



UN Sustainable Development Goals: A Guide for Councils





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The UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD) brings organisations together to accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals in the UK.

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Foreword

The action taken to halt the rapid spread of Covid-19, to protect human health and ensure the functioning of our essential public services, has caused the greatest change to our way of life for generations. Councils have maintained the provision of essential services, under enormous pressure and with a backdrop of sustained funding cuts. They have collaborated with local, regional and national partners to coordinate and deliver solutions to the crisis. We have witnessed, once again, the fundamental role that councils play in enabling the health and wellbeing of citizens. We have also seen the amazing resourcefulness and compassion of our communities, with the emergence of social support or mutual aid networks, the clap for carers movement and the investment in local causes by businesses.

Though the public health crisis is not over, we also face a period of economic uncertainty. Covid-19 has exposed the existing socio-economic inequalities in our society with shocking statistics emerging on the disproportionate loss of life for certain demographic groups, income levels or occupations. We now face the very real possibility that more people across the country will experience deep levels of financial insecurity or poverty, leading to further demand on limited public resources. At the same time, we must acknowledge the reality of a warming climate and other pressing environmental challenges, and the risk these pose to our future.

While this guide was created before the Covid-19 pandemic, we have updated some of it to reflect the current context. The challenges we now face further reinforce the need for coherent decision-making within all levels of government to ensure that efforts today lead to better outcomes tomorrow. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals can be used to future-proof and consolidate the plans developed in response to Covid-19, leading to greater economic and social resilience and a healthier and sustainable environment.

Background – getting to know the goals

The United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out how communities, organisations, and governments everywhere in the world can progress towards better lives for themselves and their children, without leaving anyone behind.

In this guide, we set out some proposals for *how* councils might respond to the SDGs and make use of them in their own communities, drawing on actions and ideas being discussed in the UK and internationally. We look at how some councils in the UK and overseas are already engaging with the goals.

The SDGs underpin UN Resolution 70/1, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.¹ The 17 goals and their 169 accompanying targets, agreed by all UN member states in 2015, represent the world's most broad, ambitious and comprehensive agreement on sustainable development to date. This means increasing and spreading prosperity around the globe, combined with ending social injustice and poverty, and improving health and wellbeing, all while protecting the environment – including the climate and biodiversity – for current and future generations.

The SDGs cover the next decade out to 2030 – a critical period for addressing climate change and loss of habitats and species. They aim to be universal and



inclusive, applying to all the world's nations: developed, emerging, and those still struggling to attain basic levels of development and infrastructure for all their citizens. As such, they contrast with the 2000-2015 Millennium Development Goals preceding them, which focussed on reducing extreme poverty in developing nations.²

National governments have the most important role to play in attaining the SDGs, but they cannot do this on their own. To succeed, they need the support and commitment of business, civil society, non-governmental organisations, and public authorities and agencies of all kinds, including local and regional governments.

If the SDGs are to be realised locally, nationally and around the world, then every level of society will need to act. Councils are on the frontline of many of the challenges the SDGs seek to resolve, but the wider national context will be crucial in doing so. To play their full part in implementing these goals, councils rely on partnership between local and national government, and the recognition that the SDGs are a shared responsibility.

Some of the goals and targets are more applicable to councils than others. For example, SDG 11: 'make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable', was negotiated and agreed largely as a result of sustained lobbying by international local government organisations. This SDG is seen as foremost among the 17 in focussing on the role of local and regional administrations in delivering sustainable development. Yet arguably, every one of the SDGs can be applied to the work and responsibilities of councils in England, from districts to counties. Because they are so wide-ranging and comprehensive, when integrated in decision-making processes, the SDGs can help councils break down silos and work in a more joined-up way.

'All of the SDGs have targets that are directly or indirectly related to the daily work of local and regional governments. Local governments should not be seen as mere implementers of the agenda. Local governments are policy makers, catalysts of change and the level of government best-placed to link the global goals with local communities.'³

The SDGs in the UK

The UK Government took part in negotiating the SDGs preceding their agreement at the UN General Assembly in New York on 15 September 2015, and like other UN member states, the UK is signed up to the goals. The Government went on to publish a Voluntary National Review (VNR) in July 2019, setting out over 235 pages how it has begun working towards the SDGs.⁴

VNRs are among the most important ways that progress towards the goals can be measured and monitored. The process of producing one can help governments build support for, awareness of and interest in its own SDG implementation. The publication of VNRs enables nations, civil society and organisations to review efforts and achievements around the goals.

This first UK VNR referred extensively to the work of local government and recognised that ‘the UK’s cities, local authorities and local partners play a key role in supporting delivery of the Goals in the UK, while helping to ensure no-one, and no community, is left behind.’ It cites an estimate that two thirds of the 169 targets that accompany the SDGs need local stakeholders, like councils, to be engaged if they are to be achieved.

At the same time as the UK VNR was published, the Local Government Association (LGA) agreed a motion supporting the SDGs at its 2019 annual conference.⁵ This motion recognised the key role councils play in delivering progress towards the goals. It also made the case for Government funding to support councils’ engagement with them, against a background of continuing austerity.

There are reasons why councils might not want to be involved with the SDGs; their finances are severely constrained, presenting a challenge of taking on new roles, priorities and responsibilities. Given that public awareness of the SDGs remains low, they may fear that actively supporting the goals will garner neither recognition nor encouragement from local citizens. Local politicians might also be concerned that, with public calls for councils to declare a climate emergency, they may struggle to find the resources they need to translate this into coherent action.

The case for council engagement with the SDGs

Many councils across the UK are already actively engaged in and progressing their plans to implement the SDGs. There are compelling arguments for them to do so:

1. Councils are essential for the success of the SDGs

If the SDGs are to be attained, then local action will play a key role - as recognised by both the UK Government, the LGA and the UN. If the SDGs are “the right thing to do” through the coming decade, as recognised by all UN member states, then councils have a moral, not statutory, duty to engage with them. Councils are important drivers of sustainable development in communities, given their local mandate and understanding of the local context, so they are well placed to implement the SDGs in their own locality. Their engagement may also serve to raise wider public awareness of the goals.

2. The SDGs can help focus efforts on the health and wellbeing of people that are the furthest behind

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the extent of social deprivation in our society which councils have been working to address for a long time. The SDGs focus on persistent forms of poverty and deprivation, not just through the statistical insights the SDG indicators communicate but through a cross-cutting principle known as ‘Leave No One Behind’. In agreeing to Agenda 2030, governments committed ‘to endeavour to reach the furthest behind first’, directing efforts towards those that are the most deprived or discriminated against within countries.⁶ Though leaving no one behind might seem like an obvious priority for many councils, the renewed focus the SDGs provide gives councils additional legitimacy in calling on other sectors and levels of government to work with them towards this outcome.

3. Engagement supports the declaration of a climate emergency

Most UK councils – almost 300 at the time of writing – have declared a climate emergency, as have the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the UK’s

House of Commons. The LGA also declared a climate emergency at the same time as it agreed its motion supporting the SDGs.

Addressing climate change merits very high priority, but the issue is too large and complex, and the stakes too high, for it to be tackled in isolation. It must be dealt with alongside other pressing environmental issues, such as air pollution and biodiversity loss, and action should be taken in ways that complement – and give equal weight to - the pursuit of inclusive growth and social justice. Committing to the SDGs signals overall support for sustainable development, social justice and attacking all the major environmental problems, while taking positive local action to tackle the threat of climate change. One of the SDGs, Goal 13, is ‘to take urgent action to tackle climate change and its impacts’ and links directly to the Paris Climate Agreement.



3. The SDGs can provide a framework for strategic planning, policy review and action

Because they are wide-ranging, comprehensive and framed in terms of targets and indicators, they can help councils set priorities, spot gaps and ensure nothing important is left out. They can help councils to break down silos and work in a joined-up way. They can also help councils review their progress. Addressing climate change at the local level provides opportunities to make progress in other areas – reducing air pollution, combatting fuel poverty, improving public health and fostering businesses of the future, for example.⁷

4. The SDGs can help local authorities foster strategic partnerships

This can be done if they frame joint actions and shared priorities. While public awareness of the SDGs may be low, the kind of organisations councils need to work with to achieve their own aims – in business, the public sector and civil society – are likely to be aware of the SDGs and support them. Businesses in the UK are arguably much further ahead in their engagement with the goals, but if councils’ partners are not yet aware of them, they may want to back the goals once they learn about the thinking and level of global support behind them.

5. The resource burden for councils to start engaging with the goals is low

Councils are not expected to undertake major new spending commitments or make radical changes in policy as a result of the SDGs. For some of the goals, their influence is limited, while for others, they may already be doing plenty to meet the targets. Councils can, however, ensure their officers and politicians are aware of them, map them onto existing plans, policies and priorities, and use them to consider whether more action might be needed.



Bond Conference 2019 © Bond

How councils might engage with the SDGs

Councils across England are already engaging with the SDGs and taking their own approach given their local contexts. There are commonalities between them: like the mapping of council priorities that Kent County Council, City of York Council, and Leeds City Council have undertaken; the detailed performance monitoring the London Sustainable Development Commission is doing on the Capital; or the strategic partnerships that have evolved in Newcastle and Bristol. There is also a lot of grass-roots engagement, where councils are recognising momentum building in the business and civil society communities – like in Liverpool or Canterbury. And in some cases, like in Bradford district, it’s the commitment to wellbeing and the climate emergency that is opening a conversation in the council about the SDGs.

Using these and other international experiences, we have identified four broad ways in which councils might engage with the SDGs. We set them out here in a sequence of steps; a rough roadmap for a council’s SDG journey. The steps overlap, so a council that starts to plan and prioritise its use of the SDGs (the first in the sequence) might, quite rightly, also want to advocate for the SDGs (the fourth and last step) from the outset.



Step 1. Plan and prioritise



To begin, councils need to understand the SDGs and think through how they might be applied in the local area. They then need to map their own high-level plans, policies and strategies against the 17 goals and accompanying targets, making choices about which are more relevant to them. Councils can then choose to adopt SDGs and the targets, or their own local versions of them, and consider amending or redrawing their plans to close any identified gaps.

They may have taken several years to negotiate within the UN, but each SDG amounts to only around a dozen words, so it doesn't take long for an individual to gain an understanding of them; that is one reason why they are such a powerful idea. Every SDG also has a small number of accompanying targets, plus one or more indicators for each of these targets, intended to measure progress towards it.

Learn about the SDGs

The first step for any council on its SDG journey need not be a large one. It requires someone in a leadership position, at political or officer level, spending a short time learning about the SDGs and exploring their relevance to the local authority. This may involve some research and awareness-raising to understand what the SDGs are, why local action and administration are so critical to their achievement, and why the council might want to make use of them. It could also consider how other local authorities, in the UK and internationally, are engaging with the SDGs.

The SDGs were intended to encourage integration, cross-cutting action and 'de-siloing' in pursuit of sustainable development. Therefore, when it comes to a decision on moving to the next phase of engagement, it should be taken at senior level with buy-in across the senior leadership team. If only one department or officer is engaging with the SDGs, they are unlikely to have much impact on the council's contribution to sustainable development.

At this early stage, a council does not have to make any final decisions or commitments about where it is going with the SDGs. It could investigate whether any of its strategic partners, local stakeholders and neighbouring councils are

already or are interested in making use of the SDGs, before going further forward. It could even defer a decision and decide to keep a watching brief on the SDGs – but it needs to be aware that the goals are set for the year 2030 and the clock is ticking.

Map the council's priorities to the SDGs

Having decided to engage, a next step is to map the council's high-level, strategic policies and plans against the 17 SDGs and their accompanying targets. That means identifying which of the council's own existing goals, targets, plans and policies contribute to each of the SDGs, either broadly supporting the entire goal or one or more of the targets within it. Several councils in England have taken this step, see for example the case studies on Bristol or York (page 15 and 14). Indeed, this can even work at the neighbourhood level, like Knightsbridge in London, where the SDGs have been integrated within the Neighbourhood Plan.⁸

If the council has a single high-level, strategic, medium-to-long-term plan (such as a 'One City' plan) covering all of its key priorities and ambitions for its area, then the mapping exercise could instead be based on that.

This mapping exercise will, inevitably, reveal that several of the 169 SDG targets have no corresponding council policies because councils are not involved in everything connected to sustainable development.



9
targets

TARGET 11.1

By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums

Identify your priority goals and targets

The mapping exercise will lead the council into making choices about which SDGs and targets align most to its own locality and communities. These will likely turn

out to be a subset of the 169 targets. The council could then decide to adopt and declare these SDG targets. It might also choose to amend its own stated goals, or supplement them, to align with the SDG targets. This exercise should raise awareness and understanding of the SDGs within the council.

The mapping exercise is also likely to reveal gaps. There will be some compelling SDG targets which the council wants to aim for or see partners achieve, but where it feels it is doing too little, or lacks policies, strategies or partnerships. That may be because it has insufficient resources, or because the issue in question is outside its remit.

Once a gap has been identified, the council can then prioritise it and decide to intervene. It could adopt the target, provide resources and draw up a plan to attain it. Alternatively, the council could identify and understand which other organisations in its area have responsibility for, or an interest in the issue. These organisations could be other public sector bodies, civil society actors and local businesses (or their representative organisations). The council may already have a partnership with the identified organisation, or it may seek to create a new partnership. The council can then adopt the SDG target and attain it through working in partnership.

STEP 1 ACTIONS

1. Learn about the SDGs, explore how your council could apply them and why they are useful in your locality
2. Map the council's high-level, strategic policies and plans against the 17 SDGs and their accompanying targets
3. Make choices about which goals and targets align most to your locality – adopt these or align your existing council priorities to the **targets**

Case study 1: City of York Council

How well do City of York Council's corporate strategies align with the SDGs? International Service, a charity and international development agency based in the city, tried to answer this question in 2018 with a rapid assessment survey commissioned by the Council with the support of the York Human Rights City group.⁹

International Service examined 20 of the Council's high-level corporate strategies, many of which focussed on working with partners. These included the Draft Local Plan, the York Economic Plan, the overarching Council Plan 2015-2019, the York Economic Strategy and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

The assessment judged that all but two of the 17 SDGs were relevant to York – the exceptions were SDG 14 (Life below water) and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals). It found that around a fifth of the 169 SDG targets were relevant to the Council and its work with partners. The Council's corporate strategies were well aligned with 70% of those relevant targets.

The remaining 30% include targets which, argued International Service, could 'enrich the strategic direction' of the city, such as: reducing the mortality rate from air pollution, having gender parity among elected members of the Council, and growing income for the bottom 40% of earners faster than for the average earner.

Recommended next steps for the Council to maximise the benefit of the SDGs for York are:

- Providing local leadership by taking ownership of local SDG achievements
- Aligning each high-level strategy with the SDGs, either by including an addendum or introducing them into strategies at the next review point, then bringing in relevant SDG targets which are currently not addressed
- Developing an environmental sustainability strategy to close gaps and ensure the environmental targets in the SDGs are well addressed
- Engaging local people in planning and delivery of the SDGs through information, participation and volunteering

- Monitoring progress against the SDGs. Mapping the SDGs, their targets and indicators against existing monitoring (e.g. performance scorecards) and aligning them, adjusting where necessary – while noting that existing local indicators are often appropriate and adequate.

Where possible, disaggregating data by gender, age, ethnicity, disability status, and any other relevant factors to find differences in outcome, to ensure we're "leaving no-one behind" when achieving the SDGs.

Case study 2: Bristol



Source: Shauking on Pexels

Bristol's strong involvement with the SDGs emerged from the city being chosen as European Green Capital for the year 2015, in recognition of its long-established commitment to environmental sustainability.

In 2016, a Bristol SDG Alliance was formed by people wanting to promote the UN's newly agreed SDGs locally. This grew to include individuals from key Bristol institutions: its two universities, council officials, business representatives, and voluntary organisations and networks. The Bristol SDG Alliance is now a network of stakeholders representing more than 80 organisations, meeting every six to eight weeks to share best practice and information, and to advocate and adopt the SDGs in their own organisations.

In 2019, Bristol became the first UK city and Council to produce a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) setting out its progress on all 17 of the SDGs in some detail.¹ This in-depth, 70 page VLR was presented to the UN in New York in 2019 at the same time as the UK Government's VNR. The VLR was researched and written by Bristol University's Cabot Institute for the Environment, and while it was published in partnership with the Council's City Office and the Bristol SDG Alliance, its academic authorship gave it a measure of independence.

Bristol's VLR had two key ingredients. The first was identifying 145 local statistical indicators and the data to support them, covering 16 of the 17 SDGs (there were none for SDG 17). Mapping the SDGs onto the One City Plan helped to select these, and an attempt was made to find an indicator for every target relevant to it. Each indicator served to illustrate progress on an SDG target or an entire goal, ranging from just one indicator per goal (for SDG 6, on Clean water and sanitation) to 29 indicators (for SDG4, on Quality education).

The aim was to use 2010 as a benchmark year across the VLR, with annual data gathered every following year to show whether there was overall progress (colour coded green), deterioration (red) or no real change (amber). Out of the total of 145 indicators, 29% were judged to be red, 57% green, 8% amber; for the remaining 6% data deficiencies ruled out any judgement.

The other main ingredient of Bristol's VLR was a city-wide online survey to identify organisations which, consciously or unconsciously, were contributing towards achieving the SDGs – and summarising the nature and scale of their contribution. Some 90 organisations responded to this survey, which helped raise awareness of the SDGs in the city.

Bristol's pioneering VLR has influenced updating of the One City Plan and established the city's UK leadership position in local level application of the SDGs.¹ The Cabot Institute authors of the VLR have also used their experience to write a handbook for UK cities wanting to prepare their own VLR.¹⁰

Bristol's elected Mayor Marvin Rees has become a strong advocate for local application of the SDGs within the city and beyond. As the city updates its One City Plan in line with the SDGs, the hundreds of actions it contains have been mapped

onto the goals and their targets. The plan also includes an aspiration to develop a separate action plan focussed on achieving the SDGs across Bristol.

The Mayor of Bristol has reaffirmed his commitment to the SDGs in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the SDGs seen as central to a sustainable and inclusive economic recovery for the city.

“We can achieve a lot more in collaboration and come through this crisis in a stronger, more sustainable way if we take the right action now.”

Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol¹¹

Step 2: Engage and partner



Any council interested in using the SDGs must decide how it wants to involve other organisations and the wider community. Given how wide-ranging and cross cutting the SDGs are, there is limited value in any council engaging with them as a purely internal exercise.

Partnerships are essential if councils are to respond to increasing demands with their limited resources. Sometimes it has been local organisations or alliances of organisations who have taken the initiative on the SDGs in their community, such as the Liverpool 2030hub (page 19) or Canterbury SDG Forum,¹² who then tried to involve their council as a key local player.

The mapping exercise described above could be an early step for the council to raise internal awareness of the SDGs, helping officers and politicians decide why and how they want to use them. Alternatively, the council could decide to engage its partners and other interested stakeholders in this mapping exercise from the outset.

Decide how to work with your stakeholders and partners

The objective would be to set down how all the key strategies, policies and plans affecting the locality – not just the council's own – are mapped onto the SDG targets. A partnership approach would then be adopted for choosing which SDGs and targets matter most to the local community, analysing the findings of the mapping exercise and deciding on the next steps. This sort of multi-stakeholder approach is strongly encouraged by *Agenda 2030* and recognised as an important way of creating action in support of the SDGs. Partnerships can help a council to decide why and how it engages with the SDGs, as well as encouraging action and a sense of shared responsibility from across society.

Consider setting up an SDG partnership with key partners

Councils could use a combination of surveys, meetings, workshops or larger events to move forward with partners. It could set up a local SDG partnership, with

representatives of the council and its key strategic partners making decisions on SDG engagement and providing oversight. Newcastle City Council have taken a similar approach by embedding the SDGs in the existing Wellbeing for Life board (page 19).

These approaches involve some awareness-raising around the SDGs, explaining them and their local relevance. Many organisations and individuals are likely to find them an attractive proposition and give their local council credit for supporting the goals. In many places across England, it is local stakeholder partnerships that have encouraged councils to engage with the SDGs, including in Canterbury, Bristol, Liverpool, and Cambridge.

Engage with citizens

Councils will also need to consider the role they play in engaging citizens in the SDGs. We explore this more in Step 4 (page 26) but it's important to note that local people are arguably the council's most important partner and working with them to agree priorities is a vital component in open and transparent decision-making. Councils around the world have delivered creative public engagement and awareness raising activities, such as Utrecht's '4 Global Goals' website,¹³ with resources and downloadable posters (page 28). Similarly, in the UK, the 2030hub Liverpool has focused on awareness raising and business entrepreneurship to encourage greater uptake of the SDGs in the city.

Partnership does, however, bring risks. There is the risk of a council losing control of the agenda if SDG-related local goals and targets are called for which the council feels are unachievable or not in accord with its own priorities. But if a council engages with the SDGs in isolation and without local partners, it is unlikely to be able to support or endorse many of the targets. There are significant parts of the local economy, society and environment where it cannot achieve much in the way of sustainable development on its own.



© Sort of Films

STEP 2 ACTIONS

1. Decide how to work with partners in your locality; consider holding meetings or workshops to explore the prioritisation of the SDGs
2. Form an SDG partnership board or bring the SDGs in to an existing one to help guide the council's progress
3. Think about how the council will engage citizens in the process, be that surveys and consultations, or more creative awareness raising and engagement activities

Case study 3: Newcastle City Council



Source: Sonywiz on Pexels

In 2019, Newcastle City Council made a political commitment to mainstream the SDGs in its policies, activities and programmes.¹⁴ A team from Newcastle University is currently working with the Council and other partners to better understand the city from an SDG perspective, with the potential to frame future collaboration and inform the city's Future Needs Assessment. In February 2020, the Council also committed to embed the SDGs in the new workplan of the city's Wellbeing for Life board.

This board is established under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, with its membership drawn from organisations including Newcastle City Council, the NHS in Newcastle, the voluntary and community sector, the two local universities and Healthwatch Newcastle, an independent statutory body which champions people using health and social care services. The board works to improve the wellbeing and health of everyone in the city, with a focus on reducing health inequalities.

The board will hold a series of themed meetings with invited experts to consider how to make use of the SDG targets in planning its work for the coming years. The health and wellbeing agenda is seen as an entry point for the SDGs, enabling

greater engagement and the opportunity for mainstreaming across the city in the future.

Health and wellbeing are a good starting point, because of the many linkages to other areas covered by the SDGs – such as people’s safety and air quality. The SDGs are well matched to Newcastle’s priorities of reducing inequalities, improving prosperity, and embedding health improvements in all its policies and strategies.

Case study 4: 2030hub, Liverpool

The UN has recognised a small number of Local2030 hubs around the globe as places where local communities can identify their own priorities and implement innovative solutions with respect to the SDGs. The first of these, the 2030hub, was opened in Liverpool in 2017.¹⁵

The 2030hub in Liverpool has a focus on fostering sustainable entrepreneurship. As well as providing co-working space in the city centre, the hub offers support to businesses, public sector bodies and non-profit organisations to help them understand their role in implementing the SDGs in the city and wider region.

Starting in 2019, it organised a series of events across the Liverpool City Region (all the Merseyside boroughs, plus Halton in Cheshire) aimed mainly, but not exclusively, at business. This event series, named the SDG Tour Liverpool and supported by Peel Land & Property, sought to explain the SDGs and their value to people and organisations. Attendee levels rose across the event series as a growing number of organisations started to engage with the SDGs.

The business-led approach to the SDGs taken by the 2030hub has sought to build on Liverpool’s heritage as a financial centre, particularly its vibrant impact investor community. In 2019, as part of a Department for International Development project on investment for a better world, the hub hosted an event with Liverpool’s finance and investment community. This resulted in a commitment to set up an impact investing working group, to consider how local investment can support SDG implementation in the city region.

In July 2018, Liverpool City Council and its elected Mayor Joe Anderson declared a climate emergency. As part of this, it agreed to incorporate the SDGs into the Council's policies and reflect them in the work plan of a newly created select committee on environment and climate change.

The Council has commissioned the 2030hub to independently map the strategic policies and monitoring indicators of the Mayor's 2018 Inclusive Growth Plan against the targets and indicators of the SDGs. This work has helped to inform consideration of the aims, priorities and metrics of Team Liverpool's new City Plan, which is under preparation.



Source: Pauldaley1977 on Pexels

Step 3: Implement and monitor



Having decided to adopt some of the SDGs and targets, a council needs to ensure that the plans and policies to achieve them are working. It needs reliable indicators of progress, and a way of systematically reviewing progress and making any changes required to ensure it stays on course.

The main outcome expected from any council's engagement with the SDGs is a localised version of them. This would be a set of 2030 targets agreed with strategic partners that align with the SDGs and some of the affiliated targets. This local commitment to the SDGs would be supported by a range of existing strategies and plans, with some possibly amended, extended or drawn up anew to embed the SDGs within them.

Identify indicators and establish a baseline

For these targets to be meaningful, there needs to be a means of reviewing progress towards them. If this review of progress is to be rigorous, at least one indicator should be chosen for each target, with baseline data used to set out the current or recent situation. Ideally, this baseline data should cover trends over the past one or two decades to indicate the direction of travel at the beginning of the commitment to the SDG-based target; have things been getting better, worse or staying about the same?

Monitor your progress

Once an indicator has been chosen and 'baselined', data should be gathered regularly to see if adequate progress is being made towards the target. If it is not, then the policies and strategies related to that target need to be reviewed, in so far as the council and its partners are able to change them. It's important this is communicated publicly. This way, council partners, stakeholders and the citizens will understand what is improving or falling behind in their area.

A global set of indicators has been agreed by the UN, covering all 17 of the SDGs and their 169 targets, so councils should try to align their own chosen indicators

with these. It is not necessarily possible for every global indicator to be used at a local level, indeed some of them are not appropriate to a UK context, so in some cases proxy indicators might be more suitable.

At a national level, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) is reporting UK progress on the global indicators through its National Reporting Platform.¹⁶ It is also increasingly disaggregating national data so that common indicators can be used across councils in the UK.



30
indicators

INDICATOR 11.1.1

Proportion of urban population living in slums, informal settlements or inadequate housing

Choose the right indicators

However, just as any council or local partnership engaging with the SDGs needs to make its own careful choice of locally relevant targets, so too should it for indicators consistent with the data gathering resources it can provide. For some targets, it may be that there are simpler, qualitative ways of effectively assessing progress. For example, the London Sustainable Development Commission (LSDC), an advisory board set up to guide Mayoral decision-making in the Capital, is updating its Quality of Life indicators in line with the SDGs.¹⁷ This work is ongoing but has identified appropriate indicators for London to monitor progress on the goals based entirely on data that is currently collected.

The key questions that a council or local SDG partnership needs to ask itself are:

- Is a chosen indicator well aligned with an SDG indicator, but also meaningful and useful to us, our partners and our community?

- Is there local data available to establish a baseline for the indicator and then track progress in future? If not, can one be established – affordably and soon?
- Are we already collecting this data ourselves, or can we find another public body that is collecting and analysing it, such as the ONS, which will give us access?
- Are there prospects for disaggregating the data to make it even more useful? Can we use it to find out what is happening for certain groups, e.g. by gender, age or ethnicity? Can we use it to find out what is happening in specific areas, such as individual wards?

If many councils become engaged with the SDGs, they may collaborate on local SDG indicators, share learning and insights, and compare their performance on reaching them. The efforts to identify suitable indicators by cities like Bristol, Newcastle, and London are potentially useful to other councils across the country, as well as the work of the ONS and international examples like that of Mannheim (page 24).

STEP 3 ACTIONS

- 1.** Establish a baseline by identifying what indicators you can use to monitor your progress against the SDG targets that you have prioritised
- 2.** Monitor your progress against the indicators on a regular basis, this should be communicated publicly
- 3.** Choose indicators consistent with the data gathering resources the council can provide.

Case study 5: Mannheim 2030



Source: Hubert Berberich on Wikimedia

The municipality of Mannheim, in South West Germany, published its first VLR in 2019 setting out how it was implementing the SDGs in this city of about 310,000 people.¹⁸

At the heart of its support for the SDGs is the “Mannheim 2030” Mission Statement, adopted by the Council in 2019 following two and a half years of consultation. About 2,500 citizens were directly engaged in workshops and discussions, while another 10,000 were involved through opinion polls and presentations of the process. Among the many consultation events were two workshops in which citizens, chosen by a lottery, discussed with the Mayor the SDGs and what they should mean for their city.

The agreed Mission Statement consists of seven equally ranked strategic goals for 2030, which includes objectives such as:

Goal 1: Mannheim guarantees educational equality and prevents poverty. The social and cultural integration of all Mannheim residents is guaranteed

Goal 3: Mannheim is characterized by a supportive city community and is a model for communal life in cities. Gender equality and the acceptance of diverse human identities and lifestyles have been achieved

Goal 6: Mannheim is a climate-friendly – in perspective, climate-neutral – and resilient city that is a model for environmentally friendly life and actions.

For each of these seven goals, Mannheim sets out which of the 17 SDGs it supports. A small number of key milestones, specific commitments and methods also accompany each of its goals, and statistical indicators have been selected to show if there is progress towards the goal.

As an example, the first of these seven goals – on educational quality, preventing poverty and inclusion – is identified as supporting four of the SDGs. “Cohesion and well-being in the city’s neighbourhoods” is one of the four key milestones for this goal, “Mannheim will leave no one behind” is one of the four specific commitments, and “Cost-free daycare, workplace training opportunities and strong local education networks” are given as one of the two methods. Seven indicators are used to track progress, each one aligned with one of the SDGs.

Across all seven of Mannheim’s goals there are a total of 48 indicators. According to Mannheim’s first VLR, there is progress towards the goals for 30 of them, but deterioration for 17 and no change for the remaining one.

The new Mission Statement feeds into the preparation of the city council’s budgeted for 2020-2021. As well as guiding the Council’s own operations, it wants the statement and its goals to be a compass for all its citizens, businesses and civil organisations, steering them towards a shared 2030 vision.

Mannheim 2030 is also seen as first step rather than the last word, to be updated and improved through the coming decade amid further citizen consultation. It also plans further VLRs to report on its progress.

Step 4: Advocate for the SDGs and report on progress



Once a council or local SDG partnership has decided to engage with the SDGs, it will want to advocate for them and report on how it is helping to achieve them. This can serve to reinforce existing partnerships and create new ones. Councils can go further in their advocacy, engaging local citizens in supporting the SDGs and reaching out to national and international audiences.

In this briefing, we have set out an SDG roadmap which starts with a council considering whether to make use of the SDGs, then moving on to creating a local SDG partnership, selecting its own local SDG targets, then tracking its progress towards them. Right at the outset, advocacy for the goals is likely to play an important part in creating any effective local SDG action.

The SDGs represent a global consensus on what sort of progress humanity should be aiming for; moving forward with decency, dignity and fairness. At the same time, they identify the gravest threats and largest injustices facing humanity: public health emergencies, environmental destruction, conflict, crime, corruption, exploitation and lack of opportunity. If a council decides it wants to support the SDGs, it will surely want to advocate for them.

Advocate for the SDGs internally and externally

This advocacy will be internal, telling a council's staff and councillors that they are part of an organisation which is part of a global endeavour for better future. And it will be external, explaining the SDG commitment to the council's partners and suppliers, and to local communities.

Make sure councillors understand the commitment made

To be effective, the council's political leadership will have to play a part in this advocacy, while every councillor will need to understand the commitment. It will have to be distilled in simple, short messages about what the SDGs are, why the council supports them and what it is doing about them.

Communicate progress

Councils should report their progress against their local SDG targets internally and to local stakeholders, but they may also wish to report more widely to national audiences. Other councils and Government need to learn what works; how did engagement with the SDGs help improve peoples' lives in a locality?

Councils may wish to input into the UK's next VNR, which will formally report on national SDG progress to the UN. A council may want to go further and set out its progress in its own Voluntary Local Review (VLR), which it may choose to submit to the UN. New York, where the UN has its headquarters, became the first major city to submit to publish a VLR in 2017, and Bristol became the first UK council to do so in 2019.¹⁹ Major cities may have led the way, but there is no reason why councils serving smaller urban and rural areas should not champion the SDGs, and draw up and publish VLRs.

Communicating progress on the SDGs nationally and internationally is important, but it's equally important, if not more so, that councils communicate the impact of their policies and service delivery to local people. This helps encourage local engagement with the SDGs and is also important as part of a democratic process, allowing citizens to hold their representatives to account for their actions.

As mentioned in Step 2, engaging citizens and organisations in a locality can be a creative endeavour. The UN provides free downloadable icons and resources for organisations online, as does the public campaign 'Global Goals'.²⁰ In some cases, such as Utrecht, these have been interpreted into local imagery, reflecting important landmarks or cultural concepts rather than the global icons (page 28).

STEP 4 ACTIONS

1. Advocate for the SDGs internally, telling your council's staff and councillors what they are part of and explain the SDG commitments made to the council's partners and suppliers, and to local communities
2. Ensure that every councillor understands the commitments being made
3. Communicate progress through national and international forums, but prioritise local audiences

Case study 6: Utrecht

In 2016, the municipality (or city council) of Utrecht, the Netherlands' fourth largest urban area, adopted the SDGs by declaring itself a Global Goals City. Its "top priorities are to increase awareness of the SDGs amongst Utrecht's residents and businesses, and to stimulate them to take supportive and - where possible – cross-sectional action."²¹

In adopting the SDGs locally, Utrecht was building on a tradition of engaging with sustainable development issues at home and abroad. It is a Fairtrade Municipality, a Human Rights City and since 1986, it has had a sister city in a relatively poor developing nation, León in Nicaragua, supporting it on projects such as combatting deforestation and building homes for low income families.

The Council's focus is as much on helping and encouraging business, citizens and civil society to work together to achieve the SDGs – locally and internationally – as it is on changing its own operations and strategies to better support the SDGs.

It sponsors an autonomous foundation, Utrecht4TheGoals, created in 2016 to raise awareness of the SDGs and inspire local people to be actively involved. Initiatives include an awards scheme recognising local people and organisations helping to achieving the SDGs, and a subsidy scheme which supports grassroots initiatives that contribute to the SDGs, either in Utrecht or abroad.

The council is developing an online Global Goals Dashboard to present local SDG-related data in a transparent, up-to-date and user-friendly way, for its own staff, residents and stakeholders. This aim is to show how different policy areas join up and relate to the SDGs, from tackling climate change to increasing social inclusion, and whether progress is being made towards achieving them.

The Council says it wants “to challenge the siloed model of policy and decision-making by offering an integrated framework through which to view and implement Utrecht’s strategies and activities.” It hopes this dashboard will facilitate new ways of working together and support integral thinking for future policy development.

Utrecht has found that the SDGs are well matched with an established local priority – healthy urban living, through which it collaborates with partners, focussing on areas such as innovation, the local health economy and infrastructure. The integrated, interdisciplinary, multi-stakeholder approach that the SDGs demand are all needed to make progress on healthy urban living.

The Council recognises that Utrecht still has plenty of work to do. The four main challenges are:

- Working with partners to make the SDGs a powerful local movement, which a large majority of local people are aware of
- Mainstreaming and integrating the SDGs into the Council’s own operations and administration
- Involving the cultural sector in rethinking their contribution to the SDGs
- Connecting with new international networks and projects to facilitate increased knowledge-sharing about how best to integrate the SDGs locally

Utrecht claims that cities are “uniquely positioned to be leaders, catalysts, educators, facilitators, implementers, and patrons of the SDGs because they are the common link connecting so many of the other key players in this story”.

Conclusion

Councils are on the frontline of many of the challenges the SDGs seek to resolve, including those we have witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic. National and local government needs to recognise that achieving them will be a shared responsibility which requires adequate resources and active partnership.

The main reasons why councils should investigate and implement the UN's SDGs are:

- Making progress towards these comprehensive and universal global goals by 2030 will depend on action at the local level, and councils are key actors at that level
- The SDGs can help focus efforts on the health and wellbeing of people that are the furthest behind
- Engagement with the SDGs supports and complements the declaration of a climate emergency
- The SDGs can provide councils with a framework for strategic planning, policy review and action for sustainable development – for economic progress, social justice and inclusion, protection of the climate, environment and biodiversity, and ensuring no one is left behind.
- The SDGs can help local authorities to foster strategic partnerships, framing joint actions and shared priorities in terms of the goals.
- The resource burden for initial engagement with the SDGs is low.

In this guide, we have set out four steps councils can take towards the SDGs. The first step on a council's SDG journey is to spend a short time learning about the goals and appreciating their relevance to the local authority. Having decided to engage, mapping the council's high level, strategic policies and plans against the 17 SDGs and their accompanying targets is crucial. This mapping exercise will lead the council into making choices about which SDGs and targets matter to its own locality and communities.

Given how wide-ranging and cross-cutting sustainable development and the SDGs are, there is limited value in any council engaging with the goals as a purely

internal exercise. So, outreach and wider advocacy of the goals is essential, engaging local citizens in supporting the SDGs and reaching out to national and international audiences. This could also include creating local stakeholder networks or a more formal SDG partnership between the council and key local stakeholders. Finally, councils adopting the SDGs should monitor and report on their progress, to ensure targets are being met, provide learnings for further work and to hold themselves accountable.

The SDGs are a global effort towards a socially just and environmentally sustainable future, where no one is left behind. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown with devastating consequences some of what a future threatened by further pandemics or climate and ecological crises could look like. We can use the SDGs to rebuild our economies in a resilient and sustainable way, focusing on creating good lives on a healthy planet for all people. With 10 years left to achieve them, we all have a part to play and councils are some of the best placed institutions to drive progress.

Further reading and resources

Reading

Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by United Nations

UK Voluntary National Review of the Sustainable Development Goals by HM Government

Voluntary Local Reviews: A handbook for UK Cities by Cabot Institute for the Environment, University of Bristol, and City Office, Bristol City Council.

The Sustainable Development Goals: What local governments need to know by UCLG

Roadmap for localising the SDGs: Implementation and monitoring at subnational level by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments

Measuring up: How the UK's performing on the Sustainable Development Goals by UKSSD

Useful websites

SDG Knowledge Platform - <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>

UN reports from Local Authorities -

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11/local>

UN Local2030 - <https://www.local2030.org/>

Global Goals - <https://www.globalgoals.org/resources>

UN Sustainable Development Goals communications materials

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/>

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- ⁵ LGA, (2019). Motion: UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2 July 2019
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- ⁷ Jennings N, Fecht D & de Matteis S. (2019) Co-benefits of climate change mitigation in the UK, Grantham Institute briefing paper 31, Imperial College. And Jones E, Jenkinson C & Brammer S. (2019). A toolkit for city regions and local authorities, Ashden.
- ⁸ Knightsbridge Neighbourhood Forum. (2018). Knightsbridge Neighbourhood Plan 2018-2037
- ⁹ International Service. (2018). Bringing the Global Goals to York – rapid assessment findings..
- ¹⁰ Fox S & Macleod A (2019). Bristol and the SDGs; A voluntary local review of progress 2019
- ¹¹ Rees, M. (2020). Bristol City Council Cabinet Meeting, 28 April 2020
- ¹² See Canterbury SDG Forum Reports on local implementation of the Goals
- ¹³ See www.utrecht4globalgoals.nl/
- ¹⁴ Newcastle City Council. (2019) Amendment to notice of motion – Sustainable Development Goals, 4 September 2019
- ¹⁵ See <https://the2030hub.com/>
- ¹⁶ See <https://sustainabledevelopment-uk.github.io/>
- ¹⁷ See <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/organisations-we-work/london-sustainable-development-commission/our-current-work-and-priorities/our-work-un-sustainable-development-goals>
- ¹⁸ City of Mannheim, The Implementation of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals in Mannheim 2030, 2019.
- ¹⁹ Fox S & Macleod A (2019). Bristol and the SDGs; A voluntary local review of progress 2019
- ²⁰ See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/> and <https://www.globalgoals.org/resources>
- ²¹ City of Utrecht, Utrecht – A Global Goals City. 2018.