

SUBMISSION BY THE SOCIETY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, SOCEMV, TO  
THE ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE  
INQUIRY INTO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE UK INQUIRY

Introduction

1. The Society for the Environment (SocEnv) is a partnership of 24 professional bodies representing individuals practicing in environmental and natural resources management, ranging from chemists and engineers to ecologists and biologists. Our members work from front delivery to the very highest levels of leadership and we have access to over 500000 individuals. Our Royal Charter provides us with the responsibility to oversee the award of the status of Chartered Environmentalist, of which there are over 7000.
  
2. Whilst the result of leaving the EU will not alter our commitments to the SDGs, it may impact the way they are implemented. The Society has already produced an initial framework of principles for responding to Brexit which will be further developed by Chartered Environmentalists; registered environmental professionals working across a broad range of sectors. As such, any changes to the way in which the UK delivers the SDGs should be tested against these principles, which are:
  - a. The Society recognises that our Nations face a challenge in moving forward in the wake of the decision to leave the European Union. As members of the European Union, the UK has made significant progress with the quality and quantity of our natural resources over the last 40 years. The Society wish to help protect that progress and maintain it going forward. But, we believe that there is the now the opportunity to enhance sustainability, environmental mitigation and protection.
  
  - b. Excessive bureaucracy can be inimical to the objectives of legislation. So we would be pleased to work with the Government in finding ways and means of transposing national legislation made in pursuit of European Union legislation into purely UK driven legislation, which sustain the objectives but which are at the same time efficient and effective and help deliver upon the SDGs. It is essential that this wisdom is applied to new legislation in future. This will add additional impetus to current efforts for better regulation and the work of the Regulatory Delivery team in the Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. However, we urge the Government not to deregulate essential environmental and natural resources management.
  
  - c. Threats to our natural resources do not recognise national boundaries. For the last 40 years, the UK has shared wisdom with Continental colleagues in pursuit of better environmental standards across Europe. The Society will continue maintain our European contacts. We urge the Governments of the UK to also continue conversing with their colleagues from across the EU and striving for the betterment of Environmental standards.

- d. Because of the international nature of environmental and natural resources management, we have believed that it must be a key component of pan-European policy. This is our description of the Policy which recognises that the UK is part of the 'Great European Project', but as an independent nation and not part of the EU. The objectives shared with the EU and other components of Europe must be in pursuit of the highest principles of individual and environmental wellbeing which transcends the needs of a common trading agreement.
- e. The Society will continue to pursue our European partnerships on that basis and we would be pleased to assist the Government in helping to maintain relationships between environmentalists and decision makers across the EU, in pursuit of both environmental protections but also in meeting our obligations towards the SDGs.
- f. The relationship of the UK with the EU has been a Reserved Matter which has restricted the flexibility of devolved administrations to implement appropriate national legislation. We believe that appropriate devolution of environmental and natural resources legislation to better approach issues at a more local level would be beneficial and will be a key component of the way forward.
- g. We recognise that the result of the EU referendum highlighted a need to re-engage with communities in decision making, in order to replenish their trust in experts, Governments and decision making bodies. The wellbeing of society is paramount to a thriving economy. With this in mind, we would welcome an opportunity to discuss potential models for to promote wellbeing, such as the Welsh Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, and how that might be adapted to strengthen community resilience across the UK.
- h. Our preferred structure for political leadership of confronting climate change is that there should be a distinct position within the Cabinet, but we can see opportunities for the new Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (DBEIS) in embedding climate change awareness and action for adaptation and mitigation at the highest levels in business.
- i. The creation of a link between climate change and business must be beneficial and DBEIS is well placed to properly embed climate change policy within the UK 's Industrial Strategy and to help develop a sustainable circular economy and promote proper natural resource management. We call upon DBEIS to honour the commitments made by the former Department Energy and Climate Change.
- j. Similarly, we believe it is essential that there is a clear responsibility within Government for delivery of the SDGs. We accept that many of the SDGs are cross departmental and that presents challenges in terms of responsibility and who would be best placed to take accountability for performance. As such, we recommend a Ministerial position within the Cabinet Office to coordinate delivery of the SDGs.

- k. There are number of Corporate and Director codes on governance; we would like to see these revised to ensure that those in a position of power, wherever and whatever that might be, will act in the best interests of our future on sustainability.
3. As SocEnv has registered environmental professionals from a broad range of sectors and industries, we have an interest in a number of the goals. However, we do acknowledge that the remaining SDGs are also incredibly important to long term success and without them, progress made on other SDGs might be limited.

### **Summary**

4. We call for clarity over which Government department is responsible for delivering upon the SDGs. If responsibility is to be split, then we urge that there is effective communication, cooperation and collaboration to ensure that delivery is efficient, effective and value for money and that there is clear line of accountability for performance and reporting.
5. The Society believes that the SDGs should be considered and included within policy across Government.
6. We call for greater focus of the skills and competencies required for delivery of the SDGs and for education about sustainability across all levels of education to be included within the education policy.
7. We call for the inclusion of sustainability within business strategy, with DBEIS taking a lead in ensuring best sustainable practice is conveyed and upheld within the private sector.
8. We recommend the involvement of both civil society and the private sector within the delivery of the SDGs as an inclusionary and holistic approach. Ownership over the SDGs is vital to the success.

### **Domestic delivery of the SDGs**

What are the potential costs, benefits and opportunities to the UK of delivering the Goals domestically?

9. The Society sees extensive benefit in delivering the SDGs domestically and internationally. Environmental issues transcend national and political boundaries and the UK should support countries in achieving the SDGs.
10. There is the opportunity to embed sustainability and good professional practice across several industries in the UK. The SDGs provide a solid framework in which to build a more comprehensive policy on sustainability education. We call for this to be done throughout the education system, including within training and professional standards.

Which Goals are the most relevant to the UK? Where is UK domestic performance believed to be strongest and weakest?

11. The Society believes that all of the SDGs are relevant to the United Kingdom. The SDGs are interlinked and it is difficult to separate them and deliver upon them individually. Though, that is not to say that the UK performs well or poorly across all SDGs. As not all of the SDGs are strictly relevant to the work the Society does, we are poorly placed to offer a comparative assessment of where are performance is strongest or weakest.
12. We would like to highlight, however, the UK's world leading performance in Higher Education. It is here in which the UK can make the largest impact upon domestic delivery of the SDGs through the embedding of sustainability education across school levels. It offers both the opportunity to educate people about the importance and impact of the SDGs, as well as the ability to teach the skills essential to delivering the SDGs, both in the UK and abroad, to the next generation of employees.
13. The UK must also be willing to share the knowledge it has gained in the areas in which performance is strongest, as well as seek knowledge in areas in which our performance is weak. As with environmental challenges, cooperation and knowledge sharing with other countries is essential to delivery of the SDGs.

#### **How best to deliver the Goals**

What structures, governance mechanisms, resources and lines of accountability are required within Government nationally and locally to ensure that efforts to deliver the Goals will be meaningful and achieve real change? Who should be providing leadership on this agenda?

14. It is essential that there is a leadership role in coordinating actions across Government, the private sector and civil society organisations (CSOs). This will allow for a comprehensive and efficient approach to delivery of the SDGs. We support calls for the Cabinet Office to take a lead on coordinating the Government approach to this and also recommend a specific ministerial position to deliver on this.
15. It is essential that the UK considers where the SDGs would fit into policy across all departments and we would strongly encourage this to happen. There are several activities that we would recommend which would be beneficial to implement towards the delivery of the SDGs goal and future sustainability. In the recommendations given, the responsible department would be accountable for success in their area, and it would be up to the new Minister in the Cabinet Office to coordinate this
16. Firstly, we believe it would be prudent to begin a mapping process of higher education and continual professional development in the UK and identify areas in which sustainability is promoted and encouraged and others where it might be lacking or absent. We recommend

a larger emphasis on sustainability in education and as such, the embedding of the SDGs within education policy in the UK. The purpose of this is twofold; the increasing of the UK's professional capacity to help deliver upon the SDGs across sectors in the UK and to begin a change in culture from the grassroots level. Embedding sustainability and the SDGs within education would be a positive first step in a cultural shift towards a sustainable future. It is not enough to merely achieve the SDGs, we need to ensure that similar action is not necessary in the future.

17. The new department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) is in a good position to embed the SDGs, especially goals 7, 9, 12 and 13 at the highest levels in business. Encouraging business to pursue best practice in sustainability and incorporate the circular economy into their ways of working will be of great benefit in achieving the SDGs. As such, there is a large mandate for incorporating the SDGs in Industrial Strategy and we would like to see the Minister of State for BEIS to take a leadership role in this, as well as from company directors in implementing it.
18. We echo the calls by the House of Commons International Development Committee to include the private sector within delivery of the SDGs.<sup>i</sup> It is essential that the change in culture towards a more sustainable, circular economy is reflected in business practice and not just placed upon the consumer.
19. There is also scope for leadership from the Department for International Trade and the British Council. The DfIT are in a position to ensure that our trading partners, as well as our own export industry, match the international standards laid down by the SDGs. The British Council is well placed to share relevant knowledge with potential trading partners. The Society maintains its position that international cooperation is essential to positive performance of the SDGs.
20. Civil Society should also be taking a leading role in the advocacy of continuing to meet the SDGs, data collection and reporting on progress of the SDGs and holding the Government to account. Civil society can continue to share knowledge and best practice with partners across the world. This is something SocEnv will continue to do.
21. We would like to highlight these recommendations from the report 'UK implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals' as being relevant and transferrable to British civil society and domestic delivery of the SDGs;<sup>ii</sup>
  - a. innovation and collaboration to achieve the SDGs are encouraged through flexible funding and reporting;
  - b. CSOs are able to undertake the important task of communicating the SDGs to citizens across the world so that governments are held to account on progress.

22. We urge the EAC and Government to consider the findings of the Department for International Development (DfID) Civil Society Partnership Review to see if there are recommendations that are transferrable to the domestic implementation of the SDGs.

How are other countries implementing the SDGs domestically? What examples of best practice are there that the UK can learn from?

23. There are examples of countries publishing yearly reviews into their progress regarding the SDGs.<sup>iii</sup> Where possible, the UK should learn from other countries best practice in regards to delivering on sustainability domestically.

### **Measuring and communicating performance**

How can performance against the Goals be measured and communicated in a way that best engages policy makers, local Government, businesses and the public and allows effective scrutiny of the Government's performance by Parliament and civil society?

24. Domestic and International measures should be separately defined as to differentiate our progress against the SDGs domestically from the work of DfID and our international commitments to the SDGs. There is scope for greater collaboration between domestic departments and DfID, especially in the adaption of their monitoring, evaluation and learning practices to apply domestically.
25. The SDGs are ambitious by design and present an end goal in 15 years. Interim targets that lead to the eventual goal in 15 years should be set and be measured against. We support calls for the UK reporting framework to be evidence based. Consultations should be made with professionals in each sector to ensure that targets are realistic and achievable and allow for adaption to change and potential problems. These should be made publicly available and reported upon.

How should measurement against the SDG indicators be integrated with existing measures of sustainable development performance, such as the Sustainable Development Indicators and the Well-being measures?

26. DEFRA began producing reports on the indicators of sustainable development through their Sustainable Development Indicators (SDIs) report. This work has now been taken on by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). We would urge Government to continue this work and adapt it for accurate reporting purposes against the SDGs. Where possible, we would encourage the Government to utilise existing methods of reporting.
27. There is a role for CSOs and private business in reporting their own progress against the goals. Data from these sources should be utilised as much as possible and self-reporting should be encouraged. However, this raises the issue of increasing the bureaucratic and

reporting burden upon SMEs and CSOs. A standardised set of measures should be produced and distributed for ease of reporting for outside stakeholders, but also so they can be easily incorporated into Government responses. Ideally, this would be brought around through culture change and be voluntary. This would require some high profile businesses to lead and encourage others to follow by example, but incentivisation could be used.

How can performance best be communicated in a way that involves businesses, the public and local government in achieving the SDGs within the UK?

28. All communication should show the benefits of acting in accordance to the SDGs and convey the value to general public, policy makers, local Government and businesses. The Society currently markets itself on the value of Chartered Environmentalist and Registered Environmental Technicians and as such would be pleased to advise Government on the best ways to convey the value of acting sustainably.
29. We encourage all data to be made publicly accessible, alongside reports and conclusions drawn from it. Communications should be catered to audience and easy for those with no knowledge to understand. Reporting on progress on the goals should be accompanied by messaging that conveys what the SDGs are.
30. It is important that there is education, across all levels, about the importance of sustainability and what the SDGs mean, in real terms, to all sectors in the UK.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmintdev/103/103.pdf> Pg57-58, Points 14-16

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmintdev/103/103.pdf> Pg27, Point 57

<sup>iii</sup> [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10632National%20Voluntary%20Review%20Report%20\(rev\\_final\).pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10632National%20Voluntary%20Review%20Report%20(rev_final).pdf)