society”.

Baroness Verma confirmed that the Department for International Development (DFID) would be the lead department in coordinating the UK’s international implementation of the SDGs, adding that the SDGs would

³³ House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, [Documents Considered by the Committee on 14 January 2015, Including the Following Recommendations for Debate: The EU and the Post-2015 Development Agenda; EU Development Assistance: EuropeAid’s Evaluation and Results-oriented Monitoring Systems](#), 23 January 2015, HC 219-xxviii of session 2014–15, p 7.

³⁴ Prime Minister’s Office, [‘PM Calls on World Leaders for More Aid Spending and More Accountability’](#), 27 September 2015.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ [HL Hansard, 17 September 2015, cols 1994–8.](#)

also be built into DFID’s strategic objectives.³⁸

2.2 Implementation

DFID retains the policy oversight for the SDGs.³⁹ Other government departments are required to embed SDGs in their single departmental plans (SDPs) and associated reporting mechanisms. In May 2018, the Government published high-level summaries of the SDPs.⁴⁰ In their plans, departments highlighted how the priority programmes and activities for which they are responsible would contribute to the delivery of the SDGs.⁴¹ The Cabinet Office has a role in coordinating domestic delivery of the goals through the SDP process. Departments report regularly to the Cabinet Office on their progress in delivering their SDPs.

In March 2017, DFID published the document, [Agenda 2030: The UK Government’s Approach to Delivering the Global Goals for Sustainable Development](#), setting out an overview and examples of how it was contributing to the delivery of each of the goals.⁴² In December 2017, the Cabinet Office provided a further overview document, [Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals](#), which pulled together some of the key targets from the different SDPs under each goal. This document was updated in May 2018.⁴³

In October 2018, in written evidence to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, DFID stated that the Government had made “significant progress towards some of the SDGs”, and that the UK had “already met some of the targets”.⁴⁴ It highlighted a number of initiatives, including:⁴⁵

- As part of the target to achieve gender equality (goal 5), the Government had introduced gender pay gap reporting regulations in 2017, requiring all employers with over 250 employees to publish gender pay gap data: the differences between what they pay their male and female staff in average

³⁸ [HL Hansard, 17 September 2015, cols 1994–8.](#)

³⁹ Department for International Development, [Agenda 2030: The UK Government’s Approach to Delivering the Global Goals for Sustainable Development—At Home and Around the World](#), March 2017, p 1; and Cabinet Office, [‘Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: December 2017’](#), updated 23 May 2018.

⁴⁰ The summaries can be found at: Cabinet Office, [‘Single Departmental Plans’](#), updated 23 May 2018.

⁴¹ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Written Evidence Submitted by the Department for International Development, HM Government](#), 23 October 2018.

⁴² Department for International Development, [Agenda 2030: The UK Government’s Approach to Delivering the Global Goals for Sustainable Development](#), March 2017.

⁴³ Cabinet Office, [Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals](#), updated 23 May 2018.

⁴⁴ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Written Evidence Submitted by the Department for International Development, HM Government](#), 23 October 2018.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

salaries and bonuses. In the first year of reporting, over 10,000 employers reported their data.

- With the aim of reducing inequality within the UK (in alignment with goal 10), the Government had published the results of its race disparity audit on 10 October 2017. The audit was established to examine how people of different backgrounds are treated across areas including health, education, employment and the criminal justice system.

DFID stated the UK Government had also made a “significant contribution to the SDGs internationally”:

SDGs are embedded across all of DFID’s work, and recent achievements include:

- enabling 8.5 million additional women from July 2012 to March 2017 to use modern methods of family planning;
- supporting 27.2 million people to access clean water and/or better sanitation between April 2015 and March 2017; and
- supported 7.1 million children to gain a decent education between April 2015 and March 2017.⁴⁶

2.3 Reporting and Monitoring Mechanisms

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) leads on reporting UK data for the SDG global indicators to the UN. In terms of national reporting, government departments are required to include in their annual reports information on the progress made in embedding the SDGs in their planned activities. Scrutiny in parliament on the implementation of the SDGs and the Government’s reporting mechanisms has included several inquiries by parliamentary committees.⁴⁷

The following sections of this briefing will focus on the role of the ONS, and on inquiries conducted by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, which considered the Government’s implementation and reporting mechanisms for the SDGs.

Role of the Office for National Statistics

To assess what progress member states are making towards the SDGs and associated targets there are 232 global indicators to be measured and

⁴⁶ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Written Evidence Submitted by the Department for International Development, HM Government](#), 23 October 2018.

⁴⁷ Other parliamentary committee reports include: House of Commons International Development Committee, [UK Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals](#), 8 June 2016, HC 103 of session 2016–17; and House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, [Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 5 in the UK](#), 14 March 2017, HC 885 of session 2016–17.

reported.⁴⁸ The ONS is responsible for reporting the UK's data for these global indicators to the UN.⁴⁹ The ONS reported in November 2018 that it had acquired data for 64% of the global SDG indicators, up from 39% in its first report in November 2017.⁵⁰ UK data for the SDG indicators can be found on the ONS' online interactive [national reporting platform \(NRP\)](#).

Scrutiny by the Environmental Audit Committee

The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee is responsible for considering the extent to which the policies and programmes of government departments contribute to sustainable development. In April 2017, it published a report which examined how the Government was implementing the SDGs and scrutinised the framework for national monitoring and reporting.⁵¹

The committee found that there was an “accountability gap” across government, with no central coordination or “voice at the top of government speaking for the long-term aspirations embodied in the goals”.⁵² It recommended that the Government should appoint a cabinet-level minister in the Cabinet Office with strategic responsibility for implementing sustainable development, including the SDGs, across government.

The committee suggested that the Government seemed “more concerned with promoting the goals abroad” and had “undertaken no substantive work to promote the goals domestically or encourage businesses, the public sector and civil society to engage with the goals”.⁵³ It stated that raising awareness and encouraging engagement would increase the number of people and organisations able to contribute towards meeting the SDGs. The committee recommended that the Government work with the national media to launch a national campaign to raise public awareness, and to support initiatives designed to encourage businesses. The committee also expressed concern that the ONS would no longer be developing national indicators, and these instead would be included in SDPs.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Office for National Statistics, '[Sustainable Development Goals: Progress and Possibilities](#)', November 2017. The total number of indicators is 244. However, because nine indicators repeat under two or three different targets the actual total number of individual indicators in the list is 232. The indicators were proposed by the United Nations Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDGs (UN IAEG), and agreed by the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC).

⁴⁹ UK Government website, '[About the Voluntary National Review](#)', accessed 12 November 2018.

⁵⁰ Office for National Statistics, '[Sustainable Development Goals in the UK: An Update on Progress](#)', November 2018.

⁵¹ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, '[Sustainable Development Goals in the UK](#)', 26 April 2017, HC 596 of session 2016–17.

⁵² *ibid*, p 4.

⁵³ *ibid*.

⁵⁴ The ONS announced in March 2017 that it would no longer be consulting on national indicators (Office for National Statistics, '[Sustainable Development Goals](#)', accessed 12 November 2018).

It concluded that:

Successful implementation would not only encourage greater cross-departmental collaboration and policy coherence in Government, it would bring economic, social and environmental benefits to the UK.⁵⁵

In response to the committee's report, the Government confirmed that it believed the "most effective way" to implement the SDGs in the UK was to embed them into government departments' SDPs.⁵⁶ It stated that SDPs were an established process to "focus Government's efforts on important issues".⁵⁷ On the issue of cross-government working and policy coherence, the Government stated that the Cabinet Office would have an important role in ensuring a coordinated approach to the delivery of the SDGs and in supporting both DFID and other departments to collaborate.⁵⁸ It said that SDPs would include evidence of progress in implementing the SDGs, allowing DFID and the Cabinet Office to track delivery.

In October 2018, the committee held the first of its annual hearings on the Government's domestic progress against the SDGs. In its written evidence to the committee, DFID provided an update on the Government's work to implement the SDGs. It stated that the UK was "well placed" to deliver the SDGs by 2030 and had made "significant progress" towards some of the goals.⁵⁹ In regards to better mainstreaming the SDGs into its programme, the Government stated that it had established a cross-Whitehall group, co-chaired by DFID and the Cabinet Office, to meet regularly to coordinate SDGs implementation.

During an oral session with the committee, the Government was questioned on the priority given to the SDGs; for example, whether they were "driving" government policy or if they were instead included in existing programmes.⁶⁰ Using the Government's work on female genital mutilation as an example, Oliver Dowden, Minister for Implementation at the Cabinet Office, stated:

We have been a world leader in response to that and I think that is an example of where you have an international agenda, through the sustainable development goals, that then gets entrenched in the activities of the Government, both at a domestic level but also through

⁵⁵ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Sustainable Development Goals in the UK](#), 26 April 2017, HC 596 of session 2016–17, p 4.

⁵⁶ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Sustainable Development Goals in the UK: Government Response to the Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2016–17](#), 7 December 2017, HC 616 of session 2017–19, p 1.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, p 6.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p 7.

⁵⁹ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Written Evidence Submitted by the Department for International Development, HM Government](#), 23 October 2018.

⁶⁰ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Oral Evidence: Sustainable Development Goals in the UK Follow-up, HC 1491](#), 23 October 2018, Q 77.

the Department for International Development and diplomatic relations through the Foreign Office. That is the benefit of taking the goals and putting them into the single departmental plans, so that they essentially become mainstream to everything the Government is doing.⁶¹

The Government was also questioned by the committee on whether the implementation and reporting mechanisms for the SDGs had led to the departments working in silos, rather than creating a joined-up approach across government.⁶² In response, Mr Dowden stated that he did not view the SDPs as having a “silo mentality”:

Because they are agreed through the Cabinet Office and the Treasury, we ensure that macro government goals such as the sustainable development goals are reflected in multiple plans.⁶³

He also stated that the Government had established many ways for departments to work together, including: a range of interdepartmental taskforces; a “whole panoply” of ad hoc ministerial meetings where they come together to work on different issues; and cabinet sub-committees.⁶⁴

3. UK's Voluntary National Review Process

The Government is scheduled to submit its VNR to the UN, ahead of the HLPF in July 2019.⁶⁵ It has stated that its VNR will consider what programmes and policies are contributing to the SDGs, will “take stock” of progress that has been made, and will seek to “understand better what more needs to be done”. The Government “will also aim to reflect the work that is going on by people, organisations and groups across the UK”.

The UK's voluntary national review will:

- Set out the UK's contributions towards all 17 SDGs.
- Be underpinned by data.
- Demonstrate both the UK's domestic and international activity.⁶⁶

The Government intends to send the initial messages of the review to the UN in May 2019.⁶⁷

⁶¹ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Oral Evidence: Sustainable Development Goals in the UK Follow-up, HC 1491](#), 23 October 2018, Q 83.

⁶² *ibid.*, Q 84.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ UK Government website, '[About the Voluntary National Review](#)', accessed 12 November 2018.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Oral Evidence: Sustainable Development Goals in the UK Follow-up, HC 1491](#), 23 October 2018, Q 91.

3.1 Preparations for the Voluntary National Review

The report will be government-led with DFID leading the overall coordination and drafting process, supported by the Cabinet Office and other government departments.⁶⁸ As part of the VNR process champions will be nominated in each department. They will be responsible for working with DFID and the Cabinet Office and will support the production of the review.

The Government has set out the principles that will inform the review:

- We are clear that the VNR should set out how the work of the Government will support the delivery of all 17 SDGs. This year's theme of empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality covers priorities for the UK Government, including economic growth, inequality, and peace and justice. We expect to highlight these areas in our report.
- There should be a good balance between the UK's domestic and international work.
- The VNR should adopt a data-driven approach to ensure it is robust and credible. We believe this is consistent with the VNRs presented by other countries and reflects UN guidance.⁶⁹

The Government has also stated it will work with the ONS "to understand the UK's progress towards data collection".⁷⁰

3.2 Stakeholder Engagement

Guidance produced by the UN on preparing and drafting VNRs suggests that, as part of the process, states should develop a stakeholder engagement plan.⁷¹ It recommends that the plan should:

Identify key stakeholders, methods of engagement and consider online and other means through which stakeholder contributions could be gathered. All sectors and levels of government, civil society, private sector, trade unions, members of parliament and national human rights institutions, should be considered.⁷²

⁶⁸ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Written Evidence Submitted by the Department for International Development, HM Government](#), 23 October 2018.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ United Nations, [Handbook for Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: 2019 Edition](#), November 2018, p 14.

⁷² *ibid.*

The Government has stated that it will consult with interested stakeholders to “produce a strong report”.⁷³

Businesses and Civil Society

The Government has opened a consultation inviting submissions from civil society and businesses to feed into the VNR.⁷⁴ The Government has asked for information about projects at the local level that are helping to deliver the SDGs. It intends to showcase in the VNR several examples of the work being done across the country by different groups. Submissions could be made through an online platform up until 16 November 2018.

In its evidence to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee in October 2018, the Government highlighted several other ways in which it was engaging with business in the VNR process. These included:⁷⁵

- Taking an “active” part in the UN global compact, which is a network of businesses around the world. Between April and November 2018, the Government stated it was undertaking a roadshow around the UK to highlight the fact that the global goals are also about local business.
- Consulting with the UK stakeholders for sustainable development group, a cross-sector network of organisations which produced the report [Measuring Up](#) in July 2018.⁷⁶ Lord Bates, the Minister of State at the Department for International Development, has described it as a “very good contribution to the work that is going into the voluntary national review”.
- The Secretary of State for International Development taking a “key role” in engaging with businesses to ensure that they are “aware of the goals and are playing their part in delivering the goals”.

Parliament and Devolved Administrations

In regard to consulting Parliament on the VNR, in his evidence to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee hearing in October 2018, Lord Bates, stated:

If I could make the commitment, therefore, on behalf of the team of ministers present, there will be a mechanism for consulting

⁷³ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Written Evidence Submitted by the Department for International Development, HM Government](#), 23 October 2018.

⁷⁴ UK Government website, ‘[About the Voluntary National Review](#)’, accessed 12 November 2018; and House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Oral Evidence: Sustainable Development Goals in the UK Follow-up, HC 1491](#), 23 October 2018, Q 86.

⁷⁵ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Oral Evidence: Sustainable Development Goals in the UK Follow-up, HC 1491](#), 23 October 2018, Q 63.

⁷⁶ UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development, [Measuring Up](#), July 2018.

parliamentary colleagues on our progress towards a voluntary national review. That will happen before May [2019]. The exact format and structure as to how that consultation takes place is something we are discussing in Government, as you would expect, but we are also open to other colleagues in Parliament making suggestions to us.⁷⁷

As part of the VNR process, the Government is also consulting with the devolved administrations on areas of their specific responsibility.⁷⁸ Lord Bates told the committee in October 2018 that the Government would do so because it wanted to “project an accurate picture of what is happening in the UK”.⁷⁹ He stated that the measures taken in the devolved areas would be “part of presenting what the UK is doing to implement the SDGs”. However, he informed the committee that the “specifics” on the format of the engagement was still to be finalised.

⁷⁷ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Oral Evidence: Sustainable Development Goals in the UK Follow-up, HC 1491](#), 23 October 2018, Q 99.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, Q 100.

⁷⁹ *ibid*.