

Debate on the Sustainable Development Goals

House of Lords

10 July 2019



KEY MESSAGES

- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an overarching framework cutting across environmental, economic and social goals. They are not an implementation plan and need to be translated into a domestic and local context. This means identifying which goals and levers are most appropriate for each place in meeting the UK's ambition to deliver the Agenda by 2030.
- The UK Government's Voluntary National Review has estimated that 65 per cent of the 169 targets set out by the SDGs need local involvement.ⁱ The Review singled out climate change and a sustainable approach to adult social care as urgent issues for local work. Councils have a vital role to play in the planning, implementation and monitoring of these and many other SDGs in local areas.
- The LGA passed a motion at its annual conference last week in support of the Goals and the promotion of the role of local government in delivering them.ⁱⁱ Several councils have already published a specific SDG agenda and many more are incorporating sustainability issues into the wide range of services they provide.
- The ability of local government to take the lead on SDGs is restricted by financial constraints on councils, a lack of devolved powers, challenges with monitoring and implementation and a lack of awareness of the agenda. A snapshot of this is research by Bristol, which shows that the Office of National Statistics can report on 64 per cent of SDG indicators, but at a UK city level they can only report on 17.2 per cent.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The Government should use the Spending Review and other key opportunities, such as the Queen's Speech, to place councils on a more sustainable footing. Our *Councils Can* proposal sets out how a new localism settlement could strengthen communities and allow them to deliver on the SDGs with locally-led public service reform.^{iv}

Briefing

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Background Information

The Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs provide an overarching framework to measure progress on environmental, economic and social sustainability policies. The SDGs are not an implementation plan and they will be applied differently between, and within, countries.

Given the breadth of the SDGs, they need to be translated into a domestic and local context, identifying those most appropriate for action in each place. This necessitates local political leadership and civic engagement.

Raising awareness of the SDGs and the role of local government will be a key component to their success. Simply imposing hard targets will not be effective and the SDGs should not be a means for Whitehall to impose top-down targets on councils. Over the past decade, the LGA has worked with Government to move from central government inspection and assessment of authorities towards a more effective sector-led improvement approach. This approach should be applied to implementation of the SDGs.^v

Local government leadership

Despite the ongoing challenges facing councils, they take the sustainable development agenda seriously. This has been shown by several trailblazers who have made widely publicised commitments to achieving the SDGs. Perhaps one the best known is Bristol, who have developed the Bristol One City plan outlining how they want to create “a fair, healthy and sustainable city by 2050”.^{vi} Each aspect of the delivery of the plan is mapped to the SDGs.

Other council areas who have explicitly addressed the SDGs include Kent, Redbridge, Coventry and Derby. All of these councils responded to the Voluntary National Review to highlight their efforts. The Greater London Authority has also for the last seventeen years sponsored the London Sustainability Commission. The Commission is currently in the process of exploring how its Quality of Life Indicators might be aligned to the SDGs and more generally the GLA is considering how its spatial framework, the London Plan, might more actively support progress towards the Goals.

While not every council has an explicit SDG policy, they are already incorporating sustainability issues into the wide range of services they provide. More than 70 councils in England have declared a ‘climate emergency’ and pledged to halve carbon emissions by 2030. Local areas are working within the context of the national industrial strategy have shown a renewed interest in the potential for creating inclusive or sustainable economies. Councils provide a wide range of services and their investment means local government will have an important role to play in the delivery of the goals and their associated targets.

A localised approach

A localised approach is vital to ensure a meaningful impact and few goals can be achieved solely through national action. The UK’s Voluntary National Review has estimated that 65 per cent of the 169 targets set out by the SDGs need local stakeholders to be involved in their creation and delivery. The Review singled out climate change and a sustainable approach to adult social care as particularly urgent issues for local focus.

As an example of this, SDG eight calls for ‘sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth’. Local government can contribute through local economic development strategies, appropriate fiscal decentralisation and devolved governance arrangements which harness the unique resources and opportunities in our local areas.

At the 2019 LGA General Assembly, we passed a motion in support of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals.^{vii} Local government has a vital role to play in terms of the planning, implementation and monitoring, work that will be key in delivering the UK's progress on meeting the ambitions of the Agenda by 2030.

At a local level councils can bring together partners to deliver leadership and direction on the specific environmental issues in the locality but local responses are likely to be determined by: the locally available datasets, a place specific process of civic and business engagement; locally-tailored set of priorities; and advocacy for the powers and resources in order to meet these priorities. For local government to reach its full potential in supporting Government's ambitions to deliver on the Goals, it must be properly funded and handed the relevant powers.

Constraints on local government

Environmental issues are likely to move further up the new Prime Minister's priorities and local government must play a key role in tackling them. However, their current ability to lead is impacted by the financial pressures on councils, a lack of devolved powers, challenges with monitoring implementation, limited cross-government support for this agenda and a lack of awareness within the sector of the benefits it can provide.

A snapshot of this is the challenges presented by monitoring the SDGs. Progress on the goals is to be monitored through a combination of Indicators and Targets. While the Office of National Statistics is able to report on 64 per cent of indicators, research by the University of Bristol has estimated that only 17.2 per cent is available at the UK city level.^{viii} ix This presents a real challenge to those authorities seeking to become involved in localising the SDGs.

Local involvement in the SDGs would also be supported by a more joined up and visible leadership role from national government, and a more coordinated approach to engagement beyond Whitehall. To strengthen commitment across Whitehall to meeting the SDGs, Government should review the use of the Single Departmental Plans and how the SDGs are prioritised within them.

In their 2019 inquiry the Environmental Audit Committee called on the government to 'do everything it can to support partners (government agencies, local government, civil society, business and the public) to contribute towards delivering the Goals'.^x The Government should use the Spending Review and other key opportunities, such as the Queen's Speech, to place councils on a more sustainable footing. Our *Councils Can* proposal sets out in depth how a new localism settlement could strengthen communities and local government.^{xi}

ⁱ Voluntary National Review, p16

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/813501/UK_VNR-web-accessible.pdf

ⁱⁱ Local Government Association

<http://lga.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s22163/Motion%20UN%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of National Statistics

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/sustainabledevelopmentgoalstakingstockprogressandpossibilities/november2018>

^{iv} Local Government Association Councils Can <https://www.local.gov.uk/spending-review-2019>

^v More information about reducing data burdens can be accessed from. www.local.gov.uk/reducing-data-burden

^{vi} Bristol One City Plan. Press release (January 2019). <https://bristolgreencapital.org/bristol-launches-first-ever-one-city-plan/>

^{vii} Local Government Association

<http://lga.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s22163/Motion%20UN%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals.pdf>

viii Office of National Statistics

(<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/sustainabledevelopmentgoalstakingstockprogressandpossibilities/november2018>)

ix This number is based on unpublished academic research carried out by Bristol that found: of the 244 indicators, only about 40 or so were applicable at the city level.

x Environmental Audit Committee

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvaud/1491/1491.pdf>

xi Local Government Association Councils Can <https://www.local.gov.uk/spending-review-2019>