



# The UK's Response to the SDGs in 2023

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## Foreword

We are at the half-way mark of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the Secretary General of the UN has asked member states for an honest assessment of their commitment. The UN has also asked for governments to consult with their national stakeholders, and since the UK government has decided against such a process, we are grateful to Dr Long and the researchers at Newcastle University for addressing the Secretary General's questions in these papers.

For those of us who have worked on the UK's implementation of the 2030 Agenda for the past 7 years, these papers clearly articulate what we have always believed to be true: simply that the UK government does not really value the Sustainable Development Goals enough to make decisions based on them. Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic has posed a significant challenge, but many of the reasons it impacted our societies so much were because of the lack of SDG implementation - from health systems strengthening to social safety nets to the lack of environmental protection. The research by Dr. Long and his team provides an empirical basis to support this argument. This is particularly regretful when we consider the leadership role that the UK played in 2015 in securing this transformative agenda.

A significant reason for the lack of institutional commitment to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is that there is no clear structure or process for decision-making. This is laid bare in paper 3, which is frankly brutal in its assessment of the UK's governance of the 2030 Agenda. On the measures used, the *minimum* score the UK could achieve is 33/80, and yet it only scored 41/80 in the researchers' assessment. For example, at the halfway deadline to meet the SDGs, the UK still lacks inter-ministerial coordination on the SDGs, no way of assessing policies for alignment to the SDGs, no effective monitoring system for evaluating impact on SDG progress, etc. The list goes on. The lack of overall governance architecture has led to incoherent decision making, a lack of awareness about the issues addressed by the SDGs, and an institutionalised unwillingness to address the challenges facing our economy, society, and environment in a joined-up way.

The impact of the lack of governance structures is starkly shown in papers 1 and 2, which map the flaws in the UK's approach to supporting the implementation of the SDGs in other countries, and the missed targets in addressing poverty in the UK itself. It cannot be underscored enough that behind the statistics and broad analysis are lost opportunities and people that have been pushed further behind. There are children and families that have had to go to bed hungry, and there are countries that have been grappling to cope with disasters exacerbated by climate change. The UK government's choice not to take the SDGs seriously is not simply a preference for a different policy framework, with sour grapes from those of

us who champion the SDGs, but a question of fundamental social justice; the lack of UK government action is to be challenged *because* it has real life impact on chronic poverty in the UK and around the world.

It is not all doom-and-gloom, as there are some clear recommendations about how the UK can get back on track. We have committed government officials, who truly care about the SDGs, a largely bought-in private sector, a third sector who are so often global leaders, engaged local authorities, and some of the world's leading academics. What we lack is political will from top leadership in government. So, we would encourage you to read and engage with the topics, but please take this main message away: we need a government that actually wants to address the challenges of the 2030 Agenda and seriously and meaningfully engages; without that, we will never be global leaders in sustainable development. We believe ultimately that the UK has the resources and capacity to turn the tide in making the next 7 years a turning point for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships and UK civil society remains steadfast in delivering on that vision.

*Lilei Chow (Save the Children) and Andrew Griffiths (Sightsavers), co-chairs of the Bond SDG Group*





## The UK's Response to the SDGs in 2023 - Executive Summary and Overview

In May 2023, The UN Secretary General (UNSG) released a paper with specific guidance and calls to action on the national and global commitments needed from states to support the SDGs at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>1</sup>

There are three elements to the UNSG's guidance:

- (1) states should identify and contribute to priority global actions to accelerate the SDGs
- (2) states should establish a domestic poverty benchmark for reducing poverty by 2030
- (3) states should make SDG achievement more central to national planning and oversight processes

In this set of three short, rapid-response papers, three research teams from Newcastle University analyse how the UK is placed to respond to each of these elements.

**Paper 1** addresses the UNSG's call for states to identify and contribute to priority global actions to accelerate the SDGs.

- There is no straightforward methodology to determine the most effective SDG accelerators or multipliers, and these will often be country-specific.
- Claims that the UK is acting to accelerate the SDGs - e.g. through aid priorities around climate action, education for girls, and food security - are welcome, but are undermined by a lack of engagement with the SDGs in UK reporting and the need to engage more with recipient country priorities.
- Recent UK commitments to global financial reform are welcome, but commit only to a limited set of piecemeal, market-led reforms.
- Debt relief and calls for structural reform towards greater equality in the global financial system are left unaddressed.

***We recommend that the UK (i) undertakes more detailed analysis of its global impacts in SDG terms, and (ii) engages with voices from the Global South around more radical reform of the global financial system.***

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<sup>1</sup> [UN Guidance Note on National Commitments](#)

**Paper 2** addresses the UNSG's call for states to establish a domestic poverty benchmark for reducing poverty (SDG target 1.2) by 2030.

- Poverty rates in the UK have shown no sign of reduction since 2015. Though poverty is a persistent problem for the UK, there is no UK benchmark (though the situation is different in Scotland and Wales).
- The DWP has responsibilities for poverty reduction, but its performance indicators miss the emphasis on multidimensional poverty in the SDG target.
- For child poverty, Scotland and Wales do have statutory benchmarks, but the DWP does not measure its performance in terms of child poverty.
- The recent Levelling Up White Paper does have time-bound SDG-relevant targets ('missions') that reflect aspects of multidimensional poverty.
- The Global SDG target - "reduce by half" could be considered a default for the UK given recent UK government recommitment to the Goals.
- The SDGs lend urgency to recent calls from Parliament for poverty targets and for a wider set of poverty metrics in the UK.

***We recommend that the UK respond by (i) deepening the Levelling Up strategy into a set of multi-dimensional poverty benchmarks and strategies that together (ii) address the "headline" ambition of the SDG poverty target in the UK whilst (iii) re-committing to new poverty metrics that can track these refined objectives and strategies.***

**Paper 3** addresses the UNSG's recommendation that states should shape their institutions of governance to better support the SDGs.

- An official global UN indicator (17.14.1) tracks countries' governance for the SDGs, focused around aspects of *Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD)*
- The UK performs poorly on this indicator (41/80 - 51%) - more poorly, on our analysis, than the Government's official evaluation of 55/80 (69%).
- Key gaps are apparent in the UK - the lack of a coordination body for the SDGs within government, and a mechanism for stakeholder engagement; an absence of frameworks and institutions to encourage and embed coherence across economic, social and environmental policies; and the absence of transparency and oversight around policy coherence across these 3 dimensions of sustainable development.
- There is positive practice amongst the UK's peers and partners in all of these areas.
- The absence of domestic institution-building for the SDGs calls into question the UK's stated commitment to the SDGs, misses an opportunity to enhance partnerships, and undermines global UK leadership.

***We recommend that the UK undertakes learning from partner countries and adopts tools and mechanisms, including those mentioned in the 2019 VNR, to strengthen policy coherence across government and enable engagement with stakeholders on the SDG***



# 1: The UK's contribution to accelerating global progress across the SDGs

*Neil Gumbs, Ayush Poolovadoo, Graham Long, Cemal Burak Tansel – Newcastle University*

## Introduction

The UN Secretary General (UNSG)'s guidance calls on states to “identify priority areas for SDG investment and priority policy changes that would yield the greatest multiplier effects across the goals.”

This paper addresses two key aspects of the UK's potential response to the UNSG's guidance. At the 2023 High Level Political Forum (HLPF), the Foreign Secretary James Cleverly identified “areas which will accelerate progress, like food security, health, renewable energy, and the empowerment of women and girls”<sup>2</sup> as top priorities, alongside climate action. The **first** section, then, examines UK activity around priority areas that could be said to accelerate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition, recent speeches, letters and announcements around the Paris Summit for a new global financing pact and the HLPF have focused on the UK's commitment to reform the global financial architecture. The **second** section takes a critical look at the UK's position around these aspects of global financial reform.

## (1) UK actions to accelerate SDG progress

The reinvigoration of progress towards the UN SDGs is a thematic priority in the UK Government's Integrated Review Refresh 2023.<sup>3</sup> In line with the UNSG's guidance, the Foreign Secretary suggested at the HLPF a range of areas in which the UK could accelerate progress, including food security, health, renewable energy, and the empowerment of

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<sup>2</sup> [Foreign Secretary's Speech - UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2023](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Integrated Review Refresh 2023](#)

women and girls. These themes also feature as “specific initiatives” and “overarching priorities” in the Integrated Review Refresh 2023.

The idea that certain actions could, through a range of multipliers and synergies across other policy areas, accelerate sustainable development more widely is a common response to the SDGs. It is widely established, for example, that educating women and girls could have a range of benefits across environment, economy and society.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, realisation of these benefits is contingent on removing context-specific inequalities and socio-economic, political and legal barriers. For example, globally, women enjoy only 77% of the legal rights that men do.<sup>5</sup> The positive effects of education on mobility and development are themselves contingent upon the extent to which states can sustainably fund social investment.<sup>6</sup>

Modelling policies’ potential acceleration and multiplier effects across the SDGs is important but difficult work. Though progress has been made, the ‘state of the art’ possesses important limitations. The UNDP’s ‘SDG Push’ methodology operates at a high level of generality to model the potential impact of different levels of investment on priority SDGs, but the generality means that there is little specific guidance on the form that investment, and the particular policy interventions it funds, should take.<sup>7</sup> Other models are focused around particular issues, making impacts easier to identify and evidence, but inevitably meaning that the wider impacts receive less attention. Much academic work has tried to assess the interlinkages between different SDG targets— and though progress has been made, these studies also find that understandings of interlinkages are often dependent on the particular ‘issue’ lens taken and very heavily influenced by context.<sup>8</sup>

There is a gap, then, between a UK pronouncement that development assistance in particular areas will accelerate progress, versus the detailed work needed to (i) understand the contextual factors that can influence impacts in national contexts, and (ii) analyse wider SDG linkages and impacts. Our initial investigation highlights potential challenges for the UK in both of these areas.

First, UK aid’s synergy with recipient countries’ priorities has been identified by a range of independent reporting as a weak point. The Centre for Global Development notes, for example “the UK does significantly worse than other donors on Indicator FI4, which looks at alignment of aid funding to recipient government priorities”.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation’s 2022 UK profile notes that the UK “used country-owned results frameworks and planning tools to a limited extent in 2018, a

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<sup>4</sup> [World Bank - Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls](#)

<sup>5</sup> [World Bank - Women, Business and the Law 2023](#), pxiii

<sup>6</sup> Heike Solga, ‘Education, economic inequality and the promises of the social investment state’, *Socio-Economic Review*, 12:2 (2014), pp. 269–297.

<sup>7</sup> [UNDP Data Platform SDG Accelerator](#)

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g. Nilsson et al. 2022 [Interlinkages, Integration and Coherence](#)

<sup>9</sup> [CGDEV – UK aid quality indicators \(2018\)](#)



decline when compared to 2016, and below the DAC average”.<sup>10</sup> Without alignment and coordination with recipient country strategies and policies, SDG acceleration benefits are unlikely to be fully realised (or fully captured in the metrics of National Statistics Services).

Second, the FCDO’s 2021-22 Outcome Delivery Plan does a poor job of mapping the impacts of UK aid in terms of the SDGs—and this team of researchers could find no other detailed work to supplement it. For example, beyond an assertion that the UK is a “leading advocate” for the SDGs, there are only two mentions of the SDGs in FCDO’s 316-page 2022-23 Annual Report and Accounts.<sup>11</sup> This means the detailed connection of UK development assistance to SDG acceleration has not really been made. The Outcome Delivery Plan lists a number of SDG goals and targets against its aid priority outcome, but offers no greater specificity than that.<sup>12</sup> There are also some strange omissions—for example, though the UK’s commitment to ocean biodiversity is held up elsewhere as an example of UK leadership,<sup>13</sup> SDG 14 on Oceans is not mentioned as an impacted Goal. Likewise, the UK notes sustainable agriculture as an important priority,<sup>14</sup> but then omits the relevant SDG target (2.4) whilst including others from the same Goal (SDG 2). In looking at how the UK accelerates the SDGs, more attention could also be paid to the UK’s negative spillovers—ways in which the UK’s domestic and trade policies threaten sustainable development elsewhere. The 2023 SDG Index report ranks the UK towards the very worst (142<sup>nd</sup> of 166 countries) for its global negative impacts.<sup>15</sup> This strengthens the need for coordinated policymaking, a theme examined in Paper 3.

The UK’s commitment to climate funding is important. The urgency is clear: the World Bank’s ‘Poverty and Shared Prosperity Report 2020’ estimates that if climate change remains unaddressed more than 130 million people in the Global South will be forced into poverty by 2030.<sup>16</sup> In 2020, the initial target year of the US\$100 billion goal under the UNFCCC, total climate finance provided and mobilised by developed countries for developing countries remained US\$16.7 billion short of that goal.<sup>17</sup> Given that commitments have not been met, the agreement by world leaders that “collective climate-finance goals must be met in 2023”<sup>18</sup> is welcome, but not a transformative statement in the absence of clearly-implemented political action.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> [GPEDC - UK 2022 country profile](#)

<sup>11</sup> [FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2022 to 2023](#)

<sup>12</sup> [FCDO Outcome Delivery Plan: 2021 to 2022](#)

<sup>13</sup> [UK Government - Global Ocean Alliance: 30 countries are now calling for greater ocean protection](#)

<sup>14</sup> E.g. [UK Government: UK presses for further progress on global food security at G20](#)

<sup>15</sup> [SDG Index Sustainable Development Report 2023](#)

<sup>16</sup> [World Bank Group - Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020](#), p12

<sup>17</sup> [OECD - Aggregate Trends of Climate Finance Provided and Mobilised by Developed Countries in 2013-2020](#), p5

<sup>18</sup> [‘A green transition that leaves no one behind’ Emmanuel Macron, Mia Mottley, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Ursula von der Leyen, Charles Michel, Olaf Scholz, Fumio Kishida, William Ruto, Macky Sall, Cyril Ramaphosa, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Rishi Sunak and Joe Biden](#)

<sup>19</sup> [UNCTAD, 2022](#)

The continued squeeze on the UK aid budget as a result of in-donor refugee spend, and its implications for these climate commitments should be noted as a challenge for this funding.<sup>20</sup> The UK is pledged to deliver £11.6bn of climate finance between 2021–22 and 2025–6. However, a government document widely reported on in July indicates that this commitment is under severe pressure due to high in-donor refugee costs.<sup>21</sup> Despite government assurances, this squeeze might yet present a barrier to achieving the UK’s climate finance commitments, or else mean that other efforts to accelerate SDG achievement will be compromised in the effort to meet this climate commitment.

## **(2) The UK commitment to a “better, fairer international financial system”**

The UK’s focus on reform of the global financial system is one way in which a wider impact on the SDGs might be achieved. Through a series of announcements (e.g., the open letter signed by the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and other world leaders), and the detailed priority areas in the Integrated Review Refresh, the UK has expressed a vision to “build a bigger, better and fairer international financial system”.<sup>22</sup>

The focus on restructuring of the global financial architecture and the potential impacts on the SDGs appears a significant change in emphasis from the FCDO’s 2021–22 Outcome Delivery Plan, which makes no reference to SDG targets around systemic global reform—for example, world agricultural markets (SDG target 2.b), regulation of global financial markets (10.5), increased voice for developing countries in international institutions (10.6), or tackling global tax evasion (16.4)—in its ‘development’ outcome (PO1) SDG mapping.

The UNSG observed in 2022 that “today’s global financial system was created by rich countries to serve their interests many decades ago. It expands and entrenches inequalities. It requires deep structural reform”.<sup>23</sup> This represents not only a widely-shared view among policymakers in the Global South, but also, increasingly, among their counterparts in the North. International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and the global financial system as a whole have long been recognised by political economists and development scholars as imperfect actors to deliver structural and sustainable development to the global majority.<sup>24</sup> In recent years, the increasingly visible limits of the dominant market-led and piecemeal policy responses to climate breakdown have exacerbated these criticisms and led to popular calls

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<sup>20</sup> [Government response to the Independent Commission on Aid Impact’s review of UK aid funding for refugees in the UK, March 2023](#)

<sup>21</sup> [UK planning to drop £11.6bn climate pledge, says leaked note \(telegraph.co.uk\)](#); [Revealed: UK plans to drop flagship £11.6bn climate pledge \(The Guardian\)](#); [Memo reveals pressure on UK climate finance pledge \(BBC News\)](#)

<sup>22</sup> [UK Government – UK to mobilise \\$40 billion for global infrastructure investment](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Secretary-General's address to the General Assembly, 2022](#)

<sup>24</sup> Stiglitz, J. E. (2004) ‘Capital-market liberalization, globalization, and the IMF’, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 20(1), pp. 57-71.; [Paul Cammack \(2004\) What the World Bank means by poverty reduction, and why it matters: New Political Economy: Vol 9, No 2](#)

to restructure global finance. SDG targets 10.5 and 10.6 address these calls for more tightly regulated, equitable, representative and legitimate global financial institutions and markets. However, the proposed response of the government—and indeed the New Global Financial Pact arising from the June 2023 Paris Summit—leans heavily into a continuation of the mixed-funding approach that aims to shore up multilateral development initiatives with private capital, rather than more radical reform.<sup>25</sup> In line with existing public-private partnership models and strategies, such as the World Bank's 'Cascade' approach, this mixed-funding model is centred on a 'private sector first' perspective that aims to support green transition efforts by mobilising new streams of income, rather than systematic attempts to radically reconfigure global finance—e.g., by overhauling regulatory systems to tackle the unequal ownership and distribution of key assets.

A key shortcoming in the mixed-model approach is the funders' silence on existing, pressing issues of debt servicing and refinancing that many climate-precarious countries face today. While the Paris Summit reiterated the importance of integrating climate-specific relief clauses in future loans, there was no comprehensive strategy to address the existing debt crisis. After a decade of private and IFI-led lending, developing countries' debt burden stood at an average of 61.8 per cent of GDP in 2020, approximately a quarter of which (US\$1.9 trillion) was amassed during the pandemic.<sup>26</sup> In 2022, 74 low-income countries spent an estimated US\$35 billion to service their existing debt to bilateral and private-sector lenders.<sup>27</sup> In addition to interest rate rises in high-income countries and related currency dynamics, projected figures suggest that developing countries, apart from China, will have to spend \$2.4 trillion per year by 2030 to fund substantial green transition projects.<sup>28</sup> As such, the existing debt obligations are guaranteed to present major challenges to meaningful transition efforts in the most vulnerable countries.

The position of low-income countries (as represented by the G77+China bloc) outlines a more expansive account of what a "better and fairer" global system requires—greater voice for low-income countries; reform of the IMF and World Bank; comprehensive debt restructuring; a more expansive financial "SDG stimulus" package; and stronger international cooperation on tax.<sup>29</sup> It is not currently clear to this team of researchers how far the government's approach goes towards meeting this broader agenda.

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<sup>25</sup> On reliance on private capital, see Basil Oberholzer, 'Moving Forward When There Are No Dollars: A Guide to Public Investment in Face of the Balance-of-Payments Constraint', *Review of Political Economy* (2023).

<sup>26</sup> Eurodad, [Outlook 2021: effective multilateralism under the UN will be crucial](#)

<sup>27</sup> Masood Ahmed and Niki Baroy, (2022) ['A Spiraling Debt Crisis, LICs, and SIDS'](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Report of the Independent High-Level Expert Group on Climate Finance 2022](#), p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Synthesised from G77 statement at the 2023 [High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#), and the [Ministerial Declaration](#) of the G77s 2021 annual meeting, and the [Outcome Document](#) of the G77's 2022 Ministerial Conference on Achieving the SDGs.

## Conclusion

It seems clear that UK’s analysis of ways in which its development assistance can best accelerate the SDGs is not currently very detailed - even before analysis of the UK’s global spillover effects are examined and factored in to a more comprehensive overall picture of how the UK is accelerating (or not) global SDG achievement.

The UK’s position on global reform, too, appears short on substance that would address the relevant SDG commitments or speak to the position of low-income countries. The current consultation around the UK’s International Development White Paper seems to acknowledge this, asking how to “regain the trust of the global South” and “listen better to those most in need”.<sup>30</sup>

We recommend that, in response to the UNSG’s guidance, the UK (i) undertakes more detailed analysis of its global impacts in SDG terms, and (ii) engages with voices from the Global South— including with civil society organisations and social movement representatives—around a more transformative reform of the global financial system to help developing countries achieve green transition objectives.

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<sup>30</sup> [UK international development white paper: call for evidence](#)



## 2: A 2030 SDGs benchmark for poverty in the UK

*Gabrielle Joyce and Graham Long, Newcastle University*

“Countries are encouraged to put forward an ambitious national benchmark for reducing poverty and inequality between now and 2030 at the Summit. Such a benchmark would serve... as a key marker of national SDG ambition alongside other targets, such as those included in Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement.” – *UNSG’s Guidance, May 2023*

### Introduction

This paper addresses the second of the UNSG’s recommendations for UN member states ahead of the SDG summit in September – that they identify a national poverty benchmark to focus poverty reduction efforts in the run-up to 2030.

The UK, as a whole, currently has no such benchmark, though Scotland and Wales do have relevant national objectives. This briefing paper takes stock of the UK’s position in response to this recommendation, in three sections. In the **first** section, we summarise the current situation regarding poverty in the UK. The **second** section looks at the responsible government ministry in the UK and their current performance targets and metrics, alongside relevant targets in Scotland and Wales. The **third**, longest, section canvasses three potential components of a way forward for the UK in response to the UNSG’s recommendations: (a) we identify the time-bound missions in the UK government’s levelling up strategy, map them against the SDGs, and highlight where they intersect with a commitment to reducing multidimensional poverty; (b) given the renewed UK commitment to the SDGs, and building off the targets of the ‘levelling up’ agenda, we show what the global ambition would look like if applied in the context of the UK, and (c) we show how the Secretary General’s call, and the SDGs more broadly, support recent critical perspectives on target-setting and the measurement of poverty in the UK.

## (1) Context: the SDGs and poverty in the UK

The key SDG target for the UK in respect of poverty is:

*1.2: By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions.*<sup>31</sup>

The UK government standardly measures poverty in terms of relative and absolute low income, before and after housing costs.<sup>32</sup> Relative low income refers to people living in households with income below 60% of the contemporary median income; absolute low income indexes this to a base year, usually 2010/11.

On the available data (which does not fully reflect recent rises in the cost of living) there has been no progress towards this target in the UK since the commencement of the SDGs in 2015. In 2015/16, 16% of people in the UK were in 'relative low income' - living in households with less than 60 percent of contemporary median household income before housing costs; in 2021/22, this figure was 17%. In terms of recent changes, from 2020-21 to 2021-22, the percentage of individuals in relative low income increased both before and after housing costs. Housing costs are an important component of poverty in the UK: whilst 13% of people in the UK were in absolute low income before housing costs in 2021/22, this figure rises to 17% after housing costs.<sup>33</sup>

Financial measures of poverty are one part of a larger picture of multidimensional poverty - poverty "in all its dimensions" - addressed by SDG target 1.2. In 2021/22, 1.7 million people in relative low income before housing costs lived in food insecure households (households with either low or very low food security), including 600,000 children.<sup>34</sup> People in poverty are more likely to have poor physical and mental health, and low life and health satisfaction. Families in poverty are more likely to have no members with formal qualifications and no adult members with a qualification equal to or above five GCSEs graded A\*-C. More people below the poverty line feel unsafe walking home at night.<sup>35</sup>

The impacts of the cost of living crisis (but also some longer-term legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic), have not yet been seen in the most recent figures, with the latest data being for 2021/22. It is clear, though, that the cost of living crisis has exacerbated the challenges of poverty in the UK. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), for example, forecasted in March 2023 that 'real household disposable income per person... will fall by a cumulative 5.7% over 2022/23 and 2023/24', mainly due to the rise of energy prices and prices of other goods that the UK imports. The OBR expects real disposable household income per person to still be below pre-pandemic levels by 2027/28.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> [Goal 1 – UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Poverty in the UK: Statistics - House of Commons Library, p5](#)

<sup>33</sup> [Poverty in the UK: Statistics - House of Commons Library](#)

<sup>34</sup> [Poverty in the UK: Statistics - House of Commons Library, p61](#)

<sup>35</sup> [Examples drawn from Poverty in the UK: Statistics - House of Commons Library, p65](#)

<sup>36</sup> [Poverty in the UK: Statistics - House of Commons Library](#)

Child poverty is also addressed by SDG target 1.2. 1.6 million children were in relative low income and material deprivation in 2021/22- 7% of children in the UK. Countries, in committing to the SDGs, pledge to “leave no one behind” and to focus efforts on tackling inequality and disadvantage across geography and between social groups. Reflecting this aspect of the SDG agenda, it is important to note that poverty in the UK is distributed unequally, both in geographical terms and across social groups.

In terms of *spatial* inequalities, the regions of England with the highest percentage of the population in relative low income are the West Midlands (27% in 2021/22 after housing costs), the North East (25%) and London (25%). On a ‘before housing costs basis’, Yorkshire and the Humber, had the highest rate of persistent low income (13%) and London (6%) and the South East (6%) had the lowest rates (2019/20 to 2021/22). On an after-housing costs basis, London had the highest rate (16%) and Northern Ireland had the lowest (9%).<sup>37</sup>

In terms of inequalities between *populations*, **children, youth, and older persons** are the most vulnerable age groups, with 20% of children and 18% of pensioners in relative low income, compared to 15% of working-age adults (2021/22).<sup>38</sup> The proportion of people in relative low income before housing costs (BHC) was 20% for families where someone is **disabled**, compared to 15% for people living in families where no one is disabled.<sup>39</sup> There are differences, too, in how poverty intersects with **ethnicity**: in 2021 data, individuals with a White head of household had lower rates of persistent low income (8%) than those with an Asian/ Asian British head of household (15%) or a Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British head of household (10%).<sup>40</sup>

## (2) Government responsibilities and performance metrics for poverty - the Department for Work and Pensions

The UK government “is committed to a sustainable, long-term approach to tackling poverty” in the UK.<sup>41</sup> In particular, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is responsible for “dealing with the causes of poverty”.<sup>42</sup> As part of the UK’s response to the SDGs, the DWP’s 2021-22 Outcome Delivery Plan is mapped against SDG targets, with Outcomes 1 and 3 identified as relevant to SDG target 1.2.<sup>43</sup>

Target 1.2 is measured by two global SDG indicators:

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<sup>37</sup> [Poverty in the UK: Statistics - House of Commons Library](#), p49, 51.

<sup>38</sup> [Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2022](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Poverty in the UK: Statistics - House of Commons Library](#), p44

<sup>40</sup> [Income Dynamics: income movements and the persistence of low income, 2010 to 2021](#)

<sup>41</sup> [Children in poverty: Measurements and targets: Government Response to the Committee’s Third Report - Work and Pensions Committee](#)

<sup>42</sup> [Department for Work and Pensions](#)

<sup>43</sup> [Department for Work and Pensions Outcome Delivery Plan: 2021 to 2022](#)

1.2.1- *Proportion of population living below the national poverty line, by sex and age.*

1.2.2- *Proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions.*

The DWP measures progress on Outcome 3 - 'Priority outcome 3: Address poverty through enabling progression in the workforce and increasing financial resilience' - through two indicators. The first of these, 'absolute poverty before housing costs', is an appropriate national counterpart to SDG indicator 1.2.1. However, the DWP does not measure *multidimensional* poverty, as in SDG indicator 1.2.2 – something that has been identified as a weakness (see section 3 below). It should be noted, too, that the DWP link for its reporting on this indicator is out of date, linking only to the 2018 dataset.<sup>44</sup>

The second DWP metric for its outcome on "addressing poverty" is the "number of children in workless households". This metric perhaps reflects the government's position that work is the best route out of poverty.<sup>45</sup> The statistics given in the 2021/22 report show a decrease in the number of children in workless households, though this positive trend has been reversed in the most recent data. However, this is not itself a metric of child poverty, most obviously because the majority of children in poverty live in households where one or more parents are in work.<sup>46</sup> A much broader array of data is available on UK child poverty, but this data is, to our knowledge, not a performance indicator for any government department.<sup>47</sup>

### **Child poverty benchmarks in the devolved administrations**

In contrast to the UK Government, devolved administrations in the UK *do* have poverty benchmarks already, at least for child poverty. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 sets out targets to reduce the proportion of children in poverty by 2030 and progress towards this target is reported annually.<sup>48</sup> The four targets established in that Act - relative poverty, absolute poverty, low income, and material deprivation - are all in line with or exceed the global SDG ambition when comparing 2030 targets to 2015 benchmarks, and constitute appropriate benchmarks in response to the Secretary General's recommendation.<sup>49</sup> As of December 2019, Wales has five key poverty benchmarks focusing on young people in relative income poverty.<sup>50</sup> The most recent report in 2022 showcases work towards the five goals and highlights five new aims.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> [Households below average income: 1994/95 to 2016/17 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) – the link should be to [Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>45</sup> [Children in poverty: Measurements and targets: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report - Work and Pensions Committee](#)

<sup>46</sup> On 2021/22 figures, 31% of children in relative low income lived in workless households; 69% in households where all or at least one adults worked – [Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2022](#), table 4.3db.

<sup>47</sup> The 2021 Work and Pensions Committee Inquiry (see below) similarly recommended a wider, consolidated dashboard of child poverty statistics: [Children in poverty: Measurement and targets](#)

<sup>48</sup> [Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2019-22](#)

<sup>49</sup> [Child poverty summary - Scotland](#)

<sup>50</sup> [Child-poverty strategy for Wales](#)

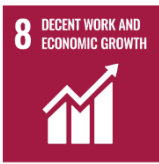

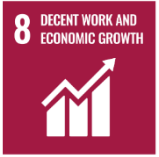


<sup>51</sup> [Child poverty strategy: 2022 progress report](#)









### (3) Ways forward for the UK






#### 3.1: Levelling up and the SDGs

The recent Levelling Up the UK White Paper identifies a set of ‘missions’ – timebound objectives – addressing regional disparities in the UK.<sup>52</sup> Though it does not otherwise mention the SDGs, the White Paper notes a similarity with the “mission-based” approach of the SDGs, and makes the case for the distinctive value of such an approach (p118). Table 1, below, maps these missions against SDG Goals and especially salient Targets:

The 12 ‘Missions’	SDG	Relevant SDG Targets
1. By 2030, pay, employment and productivity will have risen in every area of the UK, with each containing a globally competitive city, with the gap between the top performing and other areas closing.	 	8.2 Achieve higher levels of economic productivity... 8.3 Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation... 8.5 By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men... 10.1 By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average
2. By 2030, domestic public investment in Research & Development outside the Greater Southeast will increase by at least 40% and at least one third over the Spending Review period, with that additional government funding seeking to leverage at least twice as much private sector investment over the long term to stimulate innovation and productivity growth.	 	(8.3 again) 9.5 Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries... by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers...
3. By 2030, local public transport connectivity across the country will be significantly closer to the standards of London, with improved services,		11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons

<sup>52</sup> [Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper](#), p120

<p>simpler fares and integrated ticketing.</p>		
<p>4. By 2030, the UK will have nationwide gigabit-capable broadband and 4G coverage, with 5G coverage for the majority of the population.</p>		<p>9.c Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020</p>
<p>5. By 2030, the number of primary school children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths will have significantly increased. In England, this will mean 90% of children will achieve the expected standard, and the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the worst performing areas will have increased by over a third.</p>		<p>4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes</p> <p>4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations</p>
<p>6. By 2030, the number of people successfully completing high-quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK. In England, this will lead to 200,000 more people successfully completing high-quality skills training annually, driven by 80,000 more people completing courses in the lowest skilled areas.</p>	 	<p>4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship</p> <p>8.6 By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training</p>
<p>7. By 2030, the gap in Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE) between local areas where it is highest and lowest will have narrowed, and by 2035 HLE will rise by 5 years.</p>		<p>3.4 By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being</p> <p>3.5 Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol</p>
<p>8. By 2030, well-being will have improved in every area of the UK, with the gap between</p>		<p>3.4 By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being</p>

top performing and other areas closing.		10.3 Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard
9. By 2030, pride in place, such as people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between the top performing and other areas closing.	 	11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage  11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities  17.17 Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships
10. By 2030, renters will have a secure path to ownership with the number of first-time buyers increasing in all areas; and the government's ambition is for the number of non-decent rented homes to have fallen by 50%, with the biggest improvements in the lowest performing areas.		11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums
11. By 2030, homicide, serious violence, and neighbourhood crime will have fallen, focused on the worst-affected areas.		16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
12. By 2030, every part of England that wants one will have a devolution deal with powers at or approaching the highest level of devolution and a simplified, long-term funding settlement.	 	11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries  16.6 Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels 16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels

*Table 1: Levelling up missions mapped against the SDGs*

The mapping of the levelling up missions in Table 1 above, is a useful first step for understanding the alignment between these two mission-based frameworks. The mapping is, overall, easy and successful: these national missions can be mapped straightforwardly

onto the SDG targets across a whole range of Goals, reinforcing the domestic relevance of the SDGs for the UK.

Like the SDGs, the missions for the UK offer differing levels of ambition and different degrees of specificity. Some of the levelling up targets offer more specific and measurable language than the global SDG targets - e.g. on education (mission 5): if linked to the SDGs, these might constitute national benchmarks that squarely reflect and adapt global SDG targets to the UK national level. In other cases, the ambition is much less specific – often not specifying the desired improvement (e.g. missions 8, 9, 11). The target on national 5G coverage is unambitious - arguably achieved at the time of the strategy's launch - whilst the target that 90% of children in England will achieve the expected standard requires a very steep improvement from the current level of 59%.

The SDGs offer a useful framework for considering whether these ambitions are the right ones, but also how they synergise with other potential societal objectives or where there might be tensions, trade-offs, or other relationships.

Thinking about the levelling up missions from an SDG perspective also allows us to identify areas that are clearly missing. Significantly, there are no mentions of the environment in any of the UK's missions, posing the question of how these connect to the UK's environmental ambitions. It is striking, for example, that there is no mission on green growth or a just transition. An SDG framework can help make these connections - for example, SDG 12 connects 'pride in place' and wellbeing to access to green space; SDGs 8, 9 and 12 connect research and development and productivity growth to ideas of green growth, decoupling and just transition.

## The levelling up missions and multidimensional poverty

Aspects of the levelling up missions clearly address elements of multidimensional poverty such as local crime, skills, housing, health, and access to transport. They might offer an alternative or supplement to the DWP metrics as a framework of targets and indicators for measuring progress on poverty in the UK. But the missions currently do not draw this link. As a rough indicator, across the 332-page document, the term poverty is only mentioned 9 times (five of these in the context of fuel poverty). The effects of these different missions, and their relationships with dimensions of poverty, are not systematically considered.

One response, then, to the UN's recommendation to establish a poverty benchmark would be to highlight the potential relevance of these missions as time-bound benchmarks tracking aspects of poverty, whilst carrying out a further, systematic analysis of what these amounted to in terms of poverty and inequality reduction. The SDGs could be a useful vehicle for that analysis.

### *3.2: Adopting the global target as the UK benchmark*

A second, complementary approach to a UK poverty benchmark is indicated by the statement in the letter co-signed by the Prime Minister that “we are still far from achieving *our* United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030”. The Foreign Secretary's speech at the HLPF similarly notes that “we are on course to miss a staggering 88% of the targets we set” (*italics added*).<sup>53</sup>

Given this indication of a firm UK commitment to the targets of the SDGs, and the absence of any other national target, the UK can be regarded as adopting the global poverty target of the SDGs, to “reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions”. **In the UK context, this means a reduction from 16% of individuals in the UK to 8%, and from 20% of children to 10% of children** – in addition to more detailed analysis of particular disadvantaged groups and dimensions of poverty.

Clearly, in the context of - at best - no improvement in this figure over the first half of the SDGs, this is a challenging target, though some aspects of the levelling up missions seem to be similarly ambitious.

### *3.3: Towards multidimensional targets and metrics for the UK*

Lastly, it is important to note ways in which the SDGs intersect with recent policy recommendations around two key themes from parliament and other stakeholders on poverty in the UK – (i) the value of poverty targets (such as this benchmark) and (ii) the importance of broader measures of multidimensional poverty.

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<sup>53</sup> [Foreign Secretary's Speech: UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2023](#)

On poverty **targets**, a 2021 Work and Pensions Committee Inquiry considered the role that child poverty targets can play, noting that targets can help to “focus minds”. The Committee recommended that “The Government must also be committed to reducing child poverty, with a clear strategy which is supported by measurable objectives and strong delivery plans. As part of a new cross-departmental strategy, the Government should set clear, ambitious and measurable objectives and plans for reducing child poverty.”<sup>54</sup> The UNSG’s call for a national, multidimensional poverty benchmark reinforces this recommendation. It seems clear that the current DWP metrics do not fulfill this role, in respect of child poverty or poverty more generally.

On poverty **metrics**, as of March 2023, DWP is resuming work (which had been suspended) to develop experimental statistics to strengthen the evidence base on poverty in the UK in response to the 2018 report of the Social Metrics Commission.<sup>55</sup> This call for better poverty metrics is echoed in the 2021 Work and Pensions Committee report on child poverty. Given that government progress on these statistics seems somewhat uncertain, it is useful to note that the specific focus on multidimensional poverty, and the broader interlinked and disaggregated agenda of the SDGs, again supports this direction of travel.

## Conclusion

The UK, then, does not have a poverty benchmark for 2030 (though this picture is importantly different for Scotland and Wales), but this paper has shown three strands through which the government could respond positively to the UNSG’s recommendation.

We recommend that the UK respond by (i) developing and deepening the Levelling Up strategy into a set of multidimensional poverty benchmarks and strategies that together (ii) address the “headline” ambition of the SDG poverty target in the UK whilst (iii) re-committing to new poverty metrics that can track these refined objectives and strategies.

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<sup>54</sup> [Children in poverty: Measurement and targets](#)

<sup>55</sup> [Development of a new measure of poverty: statistical notice](#)



## 3: UK institutions for the SDGs – an assessment using SDG indicator 17.14.1

*Kipp Mann Benn, John Davis and Graham Long, Newcastle University*

### Introduction

The third recommendation of the Secretary General is that countries should “make SDG achievement a more central focus in national planning and oversight mechanisms” and “align domestic budgets and financing with the SDGs”.

To address this guidance from the UNSG, the aim of this paper is to undertake an assessment of the UK’s current national institutional response to the SDGs. It uses, as its method, the metric for policy coherence in SDG governance developed by UN Environment Programme (with the OECD and UN-DESA) as indicator 17.14.1 of the SDGs.<sup>56</sup> *Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development* - the idea that policies across economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development, domestic and international, are coordinated and mutually supportive - is a key principle of the SDGs. The multipart indicator developed by UNEP in response is deliberately broad, aiming to track diverse country efforts at institution building in support of the SDGs. The inclusive, broad, and globally accepted nature of this indicator make it a suitable basis for assessing the UK’s governance.

The key finding of this paper is that the UK, on this metric, scores 41/80 (51%), reflecting the absence of multiple key facets of SDG governance. This score, based on an independent assessment of information in the public domain by two assessors, is significantly lower than the UK government’s self-assessment - 68.8% (55/80). The main reasons for the low score are that the UK has not established institutions and mechanisms in response to the SDGs – notably cross-government SDG coordination bodies and mechanisms for generating and monitoring policy coherence. Despite the absence of *specific* elements of a governance response in the UK, *general* features of the UK’s democratic system make a significant contribution to the score. The score of 41/80 should be understood in the context that the lowest possible score for a legitimate, well-functioning government that committed to the SDGs in 2015 is 33/80.

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<sup>56</sup> [UNEP - methodology for indicator 17.14.1](#)

Indicator 17.14.1 is imperfect in some respects and scoring is open to a degree of interpretation. Yet the twin focuses of this indicator – *coherent policymaking* that leverages synergies and avoids undercutting SDG progress across policy domains and borders, and *effective national governance mechanisms* that institutionalise the commitment to the SDGs - are globally acknowledged as vital. Like the indicator this paper is built around, this paper aims to offer insight into the governance agenda for the SDGs and promote debate on how best to respond, highlighting good practice across the world.

The paper has three main sections. In the **first**, we briefly address the methodology for our analysis. In the **second**, we present the results and offer some notes to explain our scoring. In the **third**, we offer a discussion of the results that concentrates on the significance of the score, and the absences identified. In particular, we highlight relevant good practice amongst the UK's partners that the UK might learn from.

## (1) Methodology

The approach for the paper is taken from SDG indicator 17.14.1 and the supporting metadata and methodology, built around 8 'elements', each with a set of scoring 'components'. In line with the spirit of the methodology, the assessors deliberately took a charitable approach to where general governance processes counted as addressing these elements. Nevertheless, a degree of sustainable development-, SDG- and PCSD-specificity was required at points, in line with UNEP's detailed guidance on the method.

Though the UK government has reported on this indicator in 2023, the detailed scoring by elements and components is not publicly available at the time of writing.<sup>57</sup> In line with the approach noted on the ONS' SDG web page for this indicator, key government documents on the UK's response to the SDGs were used as the basis for the assessment.

The assessors took the decision to exclude mechanisms that have been adopted by the devolved administrations, notably in Scotland and Wales (such as Wales' Commissioner for Future Generations or Scotland's SDG-aligned National Performance Framework) – it was unclear whether the UK's own reporting takes the same approach. Because approaches in these devolved administrations are notably more responsive on some of the elements and components scored below, the assessors project with high confidence that these administrations would score more highly if treated separately.

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<sup>57</sup> [ONS - Indicator 17.14.1 - Number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development - U.K. Indicators For The Sustainable Development Goals](#)



## (2) Results

**UK Overall score: 41/80**

*Scores coded green for full, or greater than half the available score; amber for half or less of available score, and red for score of 0.*

Element	Scoring components	UK score
1. Institutionalized political commitment	Political commitment expressed/endorsed by the highest level (5 points)	5
	Additional specific commitments (1 point each, maximum of 5 points): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set timelines for the achievement of policy coherence objectives;</li> <li>• A dedicated budget;</li> <li>• Defined roles and responsibilities;</li> <li>• Regular reporting mechanism;</li> <li>• Explicit consideration of international commitments;</li> <li>• Other nationally relevant commitment.</li> </ul>	1 1
2. Long-term considerations	Long-term objectives going beyond the current electoral cycle included in national strategies (5 points)	5
	Additional specific mechanisms (1 point each, maximum of 5 points): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1)A commissioner, council or ombudsperson for future generations;</li> <li>(2)Other mechanisms of scrutiny or oversight on possible future effects;</li> <li>(3)Mechanisms for regular appraisal of policies;</li> <li>(4)Impact assessment mechanisms; and</li> <li>(5)Other nationally relevant factors.</li> </ol>	1
3. Inter- ministerial and cross-sectoral coordination	National mechanism for regular coordination (5 points)	0
	Additional elements (maximum of 5 points): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1)A mandate to make decisions regarding trade-offs (2 points);</li> <li>(2)Coordination body is convened by a centralized government body (1 point);</li> <li>(3)Coordination at both political level and technical level (1 point);</li> <li>(4)Mandate for aligning internal and external policies (1 point);</li> <li>(5)Other nationally relevant mechanism (1 point).</li> </ol>	2
4. Participatory processes	Relevant stakeholders are consulted at the early stages of development of laws, policies, plans, etc.	5
	Additional elements (scored as follows, up to 5 points total): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1)Consultations take place in a comprehensive manner at various stages of the policy cycle (1 point);</li> <li>(2)Institutions disclose the rationale for not including inputs from consultations (2 points);</li> <li>(3)An accountability mechanism that allows public intervention (2 points).</li> </ol>	1 2
5. Integration of the three dimensions of Sustainable Development, assessment of policy effects and linkages	A mechanism for assessing and addressing issues in terms of the contribution of a policy (new or existing) to broader sustainable development, including transboundary elements. (5 points)	0

	Additional mechanisms (1 point each, maximum of 5 points): (1)The application of the above mechanisms at all levels of government; (2)An indicator framework for tracking policy effectiveness towards sustainable development; (3)Cost-benefit analysis of policy impacts across all sectors; (4)The identification of measures to mitigate potentially negative effects and to optimize synergies as part of policy and planning; (5)The consideration of international spill-overs, such as cross- border and international impacts; and (6)Other nationally relevant mechanisms.	0
6. Consultation and coordination across government levels	Any of following mechanisms (5 points each, full 10 points for any two of the four mechanisms): (1)Mechanisms to systematically collect the inputs of sub-national government entities; (2)Arrangements for regular formal exchange between central government and subnational levels; (3)Mechanisms to ensure enhance substantive coherence (templates & checklists); (4)Planning cycle timeframes that facilitate alignment.	5 5
7. Monitoring and reporting for policy coherence	Monitoring and evaluation framework for policy coherence for sustainable development. (5 points)	0
	Aspects of policy coherence for sustainable development are integrated into reporting processes. (2 points)	0
	Data and information management system for sustainable development data. (3 points)	3
8. Financial resources and tools	Any of following (5 points each, 10 points total): (1)Check-lists to ensure that plans and budgets reflect policy coherence for sustainable development; (2)Integrated financial information systems; (3)Mechanisms to ensure that cooperation funds are aligned with national policies and priorities; (4)Additional points for mechanisms that could promote alignment between internal and external policy coherence.	5

*Table 1: Scores for elements of the UK's Sustainable Development governance*

### Scoring Rationale by element

A brief summary of the rationale and evidence for the score in respect of each element is provided below. The full rationale and scoring notes for the exercise will be attached to the final version of the paper as annex A.

*Element 1* – Political commitment is evidenced in the UK's only Voluntary National Review (VNR) to date (2019) and by the Prime Minister's signature of the recent joint letter from world leaders.<sup>58</sup> Departmental Outcome Delivery Plans are aligned to the SDGs showing "defined roles and responsibilities" and the UK exhibits a range of relevant external commitments (E.g. COP 26). But there is no dedicated budget, reporting mechanism or time bound targets for SDG or PCSD commitments.

<sup>58</sup> [A green transition that leaves no one behind](#)'.

*Element 2* – There are long term objectives embedded in relevant strategies (e.g. UK Environment Plan); the OEP and EAC could be thought to constitute scrutiny mechanisms – but there is no commissioner for future generations or similar, and no mechanism for policy appraisal or impact assessment in terms of SDGs or future generations.

*Element 3* – no functioning national mechanism for regular coordination across government could be found by the research team; whilst we consider that UK government and parliament has the “mandate” to decide on trade-offs (3.1) there is no evidence of coordination (either by a centralised body, or between political and technical levels around the SDGs) and no evidence of efforts to align internal and external policies.

*Element 4* – As a well-ordered democracy, the UK is considered to provide in a general sense for participation, consultation and accountability, during development, evaluation and revision in policymaking, satisfying the majority of these components.

*Element 5* –No formal mechanism for SDG or SD impact assessment could be found by the research team.

*Element 6* – The general liaison between UK, devolved and local government was considered by the research team to meet the requirements here for “regular formal exchange” and collection of inputs between levels of government.

*Element 7* – No monitoring and evaluation framework for policy coherence in the UK was found by the research team. Relevant data on the SDGs is collated by the ONS, addressing the particular component on data.

*Element 8* – The research team found evidence of financial information systems in the UK government, satisfying one component. But no mechanism or checklist for policy coherence in planning and budgeting was found. UK’s ODA is widely considered to not be well-aligned with recipient country priorities, and is viewed as having worsened in this respect.<sup>59</sup>

### **(3) UK Institutions for the SDGs – assessing and addressing the gaps**

#### ***Assessing Gaps***

This assessment highlights the key absences in the UK’s institutional response to the SDGs. Overall, there is strong evidence from this analysis of 17.14.1 that the UK’s domestic response to the SDGs falls far behind many of its global comparators (see “addressing gaps” below). These findings are, furthermore, in line with other sources of evidence, such as the 2023 SDG Index’s metrics on Policy Efforts.<sup>60</sup>

A global ranking of scores on indicator 17.14.1 is not yet available, nor is it the core purpose of this indicator. However, any well-functioning, legitimate state whose government has ever endorsed the SDGs will self-assess at least 33 points on these metrics. We project, with

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example, [CGDEV UK aid quality indicators; GPEDC - UK, 2022 country profile](#)

<sup>60</sup> [Sustainable Development Report 2023 \(sdgindex.org\)](#)

moderate confidence,<sup>61</sup> that the UK scores in the bottom third of the world's countries - and the bottom third of the G7 - on this indicator.

Further analysis of the disparity between the UK government's own self-assessment, and the scoring in this exercise, is prevented by the breakdown of the UK's assessment not being publicly available. Though the same sources of evidence were consulted, there are a number of reasons why this assessment could differ. This analysis, focused on Westminster, does not accord the UK scores for elements present in Scotland and Wales: it is unclear whether the UK's self-assessment takes the same approach. It may be that some internal SDG exercises and processes are not public, and the absence of public reporting affects our scoring.

SDG indicator 17.14.1 is imperfect as an assessment of governance for the SDGs - in some key respects it is vague, while in other respects it is very specific in what it looks for. Notably, we consider that the UK's general democratic governance satisfies element 4 on participation, even though the absence of the stakeholder engagement mechanism promised in the 2019 VNR<sup>62</sup> represents an important gap in UK activity.

A future research paper arising from this project will look at these issues in more detail. The specificities and challenges of applying the indicator have influenced the scoring, contributing to the scope for subjectivity in evaluation. Importantly, the custodians of this indicator recognise these issues. The methodology for 17.14.1 sees the indicator as a 'work in progress', and most useful as a means to foster multistakeholder conversations and learning around directions of progress on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development.

### ***Addressing Gaps***

The low scores for the UK reflect key areas where SDG-related institutions are absent, notably:

- A national mechanism for regular SDG coordination
- A mechanism for assessing and addressing issues in terms of the contribution of a policy (new or existing) to broader sustainable development, including transboundary elements.
- A monitoring and evaluation framework for policy coherence for sustainable development, and institutions for effective oversight of policy coherence.
- Checklists and guidance to ensure that plans and budgets reflect policy coherence for sustainable development

In each of these areas, there is a range of good practice from other countries that the UK could learn from:

**Cross-government SDG coordination mechanisms**, often under the responsibility of the prime minister's office, are common amongst European countries (e.g. **France, Germany,**

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<sup>61</sup> In part, based on an analysis for the UN of 44 VNRs from other countries - [Governance indicators in VNRs and VLRs 2022.pdf](#)

<sup>62</sup> [UK Voluntary National Review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals](#) p213

**Sweden, Finland**).<sup>63</sup> They are also common amongst the UK's global partners. **Canada**, for example, has a national SDG implementation strategy and Federal Implementation plan with timebound targets. Its government has separate mandated lead ministries for domestic and international SDG activity, and a dedicated SDGs unit.<sup>64</sup> **Japan**<sup>65</sup>, again, has an SDG promotion headquarters as a cross-ministerial coordination body led by the prime minister, and a national SDG strategy. **South Korea** has a lead domestic SDG unit in government and has committed to a set of nationally-adapted K-SDGs.<sup>66</sup> **India** has a national SDG coordination body, and every federal state has an SDG team, and tracks progress through an annually updated national SDG index. **Jamaica** has a "core group" within government and a set of inter-departmental working groups as vehicles for coordination between ministries.<sup>67</sup> Prominent recipients of UK development assistance also have dedicated SDG cross-government structures – for example **Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Pakistan**.

**Different statutory oversight mechanisms** such as commissions, commissioners and ombudsmen are also commonplace (e.g. **Germany, Finland**) as are SDG-specific funding mechanisms (e.g. **Canada's** SDG Funding Program).

**Specific measures in support of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development** are becoming increasingly common. **Finland** conducted a pilot policy coherence audit of government policies in 2022.<sup>68</sup> **Luxembourg** is adopting a 'Sustainability Check' as part of its impact assessment process, and has undertaken training and issued guidance on PCSD for civil servants.<sup>69</sup> **Italy** and **the Netherlands** have national policy coherence action plans with accompanying monitoring and evaluation framework to follow their implementation.<sup>70</sup> **Spain's** Secretary of State for the 2030 Agenda leads a working group addressing institutional changes for policy coherence including better cross government coordination, training for government staff, and regulatory and budgeting measures.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

The UK is under-performing on the domestic institutions needed to address the SDGs, and the 2023 SDG Summit is an important opportunity to recommit to the SDGs as a governance agenda. SDG 17.14.1 is a useful guide on what good practice looks in response to the UNSG's guidance for states. Of course, to commit to the SDGs *abroad*, but not *at home*; to commit

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<sup>63</sup> [OECD - Driving Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development : Accelerating Progress on the SDGs](#) offers an overview of country practice.

<sup>64</sup> [Canada's 2023 Voluntary National Review – A Continued Journey for Implementing the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

<sup>65</sup> [Japan's efforts for achieving the SDGs](#)

<sup>66</sup> [Republic of Korea - Sustainability](#)

<sup>67</sup> [VNR 2022 Jamaica](#)

<sup>68</sup> [Finland - Government's Sustainability Roadmap. Progress made and topics for further preparation – Executive Summary](#)

<sup>69</sup> [Luxembourg - Revue Nationale Volontaire 2022](#) p16

<sup>70</sup> [VNR 2022 - Italy; OECD PCSD Country profile - The Netherlands](#)

<sup>71</sup> [Spain – Executive Summary of 2022 SDG Progress Report](#)

to the *ends* of the SDGs, but not the *means* through which they can be realised effectively in the UK, are both examples of policy incoherence.

The SDGs depend critically on national ownership – but instead, the last 4 years give the impression that the UK has *disowned* the SDGs. Though some internal SDG exercises and processes may not be public, there has been no *public* reporting addressing the domestic integration of SDGs and policy coherence since 2019; the stakeholder engagement process promised in the 2019 VNR which would have been a vehicle for transparency and engagement has not been implemented; and we can find no evidence of the cross-government SDG forum identified in 2019 having functioned as a coordination mechanism since. Indeed, on these metrics, performance may have gone backwards since 2019 – sharpening the urgent need for a second VNR as a window to put the UK back on course.

Given the widespread governance responses to the SDGs amongst the UK’s global partners, this analysis poses the question of whether an absence of SDG governance in the UK means a missed opportunity to deepen these partnerships – and whether this undercuts the UK’s position that it is a “leading advocate” for the SDGs.

Nevertheless, this paper offers clear pathways for meaningful commitments from government in response to the UNSG’s guidance. We recommend that, drawing on global good practice and learning from the UK’s global partners, the UK could address these key gaps and absences, developing an effective mechanism for joined-up governance on the SDGs and a range of tools and resources to support the adoption of policy coherence across government.