

Environmental Audit Committee

Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow-up inquiry

Written evidence by the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management

Background to CIWEM

1. CIWEM is the leading independent Chartered professional body for water and environmental professionals, promoting excellence within the sector. The Institution provides independent commentary on a wide range of issues related to water and environmental management, environmental resilience and sustainable development.
2. CIWEM welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Environmental Audit Committee on its follow-up inquiry on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the UK.

Summary

3. SDGs are not driving policy direction, as evidenced by few mentions in key policy documents such as the 25 Year Environment Plan and the Clean Growth Strategy.
4. Whilst SDGs have now been incorporated into Single Departmental Plans, the manner of their inclusion makes it hard to understand to how, when and to what extent the goals will be met.
5. We are concerned that comprehensive delivery of the goals will be hindered by the lack of an overarching strategy, without which there is a risk of important goals falling between departments. Given the interlinking nature of the goals an overarching body responsible for ensuring departments are taking complementary steps to address the goals would be appropriate.
6. In its recent agriculture consultation the Government failed to adequately consider the link between food affordability and environmental impact.

Response to inquiry questions

What steps the Government has taken to achieve the Goals?

7. Levels of progress towards the goals are assessed in the UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD) report *Measuring up: How the UK is performing on the UN Sustainable*

*Development Goals*¹. Detail on progress against individual goals is contained within the relevant appendices. Headline findings are that of 143 relevant targets, the UK is performing well on 24% and inadequately or poorly on 72%.

What steps the Government has taken since the Committee's report to better mainstream the Sustainable Development Goals into its programme?

8. Since the last EAC inquiry the SDGs have been incorporated into single departmental plans.

9. The Government has also published the 25 Year Environment Plan and the Clean Growth Strategy as key policy direction documents. The 25 Year Environment Plan mentions the SDGs stating,

*As a developed country, the UK should drive progress on certain SDGs where domestic consumption has an impact on other countries. These include SDGs 13 (climate change), 7 (energy), 14 (life below water), 15 (life on land) and 12 (sustainable consumption and production).*²

10. The Clean Growth Strategy³ references the Sustainable Development Goals only once, in relation to international targets of reducing emissions to tackle climate change and meet the Paris agreement.

11. Taken together, these statements suggest that the Government did not take on board the advice on the EAC in their 2017 SDG report that,

The Government's doughnut-shaped approach - seeing the Goals as something for the UK to help other countries do, rather than drawing on other countries' experiences in implementing the Goals here at home - must change if it hopes to fulfil its commitment to work 'tirelessly for the full implementation of this Agenda by 2030.

12. Whilst action to support delivery of the SDGs abroad is welcome, this should be accompanied by national focus and actions. The lack of national focus indicates that the SDGs are not a driver in the development of national policy, so may not have been mainstreamed.

13. However, within the 25 Year Environment Plan the SDGs are addressed, to a certain extent, through the 10 targets. For example, target two, clean and plentiful water, overlaps with SDG 6, target three, thriving plants and wildlife, overlaps with SDG 15, target 7,

¹ <https://www.ukssd.co.uk/measuringup>

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693158/25-year-environment-plan.pdf

³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/700496/clean-growth-strategy-correction-april-2018.pdf

mitigating and adapting to climate change, overlaps with SDG 13. The levels of overlap between environment plan targets and sustainable development goals varies.

How this is reflected in Single Department Plans and departmental reporting?

14. Single Departmental Plans now reflect the SDGs. Taking DEFRA as an example, its most recent Single Departmental Plan⁴ was published in May 2018. Within its four overarching objectives, the plan refers to the SDGs 18 times and covers aspects of SDGs; 2, 3, 6, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17. This is a clear improvement from DEFRA's previous plan⁵ which made no mention of the SDGs.

15. However, the SDGs are not included in full. SDG wording is omitted with only numbers included, this does not facilitate quick understanding of SDG coverage. Where SDGs are referred to, this is not usually attached to a specific action and timeframe, instead wide goals without deadlines are included in the plan. For example, "Restore landscapes, to create more beautiful places with cleaner water and greater biodiversity through projects with our partners (contributes to SDG 15)". This doesn't give sufficient detail to feel confident of which aspects of SDG 15 are being addressed, in what way and when. Clearly this makes it difficult to hold the department to account on its delivery against SDGs.

16. The most recent DEFRA annual report and accounts (2017-18)⁶ does not consider progress against SDGs. This is unsurprising since it is reporting against the previous plan which did not reference SDGs. The next report should reference SDG progress. However, given the way the targets have been included in the plan it seems unlikely that the report will provide detailed evidence on levels of improvement against specific SDG targets.

Whether the Government has done more since the Committee's report to raise awareness of the SDGs especially amongst children and young people

17. We are unaware of any Government promotion of the SDGs to children and young people, which could be done through inclusion in the national curriculum.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-environment-food-and-rural-affairs-single-departmental-plan/department-for-environment-food-and-rural-affairs-single-departmental-plan-may-2018>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-environment-food-and-rural-affairs-single-departmental-plan/department-for-environment-food-and-rural-affairs-single-departmental-plan#DEFRA2>

⁶

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/734352/defra-ara-2017-2018-web.pdf

18. Currently promotion appears to be left to charities and not for profit agencies, with Project Everyone⁷ taking a leading role. World's Largest Lesson 2018⁸, run by Project Everyone, commences September 24th and looks to introduce children and young people to the SDGs through providing teacher and family online learning resources.

What preparations are underway for the Voluntary National Review process, and how will the outcomes and impacts be measured?

19. Some data on goal indicators is available online at <https://sustainabledevelopment-uk.github.io/>. Currently not all indicators have been reported against. For example, under SDG 2, information on six out of 13 indicators has been reported online. The last Office for National Statistics report was released November 2017⁹. We are aware that the Department for International Development will be leading on producing the Government report on SDG progress and that they have already looked to engage stakeholders¹⁰.

Whether the Government can be said to have an action plan on the SDGs

20. The Government is clearly considering the SDGs, which is shown through inclusion in Single Departmental Plans. However, we are concerned that there is not sufficient oversight of delivery in place. Giving departments responsibility for delivery of SDGs risks important goals falling between policy silos.

21. The 25 Year Environment Plan stated that a cross-Whitehall Sustainable Development Forum had been set up. It is difficult to find any further information on the forum suggesting that it may not be as proactive as we would hope.

How does the Government take its commitment under the SDGs to address food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms into account when developing policy on food; is there the data to effectively measure progress against these commitments?

22. DEFRA recently consulted¹¹ on the future of food, farming and environmental support and is due to publish an Agriculture Bill setting out future policy direction. The consultation did not mention the Sustainable Development Goals despite the potential for future policy to deliver against several of the goals. However, it did indirectly touch on some SDG targets;

⁷ <https://www.project-everyone.org/>

⁸ <http://worldslargestlesson.globalgoals.org/>

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/sustainabledevelopmentgoalstakingstockprogressandpossibilities/november2017>

¹⁰ <https://www.ukssd.co.uk/news/measuring-up-authors>

¹¹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/684003/future-farming-environment-consult-document.pdf

productivity and income (2.3), research innovation (2.A) and integration of ecosystem values into planning (15.9).

23. The consultation focused mainly on the environment rather than social factors. Where social factors were considered this was in relation to farmers rather than wider society, for example whether upland farmers should be subject to a different support policy due to the unique economics of their enterprises. Income is included alongside productivity under SDG 2.3 so looking to address the income of upland farmers will contribute towards meeting this goal. However, given the dependence of many types of farmers on pillar one support we maintain that the supply chain and farmer profitability should be reviewed, which may contribute to SDG 2.C. A review of supply chain could also consider affordability to consumers.

24. The consultation did note the issue of food prices but only in as far as it stated an aim to “keep food affordable”. Food poverty is currently a surprisingly big issue in the UK. As a developed country we would expect the incidence of food insecurity to very low. However, in 2016 the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimated that 8.4 million Britons faced food insecurity in 2014. In recent years there have been numerous articles stating that this situation is worsening, with increasing reliance on food banks. However, food insecurity is not officially monitored making it difficult to understand its full extent and profile. MP Emma Lewell-Buck put forward a private members Food Insecurity Bill¹² in 2017 to look to address this, the Bill’s second reading is scheduled for October this year.

25. The inability to afford food can be caused by food being too expensive or incomes being insufficient, or a combination of both. Either way, food insecurity impacts on buying habits, with people buying cheaper, more artificial products. This has clear negative impacts on health and is linked to both obesity and malnutrition issues. Food insecurity can also link to environment through other aspects of SDG 2 and SDG 15 (ecosystems).

26. Cheap processed foods, such as crisps and biscuits, often come in non-recyclable plastic packaging contributing to waste problems, and demand for cheap food can drive less sustainable production practices. For example, intensive UK production as well as importation of cheap food from elsewhere, impacting on biodiversity, soil health and pollution levels. We do not believe the Government adequately considered the link between food affordability and environmental impact in its recent consultation.

¹² <https://services.parliament.uk/bills/2017-19/foodinsecurity.html>