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

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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.[1] *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

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[1] UNEP - methodology for indicator 17.14.1

lowest possible score for a legitimate, well-functioning government that committed to the SDGs in 2015 is 33/80.

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.[2] 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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[2] 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): • Set timelines for the achievement of policy coherence objectives; • A dedicated budget; • Defined roles and responsibilities; • Regular reporting mechanism; • Explicit consideration of international commitments; • Other nationally relevant commitment.	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): (1)A commissioner, council or ombudsperson for future generations; (2)Other mechanisms of scrutiny or oversight on possible future effects; (3)Mechanisms for regular appraisal of policies; (4)Impact assessment mechanisms; and (5)Other nationally relevant factors.	1
3. Inter- ministerial and cross-sectoral coordination	National mechanism for regular coordination (5 points)	0
	Additional elements (maximum of 5 points): (1)A mandate to make decisions regarding trade-offs (2 points); (2)Coordination body is convened by a centralized government body (1 point); (3)Coordination at both political level and technical level (1 point); (4)Mandate for aligning internal and external policies (1 point); (5)Other nationally relevant mechanism (1 point).	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): (1)Consultations take place in a comprehensive manner at various stages of the policy cycle (1 point); (2)Institutions disclose the rationale for not including inputs from consultations (2 points); (3)An accountability mechanism that allows public intervention (2 points).	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;	0

	(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.	
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.[3] 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.

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[3] '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.[4]

(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.[5]

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

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[4] See, for example, CGDEV UK aid quality indicators; GPEDC - UK 2022 country profile
[5] Sustainable Development Report 2023

endorsed the SDGs will self-assess at least 33 points on these metrics. We project, with moderate confidence,[6] 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[7] 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:

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[6] In part, based on an analysis for the UN of 44 VNRs from other countries - Governance indicators in VNRs and VLRs 2022
[7] UK Voluntary National Review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals p213

Cross-government SDG coordination mechanisms, often under the responsibility of the prime minister's office, are common amongst European countries (e.g**. France**, **Germany**, **Sweden, Finland**).[8] 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.[9] **Japan**[10], again, has an SDG promotion headquarters as a cross-ministerial coordination body led by the prime minster, 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.[11] **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.[12] 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.[13] **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.[14] **Italy** and **the Netherlands** have national policy coherence action plans with accompanying monitoring and evaluation framework to follow their implementation.[15] **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.[16]

Conclusion

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[8] OECD - Driving Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development : Accelerating Progress on the SDGs offers an overview of country practice.
[9] Canada's 2023 Voluntary National Review – A Continued Journey for Implementing the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals
[10] Japan's efforts for achieving the SDGs
[11] Republic of Korea - Sustainability
[12] VNR 2022 Jamaica
[13] Finland - Government's Sustainability Roadmap. Progress made and topics for further preparation – Executive Summary
[14] Luxembourg - Revue Nationale Volontaire 2022 p16
[15] VNR 2022 - Italy; OECD PCSD Country profile - The Netherlands
[16] Spain – Executive Summary of 2022 SDG Progress Report

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 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 form 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.