

LOCALISING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Summary



WHAT ARE THE SDGs?

The UN Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by world leaders in 2015, call all countries to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all.



WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE U.K.?

The UK Government has committed to achieving the SDGs at home and abroad, but could do more to demonstrate its commitment to the Goals and support local action.



WHY IS LOCAL ACTION IMPORTANT?

It's estimated that around two thirds of what is required to achieve the SDGs will need to involve local actors, galvanising political, business and civil society interests to work together to improve quality of life for all.



WHAT'S HAPPENING LOCALLY?

Local engagement with the SDGs in the UK has, so far, been shaped by cities & city regions, local government, local enterprise, universities and local citizens.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM CITIES USING SDGs?

To implement the Goals we should work together. Using them to tell a local story can help us develop partnerships and support for them.



What are the Sustainable Development Goals?

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015 as part of the United Nations' Agenda 2030. These 17 Global Goals are an urgent call to action for all countries - rich and poor - to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all (see Figure 1).

Created in consultation with international governments and civil society, the SDGs provide a shared framework, language and vision for improving quality of life and transforming the way we live whilst safeguarding the environment. This has never been more important given the climate emergency we face. The Goals require people and organisations to come together to address issues such as poverty, hunger, health, wellbeing, education, equality, access to water and sanitation, affordable clean energy, decent work, resilient infrastructure, sustainable cities & communities, climate action, and environmental protection.

What's happening in the U.K.?

The UK Government contributed to the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals and, like other UN member states, has committed to achieving them at home and abroad. In June 2019, the Government submitted its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) of progress towards the Goals and presented this at the UN High Level Political Forum.¹

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uks-voluntary-national-review-of-the-sustainable-development-goals>

The VNR outlines the Government's view that the SDGs are addressed primarily through existing policy mechanisms, such as Single Department Plans. The Government's approach to the VNR and to domestic implementation of the Goals has been criticised for lacking essential cross-government coordination, for cherry-picking evidence and offering only superficial opportunities for stakeholder input.²

Independent analysis by a cross-sector group of over 100 organisations, conducted in 2018 for the UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development report *Measuring Up*, suggests that the UK is performing well on less than a quarter (24%) of the targets that underpin the SDGs.³

The UK Government could do much more to demonstrate its commitment to the Goals and to support effective action by all sectors of society.

The good news is there are many people and organisations taking action themselves who are willing to share experiences and work together. This was the main message that came out of a UK-wide workshop on *Localising the Sustainable Development Goals* that we hosted in Sheffield in June 2019, which invited local government, city region and civil society stakeholders to exchange knowledge and ideas for action.

Fig. 1 What are the SDGs?



² <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/international-development-committee/news-parliament-2017/sustainable-development-goals-report-publication-17-19/>

³ <https://www.ukssd.co.uk/measuringup>

Why is local action important?

It's estimated that around two-thirds of what must happen to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals will need to involve local actors.⁴ For the growing number of UK and international cities that are working with the SDGs, their global ambition offers an opportunity to galvanise political, business and civil society interests to work together to improve quality of life for all, and especially for the most vulnerable in society.

Many local authorities are declaring a climate emergency, and citizens are demanding urgent action on climate change through movements like Youth Strike 4 Climate and Extinction Rebellion. The SDGs offer a comprehensive, internationally-recognised framework for action to address the environmental, social and economic challenges that communities face in an integrated and holistic way. There is an opportunity for learning from other cities that are using the SDGs to drive local impact.

Local action for sustainable development tends to be cross-cutting, working across all 17 Goals at some level. Cities are home to a huge number of people and can play a key role in communicating, inspiring and mobilising people to work together to address these global justice issues.

In the VNR, the UK Government suggests that local authorities should be "using their position as a bridge between national government, civil society, businesses and citizens" to "convene and support networks of domestic and international partners" to take action on the SDGs. In June 2019, the Local Government Association stated its support for the SDGs, whilst arguing that the crucial role that local councils play in their delivery should be recognised, and should be supported with appropriate powers, long-term central funding, and stronger domestic implementation at the national level.

⁴ <https://www.citiesalliance.org/sites/default/files/Opportunities%20for%20the%20New%20Urban%20Agenda.pdf>

What's happening locally?

The Sustainable Development Goals offer a shared global vision, but they can also be adapted in response to local priorities and needs. Local engagement with the SDGs in the UK has, so far, been shaped by different groups and sectors at a variety of scales (see Figure 2).

Cities & city regions are using the SDGs to connect citizens' concerns with policy-making. The London Sustainable Development Commission (LSDC) have been consulting young Londoners to understand their views and priorities on sustainability issues, and how these align with the SDGs. In Bristol, a cross-sector SDG Alliance established in 2015 has helped to build local political momentum and support for the Goals. Cities are also exploring the data challenges and opportunities of working with the SDGs. Greater Manchester Combined Authority took part in an international pilot study in 2015 to feedback on the UN's proposed indicators for SDG 11, 'Sustainable Cities and Communities'. The LSDC are also realigning London's existing Quality of Life Indicators with the Goals and exploring local data availability. They expect to publish a report on this work in 2020, and are building a network of local organisations to develop locally-appropriate metrics and act as SDG champions.

Local government is ensuring that existing policies are aligned with the SDGs, identifying gaps, and convening local partners to work together. Examples include Bristol's One City Plan, the One Planet York initiative, and Dundee City Council's commitment to three local actions per SDG. Some councils, such as Birmingham, Bristol and Liverpool, have made a public commitment to the SDGs. Bristol also recently completed a Voluntary Local Review of progress towards the Goals, and the Mayor has named an SDG Ambassador for the City.

Local enterprise has been pivotal to achieving city level commitment with the SDGs in Liverpool, where a UN recognised Local 2030 hub drives wider city region awareness; and multi-sector support challenges the private sector to understand the advantages of adopting the SDGs. The 2030 hub provides a physical space in the city centre where people from different sectors can come together. The hub also organises cross-sector events and activities to raise awareness of the SDGs. Several UK cities have hosted UN Global Compact events to spur practical actions and partnerships in support of the SDGs from the private sector.

Universities, as part of their civic commitment, are mobilising funding and research capacity to support engagement with the SDGs. Examples include partnerships between the University of Bristol's Cabot Institute, Bristol SDG Alliance and Bristol City Council, and between the University of Sheffield's Urban Institute, Sheffield City Council and Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

Citizens are also coming together to share knowledge and ideas about how they can work with the SDGs. Canterbury SDG Forum brings residents together to identify local priorities and engage with their local council on actions to achieve the Goals. SDG meet-up groups in Milton Keynes and London offer networking opportunities for campaigners and professionals.

Fig. 2 What's happening locally?

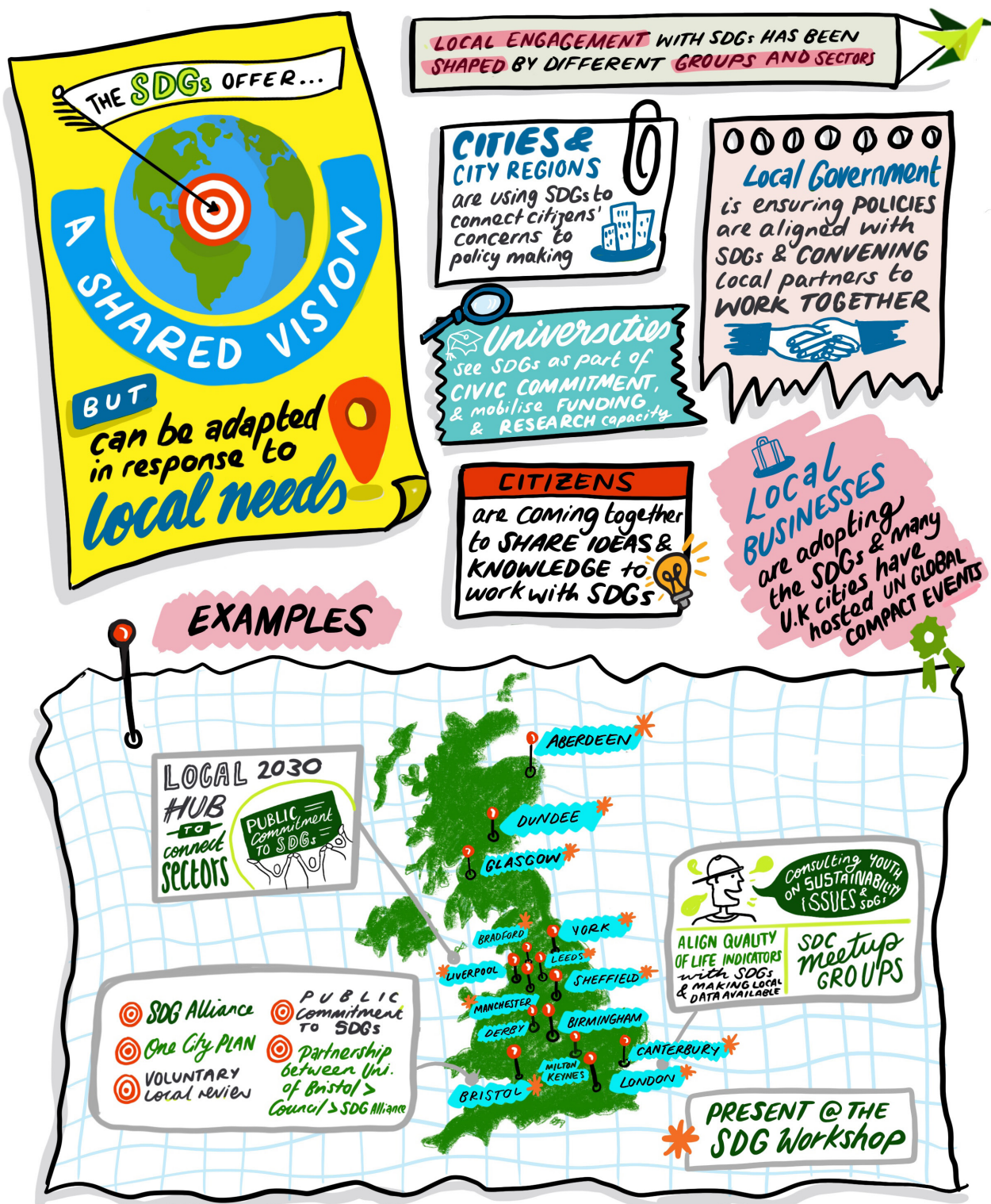


Fig. 3 What can we learn from cities that are working with the Goals?



What can we learn from the cities that are working with the Goals?

The *Localising the Sustainable Development Goals* workshop brought these diverse stakeholder groups together from across the UK, along with international representatives from Baltimore, Gothenburg and Utrecht, to reflect on lessons learned and distil key messages for others interested in working with the SDGs (see Figure 3). In brief, these messages were:

Work together

Partnerships and cooperation are key to delivering the Sustainable Development Goals, which were designed to bring people and organisations together for a common purpose. They connect local commitments to a global consensus, and in doing so enable cross-sector discussions and city-to-city collaboration, both in the UK and internationally. Rather than constantly reinventing the wheel, we can learn from pioneer cities and initiatives, who are often eager to collaborate and share their experiences.

The Goals aren't perfect, but they can be useful

The SDGs were not designed specifically for cities, and not all of the underlying framework is locally relevant. Nonetheless, the overarching vision of the Goals, the common language to convene and work with different partners, and some of the suggested metrics for monitoring progress, are helpful discussion and decision-making tools for city leaders and stakeholders. In essence, rather than an inflexible 'tick-box' exercise, the SDGs should be seen as a series of principles that provide a starting point for local discussion, and that are applied using common sense.

Avoid 'SDG-washing'

The SDGs are intended to promote an integrated, or holistic, approach across all 17 Goals, not a menu of options. Cherry-picking only those SDGs which are closest to your mission, or only reporting on what you are already doing to contribute to the SDGs, will not add value. An increasing number of local authorities, businesses and other organisations are looking at how their existing policies align with the SDGs, and this is an opportunity to improve accountability, identify gaps, and develop bold new initiatives.

Tell a local story inspired by the Global Goals

Translate and adapt what's most useful in the SDGs

to make them relevant to the lives and the work of the people you want to engage. In Utrecht, for example, the city has adapted the UN logos to include recognisable local landmarks, and convened events and workshops as part of a concerted effort to raise awareness of the SDGs among its citizens.

Resource and support partnerships for the Goals

While local partners are eager to work together, there is only so much they can achieve with limited resources and no national coordination of this work. For example, a key issue raised by cities that have explored monitoring progress towards the SDGs is the availability of and access to disaggregated data, ideally at the neighbourhood level. Other national governments, such as Sweden, have developed domestic SDG action plans, appointed an independent delegation to oversee progress towards the SDGs, and published a national suite of voluntary local indicators that were developed in consultation with local government.

Where can I find more information?

You can access blogs, videos, reports and networks focussed on UK, local and international work with the SDGs through the Realising Just Cities website: bit.ly/SDG-Resources

You can sign up as a partner and find out more about action on the SDGs across the UK via UKSSD's website: www.ukssd.co.uk

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