

# **UK Progress on Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, 8, 9 and 13: policy and literature review**

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## Overview

With an overall Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) achievement score of 82.16, the United Kingdom ranks 9th among 193 UN Member States. This overall score reflects the country's total progress across all 17 SDGs. In contrast, the UK's spillover score, which assesses the positive or negative cross-border effects of its policies and actions on other countries' ability to meet the SDGs, is considerably lower at 61.85, positioning it at 148th out of 167 ranked countries. Higher scores correlate with a more positive and less negative global influence of a country (Sachs, Lafortune and Fuller, 2024).

The UK's Sustainable Development Goals website currently displays the following message: "Since September 2023, data uploads to this site have been paused. However, users can still access indicator data sources via the provided hyperlinks to check for published and potentially newer data. For up-to-date, globally comparable SDG data, please refer to the UN SDG website" (Office for National Statistics, 2025).

A clear shift has occurred in the UK government's approach to SDG reporting, particularly regarding the depth of information provided. Initial reports between 2017 and 2020 were far more substantial in content (Office for National Statistics, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). They outlined ambitions which explicitly prioritized increasing the amount of UK SDG data reported, further developing the UK SDG data site, and providing analytical insights into the UK's progress.

This trajectory stands in stark contrast to a concise 2021 report which lacked a clear set of goals for the following year (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Subsequently, no new official reports have been released since then to monitor development indicators. Notably vague, the "future developments" section of the 2021 annual report – the last ever published on this domain – briefly mentioned a commitment to ongoing engagement with users and the wider SDGs community, without providing any details on how this would be achieved.

# RQ1. What progress has the UK and Thailand made on meeting key SDGs relevant to our themes? (Goal 4, 5, 8, 11, 13)

## GOAL 4 – QUALITY EDUCATION

According to the Sustainable Development Report 2024 (Sachs, Lafontaine and Fuller, 2024), the United Kingdom has officially met the target for the indicator “Participation rate in pre-primary organized learning” – defined as the adjusted net enrolment rate in organized learning one year before the official entry age for primary education. However, a closer examination of the metadata reveals that this indicator is based on data from up to 2014, when the participation rate in pre-primary organized learning was 98.2% (SDG Index, 2025). Looking at the more recent metadata available at the UK Data for the SDGs website (Office for National Statistics, 2023), the participation rate dropped to 91.4% in 2023. This discrepancy raises concerns about the validity of the ‘achieved’ status on the SDG Report 2024 and prompts questions regarding the current state of early childhood education participation in the UK.

Focusing on a different aspect, a similar trend emerges in the indicator “Net primary enrolment rate”, which reflects the percentage of children of official primary school age who are enrolled in primary education. This indicator is flagged in the report as a remaining challenge as the UK’s performance declined from 98.13% in 2015 to 96.91% in 2022, signalling a concerning trend in primary education accessibility or retention (SDG Index, 2025).

For the “Lower secondary completion rate”, the report classifies this indicator as having achieved the SDG. The report relies on available trend data up until 2021, which shows a decline in completion rate from 98.75% in 2017 to 96.61% in 2021 (SDG Index, 2025). Despite this downward trend, the World Bank’s (2025) most recent data shows an increase to 99.4% in 2022, backing up the status of “achieved” for this indicator.

The Covid-19 pandemic's considerable impact on SDG-related educational trends, particularly regarding the “Net primary enrolment rate” and “Lower secondary completion rate,” calls for careful consideration. The interruption to early years education likely triggered a series of negative consequences for children's later involvement in schooling. While a recent study by the Education Policy Institute (Crenna-Jennings, Joseph and Hutchinson, 2024) indicated that the number of children out of school remained consistent during the pandemic itself, their analysis revealed a subsequent and continuing upward trend. This research estimates that by 2023,

approximately 400,000 children were not attending school, a substantial 53% increase since 2017.

Simultaneously, local authority records show a more than twofold increase in formally registered home-educated children between 2017 and 2023, rising by 108% from 45,500 to 94,800. Despite this rise in home education, the EPI's findings suggest that around 305,000 children were completely absent from the education system in 2023, marking a worrying 41% rise since 2017 (Crenna-Jennings, Joseph and Hutchinson, 2024). This figure is approximately 2.5 times greater than the Department for Education's estimation, as highlighted in the EPI report. These interconnected patterns emphasize the urgent need for deeper exploration into the complex factors undermining participation in education in the aftermath of the pandemic.

A significant gap in the SDG 2024 Report is the absence of data for the "Literacy rate," a key indicator. Moreover, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics similarly lacks data on this metric for the UK. According to the Survey of Adult Skills 2023 (Wheater *et al.*, 2024), 10% of England's youth aged 16-19 and 13% of those aged 20-24 had low proficiency (Level 1 or below in literacy). The SDG long-term objective for this indicator is to achieve 100% literacy.

In the case of "Tertiary educational attainment", defined as the percentage of individuals aged 25 to 34 who have completed tertiary education, the UK is marked as having achieved the SDG (Sachs, Lafortune and Fuller, 2024). In 2022, the attainment rate stood at 57.70%, above the long-term objective of 52.2% (SDG Index, 2025). This marks a substantial improvement from 49.94% in 2015, indicating sustained progress in this domain.

The "PISA score" is also categorized as "SDG achieved." However, the trend in scores reveals stagnation rather than growth (Sachs, Lafortune and Fuller, 2024): from 499.89 in 2015 to 503.46 in 2018, followed by a decline to 494.35 in 2022. Given the long-term objective of 525.6 and the absence of significant score improvements, the UK faces a significant challenge to maintain its 'achieved' status in this domain, requiring maximized efforts.

Concerning the "Variation in mathematics performance explained by socio-economic status", the UK is reported to be "on track," though the indicator remains a challenge. The value has shown improvement over time, declining from 14.76 in 2012 to 10.95 in 2022 (SDG Index, 2025). The long-term target for this indicator is 8.3, highlighting the need for continued efforts to maintain the current pace of progress.

Finally, the indicator for "Underachievers in mathematics" reveals one of the most significant areas of concern for the UK. This metric has seen a general upward trajectory in recent years: rising from 19.75% in 2006 to 21.87% in 2015, improving slightly to 19.23% in 2018, and reaching a peak of 24.33% in 2022. This figure is notably distant

from the target of 10% or below, indicating that substantial challenges persist in improving students' performance in science.

## GOAL 5 – GENDER EQUALITY

The 2024 Sustainable Development Report (Sachs, Lafortune and Fuller, 2024) highlights persistent challenges in the UK regarding gender equality, noting that while progress is being made, the current rate of improvement is insufficient to meet the 2030 targets.

The UK has demonstrated success in achieving the SDG target for "Demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods," defined as the proportion of women of reproductive age whose family planning needs are met through contemporary contraceptive methods (Sachs, Lafortune and Fuller, 2024). Consistently reporting a figure of 85% between 2015 and 2023, the UK's performance on this indicator showed a marginal increase to 86% in 2024 (SDG Index, 2025). While the long-term aspiration for this indicator is universal access (100%), recent evidence suggests potential challenges in translating this high-level achievement into equitable and satisfactory experiences for all women. Specifically, a recent report by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS, 2025) indicates that a significant proportion, nearly half (49%), of women in the UK encounter obstacles in accessing their preferred contraceptive methods. These barriers reportedly include extended waiting periods, difficulties in securing appointments, and financial constraints.

Furthermore, the BPAS report highlights dissatisfaction among some women with their current contraceptive options, with approximately one in seven expressing unhappiness related to side effects. Notably, over a quarter of respondents (28%) reported not using a primary method of contraception. The report also points to unmet needs and preferences, with a substantial majority (72%) of women expressing interest in non-hormonal alternatives. Additionally, a significant majority (76%) indicated a willingness to trust male partners to utilize long-acting reversible contraception (LARC), like male contraceptive pills, gels, or injections, if such options were available. These findings suggest a potential divergence between national-level SDG achievement and the lived experiences and preferences of women regarding family planning in the UK.

The target for the "ratio of female-to-male mean years of education received" has also been met and is projected to maintain this SDG achievement. The ratio improved from 99.4 in 2015 to 100.67 in 2022 – the latest available data (SDG Index, 2025). However, a longitudinal perspective reveals a more nuanced trajectory, with the ratio reaching a high of 105.29 in 2000, followed by a dip to 98.87 in 2002, before its eventual recovery to above 100 in 2018.

While the "Ratio of female-to-male labor force participation rate" in the UK has generally trended upward since 2000 (77.1), reaching a high of 88.2 in 2021, recent data indicate a potential shift. Despite its current status as SDG achieved and the outlook for continued achievement, the ratio experienced a decline in 2022 (87.53) and 2023 (87.49) (SDG Index, 2025). This recent downward trend underscores the importance of continued monitoring of this indicator to safeguard prior gains.

The UK continues to lag behind the 50% target for "Seats held by women in national parliament," with the 2024 figure standing at 34.7% (SDG Index, 2025). However, analysis of the *Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments* (IPU Parline, 2025) reveals a substantial positive shift between January 2024 and January 2025 which has not been reflected in the SDG report. During this period, the UK's global ranking improved from 48th to 26th, with the proportion of seats held by women increasing by 5.8 percentage points to 40.5%. This notable increase occurred after the July 2024 general elections and subsequent governmental transition.

The "gender wage gap" indicator presents a significant area of concern for the UK, demonstrating a less satisfactory trajectory compared to other gender equality metrics. Following a period of decline from 2008, the gap reached its narrowest point at 11.98 in 2020, only to widen again to 14.17 in 2021 (SDG Index, 2025). While final OECD data for 2022 shows a marginal reduction to 13.98 (OECD, 2023a), this slow pace of progress suggests that achieving the long-term target of zero remains a considerable challenge. Additionally, a study by the Living Wage Foundation (Mignon, 2025) highlights the imbalance in low pay between genders in 2024. According to their analysis, the likelihood of women being in jobs paying below the real Living Wage was nearly 50% higher compared to men. This disparity is further evidenced by the fact that women occupied over 60% of all positions classified as paying below this threshold in 2024, clearly demonstrating that they are over-represented in the lowest-paid segments of the workforce.

## GOAL 8 – DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

The 2024 Sustainable Development Report (Sachs, Lafontaine and Fuller, 2024) points to substantial remaining challenges in the UK concerning Decent Work and Economic Growth, suggesting that a more accelerated rate of progress is required to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Regarding the indicator "Adjusted GDP growth" – defined as the GDP growth rate adjusted for income levels and relative to the average growth of high-income countries – the United Kingdom faces a notable remaining challenge. In 2022, the UK recorded a value of -1.38, significantly below the target of 5 (SDG Index, 2025). While trend data is unavailable, the report indicates a substantial gap. Adding to this concern, OECD data

shows a sharp drop in the UK's unadjusted GDP growth from 4.8% in 2022 to 0.3% in 2023 (World Bank, 2023).

The UK's designation as SDG achieved for "victims of modern slavery," with a 2022 value of 1.8 (long-term target: 0), offers an incomplete picture due to the lack of trend data on the SDG website (SDG Index, 2025). While acknowledged for its robust government response to modern slavery, the UK's performance in this area, according to the Global Slavery Index 2023, has been on a downward trajectory since 2018 (Walk Free, 2023). The UK reported a minimal increase in referrals (only 1%), but this was coupled with a deterioration in victim support measures and visa access – mostly as a consequence of the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act. The subsequent Illegal Migration Act 2023, with its breaches of international law and the UN Refugee Convention, suggests a continued negative trajectory. This critical downward trend, not reflected in the SDG report, demands attention as it challenges the notion of sustained SDG achievement in this domain (ibid, 2023).

The indicator "Adults with an account at a bank or other financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider" is also reported as an achieved SDG for the UK. Data from 2011 to 2021 shows a fluctuating but overall high level of access, reaching a peak of 99.76% in 2021, just 0.2 percentage points below the 100% target (SDG Index, 2025). However, the absence of more recent data creates a significant gap in our understanding of trends. Nevertheless, the "Family Resources Survey: financial year 2021 to 2022" offers some insight, revealing regional variations. Notably, current account ownership was lowest in the North West and Northern Ireland (92% of households), and the North West also had the highest incidence of households without any type of account (Department for Work & Pensions, 2023). These regional disparities highlight an area that requires continuous scrutiny.

As for "Fundamental labor rights are effectively guaranteed", despite being classified as "on track" to achieve this SDG indicator by 2030, the UK's progress appears limited. The indicator value in 2022 stood at 0.69, identical to the value recorded a decade prior in 2012 (SDG Index, 2025). Although the indicator experienced some volatility, reaching a high of 0.7 in both 2014 and 2021, the absence of a clear upward trend suggests that current efforts are insufficient to meet the target of 0.85 by the deadline.

The indicator "fatal work-related accidents embodied in imports" stands out as a critical concern for the UK's progress on SDG 8. Its classification as facing significant challenges is underscored by a stagnating or worsening score, achieving less than 50% of the necessary rate of improvement. The lack of updated data for this specific indicator, with the most recent figure of 2.73 dating back to 2018, impedes our ability to ascertain if any progress has been made in relation to its long-term objective of reaching 0. Nevertheless, analysis of the *Work-related fatal injuries in Great Britain* report (HSE, 2024) shows a marginal decrease in the overall fatal injury rate per 100,000

workers (ranging from 0.46 in 2018/19 to 0.42 in 2023/24, with a marked reduction to 0.34 in 2019/20, a period likely affected by COVID-19). While this national data does not isolate import-related fatalities, it offers a relevant point of reference for workplace safety trends.

The indicator "Victims of modern slavery embodied in imports" presents a remaining challenge, with lacking trend data and the sole recorded value of 83.54 in 2018 being far from the target of 0 (SDG Index, 2025). A recent inquiry by the Human Rights (Joint Committee) (UK Parliament, 2025b) directly addressed the need for further investigation into the UK's response to modern slavery in supply chains. The inquiry highlighted that the Modern Slavery Act 2015, while initially groundbreaking in its definition of offences and victim protection, is now considered insufficient, with the UK notably falling behind other countries in this area.

The UK is currently on track to sustain its SDG achievement for the "Employment-to-population ratio." With figures ranging from 73.68 in 2015 to 75.08 in 2023 (peaking at 76.18 in 2019), the UK is close to the 2030 long-term objective of 77.8 for this indicator (SDG Index, 2025). Despite this proximity, the decrease observed between 2019 and 2023 indicates a potential vulnerability that requires attention to prevent a reversal of earlier gains.

Regarding the "Youth Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET)" indicator, the UK continues to face challenges in reaching its target for 2030. While the latest available data in the SDG website indicates a value of 11.49% in 2021 (SDG Index, 2025), more recent OECD data reveals a further decline to 10.35% in 2022 – the lowest recorded since 2017 (10.97%) (OECD, 2023b). Although this downward trend is encouraging, a substantial gap remains to achieve the long-term target of 8.1%. The historical data, characterized by fluctuations since 2018, underscores the necessity for sustained and accelerated progress to meet the 2030 objective.

## GOAL 11 – SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

The 2024 SDG Report (Sachs, Lafourture and Fuller, 2024) underscores a significant gap in the UK's progress towards Sustainable Cities and Communities, indicating that current rates are insufficient to meet the 2030 target. This is primarily because of the country's poor performance on the "Population with rent overburden" indicator, as discussed later.

The UK has consistently maintained a value of 0 for the "Proportion of urban population living in slums" indicator from 2000 to 2024, indicating achievement of this SDG and a trajectory to sustain it (SDG Index, 2025). It is noteworthy that despite the absence of formally defined slum areas in the UK, the *English Housing Survey 2022 to 2023*

reported a substantial number of households, specifically 3.5 million, residing in dwellings that did not meet the government's Decent Homes Standard in 2022-23 (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2024). This issue disproportionately affected those in the private rental sector, with 21% living in non-decent homes compared to other housing tenures. Moreover, private renters were the largest segment of households experiencing Category 1 hazards under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) at 12%, and also represented a significant proportion (10%) of households living with dampness.

As for the indicator "Access to improved water source, piped", the UK has reported 100% from 2000 to the latest available data in 2022, showing a consistent SDG achievement. However, this data fails to grasp water poverty in the country, in which households struggle to or cannot afford their water bills. Research by Sylvester, Hutchings and Mdee (2023) indicated that approximately 20% of households in England and Wales experienced water poverty in 2020. The study suggests that achieving the 2030 target to end water poverty is unlikely due to inherent structural issues.

Regarding the "Annual mean concentration of PM2.5" indicator – air pollution measured as the population-weighted mean annual concentration for urban populations – the UK reportedly faces a persistent challenge. Although considered on track for the 2030 goal, trend analysis reveals minimal improvement between 2015 (10.6) and 2022 (10.1) (SDG Index, 2025). This marginal change falls significantly short of the long-term target of 6.3, suggesting the current rate of progress may not be sufficient.

Additionally, the UK's performance on the "Population with rent overburden" SDG indicator represents another major challenge. Between 2015 and 2020, the percentage of the population experiencing rent overburden rose from 16.36% to 18.5% (SDG Index, 2025), moving further away from the established long-term target of 4.6%. Moreover, supplementary data from the OECD Affordable Housing Database (OECD, 2022), reveals an even more precarious situation for low-income private tenants, with 48% spending over 40% of their income on rent in 2021.

While UK data suggests the achievement of SDG targets for urban accessibility, a closer examination reveals potential complexities. For the "Urban population with access to points of interest within a 15-minute walk," a value of 98.48 was recorded in 2024, exceeding the target of 98 (SDG Index, 2025). The lack of longitudinal data, however, limits the analysis of its long-term trends.

Similarly, while the "Population with convenient access to public transport in cities" met its SDG target with a value of 95.72 out of 100 in 2020 (ibid, 2025), the absence of updated data makes it difficult to assess its sustained achievement. In contrast to these seemingly positive access indicators, an external report from the Clean Cities Campaign highlights a significant challenge concerning public transport affordability.

Specifically, major UK urban centres – Birmingham, London, and Greater Manchester – are identified as exhibiting the lowest public transport affordability in Europe, with residents allocating a substantial proportion (8-10%) of their household income to monthly travel (Virdo *et al.*, 2022). This affordability disparity potentially undermines the equitable and inclusive nature of the reported accessibility levels.

*Note (non-UK specific): There is a significant limitation identified in the reviewed data regarding the "Pedestrian accessibility indicators by country," which are exclusively reported for OECD member states. The apparent absence of this indicator for non-OECD countries suggests a potential bias in data collection or prioritisation, implying that this aspect of urban infrastructure may not be considered equally relevant or measured globally. Furthermore, a similar data gap exists for the indicator "population with rent overburden," which is also not measured in non-OECD countries. This omission calls into question the comprehensiveness of the SDG indicators in capturing the prevalence and impact of housing affordability challenges worldwide. Further investigation into the rationale behind these data exclusions is needed to ensure its relevance in addressing key aspects of urban development across all countries.*

## GOAL 13 – CLIMATE ACTION

The findings of the 2024 Sustainable Development Report (Sachs, Lafortune and Fuller, 2024) paint a concerning picture regarding the UK's progress on SDG 13 – Climate Action. The report states that the current rate of progress is insufficient to meet the 2030 goal. The failure to meet any of the relevant SDG indicators up to this point provides further evidence for this assertion. With only one indicator showing a positive trajectory towards 2030, and the others hampered by insufficient action or a lack of trend data, the report underscores the significant challenges the UK faces in fulfilling its climate commitments within the Sustainable Development Agenda.

The trend in the UK's "CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production" shows a general decrease from 9.69 in 2000 to 4.73 in 2022 (SDG Index, 2025), indicating some success in emissions reduction. However, the 2024 SDG Report's assessment indicates that the observed rate of decline is not sufficient to meet the stipulated zero-emission target by 2030. Moreover, the data reveals a notable interruption in the downward trend, with emissions experiencing an increase from 4.87 in 2020 to 5.17 in 2021 before returning to 4.73 in 2022. This temporary surge underscores the potential for fluctuations and challenges in maintaining a consistent decarbonization pathway. Similarly, the trend in the UK's "GHG emissions embodied in imports" shows a reduction from 6.82 in 2015 to 5.03 in 2021. However, this rate of decline is not projected to be fast enough to meet the relevant SDG target within the specified timeframe.

The indicator concerning "CO<sub>2</sub> emissions embodied in fossil fuel exports" presents a significant challenge for assessment due to the unavailability of consistent trend data for the UK. This data gap represents a notable impediment to comprehensively monitoring the UK's progress towards its SDG target in this domain. Identified as a remaining challenge, the only available value is for 2023, at 601.23 kg/capita, a considerable distance from the long-term objective of zero (SDG Index, 2025).

The "Carbon Pricing Score at EUR60/tCO<sub>2</sub>" is the only indicator related to SDG 13 where the UK is currently on track for achievement, although it is still identified as a remaining challenge (Sachs, Lafortune and Fuller, 2024). The Carbon Pricing Score (CPS) assesses the degree to which nations have implemented pricing mechanisms across all energy-related carbon emissions at established benchmark levels. The UK has demonstrated consistent improvement in this area, evidenced by a progression from 35.56% in 2012 to 43.4% in 2015, with the most significant advancement observed between 2018 and 2021, rising from 46.87% to 57.89% (SDG Index, 2025). The ultimate target for this indicator is a value of 100%.

## RQ3. In each context what policy/legal initiatives have been made in explicit response to the SDGs?

### GOAL 4 – QUALITY EDUCATION

The UK has developed a series of initiatives, policies, and bills that address the SDGs tangentially, rather than directly. Regarding SDG4, this review identified only one initiative – the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) guidance – that explicitly refers to the SDGs within its primary documentation.

In March 2021, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Advance HE released an updated version of the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) guidance. This built upon previous guidelines and aimed at supporting higher education institutions in integrating ESD into their curricula. The framework emphasised incorporating ESD into every student's learning experience and encouraged a whole-institution approach to sustainability (QAA and Advance HE, 2021). Later, in December 2023, the Department for Education published the "Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services systems" policy paper, which addressed education service systems of all levels setting out policies focussed on the environmental aspect of sustainability, but also considering how those policies will interact with the social and economic aspects of sustainability (DfE, 2023a).

## GOAL 5 – GENDER EQUALITY

In July 2019, the "Government Equalities Office strategic plan 2019 to 2020" was published, directly addressing SDGs 5 and 10 (Government Equalities Office, 2019). This document detailed the government's approach to advancing gender equality, which involved interdepartmental collaboration on the Gender Equality Roadmap and the creation of an annual Gender Equality Monitor to track relevant data. The strategic plan aimed at further developing the 2017 pay gap regulations, focusing on reducing the GPG by requiring pay structure transparency in large organisations and mandating the implementation of effective action plans.

The strategy (ibid, 2019) also included developing targeted interventions for sectors with the most pronounced inequalities and engaging with external partners to drive progress. To address discrimination, violence, and health inequalities experienced by women, the plan committed to supporting the Department of Health and Social Care in delivering initiatives like the Reproductive Health Action Plan and the Women's Health Taskforce. Additionally, the strategy aimed to challenge negative gender stereotypes by working with the Department for Education to boost girls' involvement and interest in STEM subjects.

## GOAL 8 – DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Although a direct policy or legislative framework explicitly dedicated to SDG 8 was not found, some UK government documents discussing SDG 5, for instance, did refer to policies that contribute to the aims of SDG 8. For example, the "Government Equalities Office strategic plan 2019 to 2020" (Government Equalities Office, 2019) aimed to tackle inequality in the workplace. This included efforts to monitor how the pension system serves women, and to support women in low-paid, low-skilled jobs in their career progression. The plan also sought to back programs assisting people, particularly marginalised women, in returning to work after periods spent caring for others.

## GOAL 11 – SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

The UK government's Inclusive Transport Strategy (ITS), launched in 2018, sought to achieve full and unhindered access to the transport system for Disabled people by 2030 (Department for Transport, 2018). Progress was last reported in 2020, with an accompanying note acknowledging the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the strategy's implementation (Department for Transport, 2020). No further updates have been released, although 2021 research commissioned by the Department for Transport did explore Disabled people's experiences with the transport network.

The evidence suggests that disabled people face numerous difficulties in using the transport network in the same way as others. They report more negative experiences than non-disabled individuals in many respects, such as lacking travel confidence, not having enough time to board or exit public transport, and struggling to access certain areas of the transport system (Bernard Steen *et al.*, 2021).

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is a key part of government's plan planning system with the ultimate goal of protecting the environment and promoting sustainable growth (Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025). It was first published in March 2012, but since then has gone through updates and revisions in 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2023. Its latest version was released in December 2024, with further amendments in February 2025. This version explicitly addresses the UN agenda for sustainable development.

The most significant changes introduced in the latest document was the reintroduction of mandatory housing targets for local authorities. The framework also modifies Green Belt protection, stating that development needs can justify amending Green Belt boundaries under "exceptional circumstances". The exceptions, however, seem very broad, allowing plenty of room for negotiation in the reduction of these areas. Possible exceptional circumstances mentioned in the document include buildings for agriculture, outdoor sport/recreation facilities, limited infilling in villages, affordable housing for local needs, and redevelopment of previously developed land that does not harm openness.

## GOAL 13 – CLIMATE ACTION

The UK is a signatory of the Kigali amendment to the UN Montreal Protocol, which aims to prevent the increase of up to 0.5° C of the global temperature by 2100 by limiting the use of hydrofluorocarbons (HFC) and, consequently, avoiding the emission of over 100 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide (UNEP, 2018).

In 2016, the UK launched The Clean Growth Strategy as a means to address some of the points raised in the Climate Change Act 2008 (UK Parliament, 2008; HM Government, 2017). The document was ambitious and focused on "growing our national income while cutting greenhouse gas emissions", affirming that the UK had a strong position to kick-start its clean growth strategy. The document emphasised economic growth as the key aspect through which the country aimed to contribute to reducing the impact of climate change. The government's discourse regarding its investment in a 'green' economy reveals a strongly neoliberal and arguably inappropriate drive. The prevalent discourse treats climate change as primarily a great business opportunity—a mindset that explains the dismal reality that persists nearly a decade after the creation of this document.

In 2018, the UK introduced its 25 Year Environment Plan, outlining ten key objectives for environmental improvement. These goals included ensuring clean air and abundant, pure water, fostering thriving plant and wildlife populations, and reducing environmental hazards. The plan also aimed to promote the sustainable and efficient use of natural resources, enhance the beauty and heritage of the natural environment, and encourage public engagement with it. Furthermore, it addressed climate change mitigation and adaptation, waste reduction, chemical exposure management, and the strengthening of biosecurity (HM Government, 2018a).

After Brexit, with the UK no longer bound by EU environmental regulations, the government identified the need to create new national legislation for environmental protection. Consequently, the Environment Act 2021 was enacted. This Act mandates the development of Environmental Improvement Plans outlining how the government will meet its environmental objectives. The existing 25 Year Environment Plan from 2018 was then officially nominated as the first of these statutory plans.

The “Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener”, launched in 2021, was the first attempt to address how the UK government would achieve its 2050 legally binding target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to zero. Again, the government’s focus on this document was to portray net zero as the ultimate economic opportunity. Growing its low-carbon portfolio of investors and creating so-called “green jobs” was at the core of the strategy, with the intention to place the UK as a top, green-based economy—what we can now see was a successful push toward the wider spread of greenwashing.

Upon release, the Net Zero Strategy quickly faced criticism and legal scrutiny. ClientEarth, Friends of the Earth, and the Good Law Project jointly initiated court proceedings, arguing the plan needed to be strengthened to meet the requirements of the Climate Change Act 2008. The Court sided with the claimants, declaring the strategy unlawful and compelling the government to publish a revised version in 2023. Yet, the same organisations deemed this new plan inadequate, leading to a second successful lawsuit. As a result, the government has until October 2025 to produce yet another revised plan (ClientEarth Communications, 2024).

In 2023, the Environmental Improvement Plan was released (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2023). This was the first review of the 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment, highlighting the UK achievements up until that point. Among them, there was the significant expansion of wildlife habitats, creating or restoring an area equivalent to the size of Dorset. The government also claimed to have committed over £750 million to environmental initiatives through its Nature for Climate Fund, focusing on planting trees and restoring peatlands. Another achievement highlighted in the document was the establishment of a substantial network of marine protected areas in English waters.

As for next steps, the plan set out an environmental strategy focused on several key areas: establishing the Species Survival Fund to create and restore habitats, expanding wildlife areas through initiatives like National Nature Reserves and Landscape Recovery Projects; safeguarding 30% of land and sea via the Nature Recovery Network and Highly Protected Marine Areas. Additionally, the plan involves implementing the Environment Act 2021, which includes Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Biodiversity Net Gain to enhance built environments. The strategy also aspires to transform the management of 70% of the countryside by promoting nature-friendly farming practices (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2023).

Two months after the release of the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023, the government published an updated Green Finance Strategy to attract private investment, with a goal of securing over £1 billion annually for nature's recovery by 2030 (HM Government, 2023).

## RQ4. What other policy initiatives /legal changes are relevant for each country's progress towards the SDGs?

### GOAL 4 – QUALITY EDUCATION

Several initiatives from the UK Government, sometimes in combination with the civil society and third sector, directly align with the aims of SDG 4, despite not explicitly addressing them. These initiatives focus on various aspects of education, from early years to adult learning and international collaboration. The UK's Voluntary National Review (UK Gov, 2019) outlines the UK's progress across all SDGs up to 2019. Specifically concerning SDG 4, the document provides an overview of the policies and initiatives established up to its publication.

The 2017 Social Mobility Plan for England, officially named "Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential" (DfE, 2017), centred on enhancing social mobility through education. Its objective was to overcome barriers that impede individuals from achieving their full potential, with specific attention directed towards early childhood education, schooling, post-16 education, and career pathways. The plan also sought to address geographical inequalities in educational and career results.

One of the aspects addressed by the Social Mobility Plan was the educational disadvantage faced by children from less privileged backgrounds, who typically start school at age five already several months behind their peers – a gap that widens further by ages 11 and 16 (Education Policy Institute, 2018). Through England's universal early education programme, disadvantaged children are entitled to 15 hours of free early

years education per week for 38 weeks, starting from their second birthday. All other children (those not classified as disadvantaged) can access the same programme from the age of three (UK Gov, 2019). Furthermore, since 2017, working families with three and four-year-old children have qualified for extra 15 hours of free childcare weekly, supplementing the standard allocation. The report states that these measures have led to almost all children in England engaging in structured learning in the year preceding their official entry into primary school (ibid, 2019).

However, a review by the Centre for Research in Early Childhood found that although the 30-hour entitlement increases funded early education and care for the most deprived two-year-olds, it also leads to a situation where these same children receive fewer funded hours compared to their better-off counterparts in the three-to-four age range (Chris Pascal, Tony Bertram, and Aline Cole-Albäck, 2021).

Another aspect addressed by the Social Mobility Plan was a strategy to significantly enhance the quality of early years education, particularly in disadvantaged areas, by investing in professional development for practitioners and promoting evidence-based approaches, especially in early language and literacy. Key action points included a £50 million investment to create English Hubs for sharing best practices in language and literacy, with a focus on reception year; a £20 million professional development offer for pre-reception practitioners in language and numeracy; a focus on early language and literacy within existing funding streams like the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund (TLIF) and the Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF); an £8.5 million system leadership programme for high-performing local authorities to support others; and a dedicated "what works" fund informed by research. Additionally, the initiative aimed at improving reception year specifically by revising Early Learning Goals to strengthen literacy and numeracy, and by establishing expert groups to identify and share best practices for what should be taught in reception (DfE, 2017).

Although some progress was made through the 2017 Social Mobility Plan, such as narrowing the achievement gap in schools, its overall influence and lasting consequences are still being discussed. A report by the Social Mobility Commission (2024) suggests that a faster and more significant mobility progress in the UK is impeded by insufficient economic growth and innovation, and a lack of focus on the differences between regions. Conventional methods of promoting social mobility have historically pushed for increasing access to higher education by people in the margins of society, as well as career progression. The report reveals, however, that although universities' expansion created new opportunities for many, there are severe limitations to this approach, which benefits only a small fraction of the population (ibid, 2024).

Another initiative was the Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme. Starting in 2018, this programme aimed at reducing developmental disparities in early language and improve the future prospects of disadvantaged young children (UK Gov, 2019). It

focused on assessing the efficacy and potential of local services in improving early outcomes for these children by age five, with a specific focus on speech, language, and communication (SLC). In 2020, government ministers decided to integrate this peer review programme with the joint work of the DfE and Public Health England on early identification and SLC needs, resulting in the formation of the Early Language Local Innovation and Excellence (ELLIE) programme. Through a partnership between the DfE and the Local Government Association (LGA), support is being provided to help local services address early language development gaps. This support involves implementing SLC pathways and promoting the use of the Early Language Identification Measure (ELIM) within integrated local authority SLC pathways, with the overarching objective of enhancing early language development and school readiness (Local Government Association, 2025).

In the spring of 2019, a programme to fund the provision of free period products in secondary schools and colleges throughout England was announced by the UK Government. This scheme was later expanded to include primary schools, based on feedback from teachers and stakeholders (DfE, 2022a). The programme national roll out took place in January 2020, and since then 99% of secondary schools and 94% of post-16 institutions have ordered products through the scheme (The Education Hub, 2023).

Launched in May 2015, the UK Apprenticeships Reform Programme saw over 2.3 million individuals commence apprenticeships in England between its inception and early 2021 (DfE, 2021b). This reform involved a levy, introduced in 2017, initiated on public and private sector employers with annual wages which exceeded £3 million, requiring them to fund enhanced apprenticeship training and strengthen the involvement of their businesses in this educational route (ibid, 2021). However, the 2015 UK Apprenticeship reforms, particularly the apprenticeship levy, have been subject to criticism. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) suggest these reforms have negatively impacted the quality and accessibility of apprenticeships, leading to fewer starts and a mismatch with labour market needs (Mayne, 2024). Concerns have also been noted regarding the levy's complexity, inflexibility, and the possibility of other training being improperly labelled as apprenticeships (ibid, 2024).

A further substantial government undertaking, the multi-million-pound National Retraining Scheme designed to meet retraining demands, was discontinued and its functions absorbed into the government's national skills fund (DfE, 2020). Launched with the promise of supporting adults through economic changes, the 2017 initiative was cancelled in 2020 mostly due to a lack of adherence from key regional leaders, including the mayor of London. Reporting by FE Week uncovered that the pilot website, "Get Help to Retrain," involved a £1.8 million, nine-month contract awarded in May 2019. While the government reported approximately 3,600 website users, the absence of contact information collection meant that the success of the initiative in driving

enrolment in maths or English courses could not be quantified. Sector leaders have voiced strong disapproval of the failed scheme, arguing that the allocated funds could have been more effectively used to strengthen existing training services (Camden, 2020).

With respect to Higher Education, the Higher Education and Research Act came into effect in April 2017. A key outcome of this Act was the creation of the Office for Students (OfS), which was tasked with objectives such as (i) protecting the autonomy of English higher education providers, (ii) enhancing quality and student opportunities, (iii) promoting competition between English HE institutions alongside the recognition of the benefits in collaboration, (iv) securing value for money, and (v) advancing equal access and participation (UK Parliament, 2017). Up to 2022, the implementation of the Act shows that the establishment of the UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) as part of this strategy has been a positive (Kernohan, 2022). In contrast, many other elements of the legislation have either not worked as expected, drifted from their initial goals over time, or eclipsed by an unusually fast pace of change in government policy (ibid, 2022). In addition to the Act, from August 2019, Higher Education providers are obliged to make public disaggregated data on student performance and applications. This measure aimed at identifying which institutions need to expand access and improve outcomes for their students (UK Gov, 2019).

In March 2021, the UK Government implemented the reform of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework. The EYFS is a statutory framework in England that defines the standards for the education, growth, and care of children from birth to age five. Designed to ensure quality and coherence in early years provisions, it outlines seven domains of learning and development. A key aspect of the reform involved placing a greater emphasis on early language acquisition and vocabulary expansion, accompanied by enhanced guidance on how to embed and develop these language skills (DfE, 2021a). A report by IFF Research (2023) found that the majority of schools and receptions have adapted their curriculum approach and reduced early years assessments, with most leaders and staff believing the EYFS reforms have improved teaching quality. However, a key concern raised was the potential lack of sufficient support for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and English as an Additional Language (EAL). The report also suggested that while most leaders in reception anticipated a positive impact on learning and development, fewer were optimistic about the transition to Year 1. Furthermore, Local Authorities viewed the removal of statutory moderation as having a negative impact on the quality and consistency of early years education, despite some schools reporting reduced staff stress.

In July 2023, the DfE published The Reading Framework (DfE, 2023b) to assist primary and secondary schools in meeting the expectations set out in the national curriculum

and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework. The Reading Framework aids schools in evaluating and improving their reading provision from reception to year 9 through the allocation of support for teaching comprehension, fluency, and systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). It also emphasises the necessity of systematic phonics teaching for struggling older readers. Furthermore, it aims to help schools to cultivate a deep interest in reading among their pupils by also supporting collaboration with parents in their children's reading development.

Between 2022 and 2025, the UK government implemented the Multiply Programme, a key initiative aimed at improving numeracy skills among UK adults (DfE, 2022b). This programme allocated £559 million over three years as part of the broader UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which succeeded European Union funding. The objective was to address low adult maths abilities, citing estimations that approximately half of the working-age population possessed numeracy skills equivalent to a primary school child. A portion of the funding was distributed to Mayoral Combined Authorities in England, granting them the autonomy to fund courses tailored to local mathematical needs. However, the government decreased its total commitment to the UKSPF from £1.5 billion to £900 million in October 2024, creating uncertainty about the continuation of Multiply (Mellor, 2024). The programme was terminated in March 2025.

As part of more recent efforts supporting SDG4, the UK government commissioned a Curriculum and Assessment Review in July 2024 (DfE, 2025a). Recognising that the national curriculum had not been comprehensively examined since 2011, the review sought to address concerns that the existing system was not equitable and that a substantial socioeconomic gap in educational outcomes remained. Furthermore, the review highlighted the slower progress of young people with SEND. With the understanding that various factors influence these outcomes, the review aimed to identify how the curriculum and assessment system could better provide appropriate support for learners' development. The review also pointed to challenges in specific subjects and the need for the curriculum to adapt to social and technological changes. Regarding post-16 education, the review supported the broad curriculum up to age 16, contrasting it with earlier specialisation in other countries. It argued that whilst England's 16-19 provision is diverse, it is relatively specialised, and that A-levels effectively prepare students for three-year university programmes (ibid, 2025).

Another recent initiative related to SDG4 is the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which was introduced to Parliament on December 17, 2024, and is currently undergoing its Committee stage in the House of Lords (as of May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2025) (UK Parliament, 2025a). The Bill proposes several changes, including the creation of a unique identification number for all children and a mandatory register for those not attending school. Additionally, the bill seeks to modify regulations surrounding home education, stipulating that parents of children in special schools or those involved in child

protection processes will need to seek local authority approval before opting for home education. The legislation also introduces changes to the management of academy schools, ending the policy of mandatory conversion for underperforming schools and permitting local authorities to build new schools that are not academies. Furthermore, it will be mandatory for academy schools to follow the National Curriculum (Adoption UK, 2025). Despite these advancements, the Children's Commissioner argues that further legislative action is needed to specifically address the needs of all children, especially those with SEND (Children's Commissioner, 2025).

Of particular significance within the Bill is the formal establishment of the ongoing Free breakfast clubs scheme in primary schools, launched in April 2025. The programme aims to support around 180,000 pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds by providing 30-minute pre-school sessions with a free breakfast, thereby enabling them to start their school day ready to learn (DfE, 2025b). Initially implemented in 750 schools as part of the national rollout's first phase, the initiative is intended to be available in all English primary schools, with the expectation of fostering better behaviour, attendance, and attainment.

In a further parallel development connected to SDG4's early education objectives, the UK government is scheduled to roll out 300 school-based nurseries from September 2025, resulting in thousands of new places (Department for Education, Stephen Morgan MP and The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, 2025). The stated objective is to improve parents' access to childcare. The initial phase of these nurseries will be located throughout England, with a significant number planned for the North and Midlands regions. The programme is being supported by increased funding, and the first wave is anticipated to create up to 4,000 places by the end of September.

In February 2025, the UK government announced a £2 million investment aimed at improving reading and writing standards of pupils across England (Department for Education and The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, 2025). This funding will build upon the existing phonics programme by providing additional teacher training in primary schools to support students' progression to fluent reading. This initiative will be implemented through the English Hubs programme, a school-led effort to improve standards. It suggests that secondary schools with the greatest need will be able to apply for £1 million to purchase resources for struggling readers, with further secondary-level training planned.

In addition to this investment, the government plans to publish a writing framework – the UK currently has a Reading Framework published in 2023, as mentioned earlier in this text – to support high-quality writing instruction. The overarching aim is to ensure all pupils develop strong reading and writing skills, which are considered fundamental for accessing the wider curriculum. According to the Education Secretary, the present

administration aims to further the achievements of previous years by elevating school standards and reducing inequalities in educational attainment (ibid, 2025).

As an initiative aligning with both SDG4 and SDG13, the UK Government has established the National Education Nature Park (National Education Nature Park, 2025). This programme endeavours to forge a stronger bond between students and nature by encouraging schools, nurseries and colleges to develop and improve natural areas within their grounds. This focus aims to promote both outdoor education and ecological awareness. Furthermore, the project aims to support educators in incorporating nature into their teaching by providing resources, advice, and a collaborative network. Ultimately, by establishing these natural spaces within educational settings, the initiative seeks to boost biodiversity, improve student wellbeing, and foster a greater understanding and valuing of the natural environment.

## GOAL 5 – GENDER EQUALITY

In 2017, the Government Equalities Office published the pay gap regulations (*The Equality Act 2010 (Gender Pay Gap Information) Regulations 2017*), which enforced that any employer with over 250 employees must provide annual reports on gender pay gap (GPG) within their company's website and also at the government's dedicated portal. This regulation is valid in England, Wales and Scotland and represented an important step in monitoring the gender pay gap in the UK. A summary of the reported data within the first year of the policy stated that women were the highest paid employees in only 33% of businesses and organisations, and the lowest paid employees in 57% of them. This policy propelled employers to think of solutions to close the GPG, with 48% of them having published an action plan by May 2018 (Government Equalities Office, 2018).

In November 2020, the APPG on *Diversity and Inclusion in STEM* published a report on “Diversity and representation in STEM industries in the UK” (APPG on Diversity and Inclusion in STEM, 2020). At the time, the share of female workers in the STEM workforce was of only 27%, compared to their presence in 52% of the wider workforce. In engineering specifically, gender was the biggest challenge reported, with only 9% of those working in the field being women. The report also flagged that ethnic minority women, while still underrepresented in STEM industries, were more likely to work in the field (13%) than white women (10%).

The latest *Diversity and inclusion in STEM* report was published in March 2023, with a Government response following in June of the same year (Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, 2023a, 2023b). The report indicated that only limited progress was made, and significant efforts are still required to increase women's representation in STEM subjects. For instance, data shared with the report committee by Engineering UK indicated that the share of women in core and related engineering jobs in 2021 in the

UK was of only 16%, versus 47% of the wider workforce. The report also analyses HESA data, having found that although women hold 57% of postdoctoral positions in biological sciences, this percentage fell to only 29% at professorial level. The same happens in physics, where women accounted for 21% of the postdoctoral researchers, but only 10% of professors in the field (Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, 2023a).

In its recommendations section, the report did not specifically address gender inequalities in STEM research institutions or labour market, but requested responses in a broader sense, mentioning the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy that encompasses gender, race, ethnicity and disabilities altogether (Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, 2023b). Consequently, the Government's response to the report did not elaborate on initiatives targeted at narrowing the gap in women's participation in the STEM labour market. Instead, it approached the issue from a broader perspective too, elaborating on the inclusion of "underrepresented groups". The lack of targeted recommendations for each group was somehow inefficient, allowing the government to give vague responses to tackling the issues brought up by the data in the report.

It is important to mention, however, that from a long-term perspective, the government's response to the report did address gender. It articulated educational strategies intended to increase the representation of girls and young women in STEM subjects in schools and, consequently, universities. Some of the governmental initiatives mentioned were the DfE's programmes "Advanced Mathematics Support Programme (AMSP)" and the "Steps to University for Mathematical Pupils (SUMS)", with their core objective of fostering girls' engagement in mathematics beyond GCSEs.

The latest HESA data reveals that substantive progress is still required to attain gender equality within higher education courses. In 2023/24, women represented approximately 80% of the students in courses such as veterinary sciences, psychology, subjects allied to medicine, and education and teaching. Conversely, engineering, technology, and computing persist as male-dominated fields, with female students accounting for only about a quarter of the total enrolment (HESA, 2025).

The gender pensions gap is another dimension of inequality that has received increasing attention. In 2024, the average value of women's pensions upon retirement stood at £69,000, in contrast to £205,000 for men. Additionally, women represent 67% of pensioners in poverty, of whom half are single women (NOW Pensions, 2024). In 2022, the "Saving for later life report" was published (Work and Pensions Committee, 2022), addressing several problems such as "carers' credit, the earnings trigger for auto-enrolment, tax relief for non-taxpayers, pension sharing on divorce, and the high income child benefit charge" (Khadijah Zaidi and James Mirza-Davies, 2024).

Responding to the report in early 2023, the government partially endorsed its recommendations. Accepted measures included annual reporting on the gender pension gap, commencing after a measurement method was developed in June 2023. Reforms to workplace pension auto-enrolment, previously excluding employees who earned less than £10,000 (disproportionately affecting women), were also addressed. With that in mind, the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Act 2023 granted the Secretary of State with the authority to lower or remove this earnings threshold (UK Parliament, 2023c). Finally, recent government childcare reforms intend to support women managing childcare, enabling them to work and potentially narrowing both the gender pay and pension gaps in the long term (Khadijah Zaidi and James Mirza-Davies, 2024).

Regarding violence and abuse against women, The Domestic Abuse Bill, published in 2020 and enacted in 2021, aimed to enhance societal awareness and understanding of domestic abuse while strengthening support and protection for those affected (Home Office, 2024). Although this Bill lacks a direct citation to SDG 5, it contributes to it by addressing and aiming to eradicate violence and harmful practices experienced by women and girls. A key aspect of this legislation was the adoption of a more comprehensive definition of domestic abuse, extending beyond physical violence to include emotional, controlling or coercive, and economic abuse. Furthermore, the Bill established the role of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, outlining their responsibilities and authority. Notably, the Bill mandated that local authorities in England provide safe housing options for domestic abuse victims and their children.

In 2021, the Home Office published the "Tackling violence against women and girls strategy" (Home Office, 2021), a further development of the Government Equalities Office 2019 strategic plan and the Domestic Abuse Bill 2020. This strategy was informed by, among other factors, the increased need for domestic abuse helplines during the COVID-19 pandemic. It sought to improve access to quality, funded victim support services whilst strengthening the criminal justice response. The strategy aimed to increase the prosecution of perpetrators of domestic abuse, rape, and stalking offenses; boost reporting and victim engagement; reduce victim withdrawal; and enhance public trust.

## GOAL 8 – DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

In the Voluntary National Review (UK Gov, 2019), the UK proud itself for “championing small businesses, reforming the financial services sector, enhancing the role of women in work and building global links to enhance opportunities from international trade” in the scope of SDG8.

The New National Living Wage was mandated from April 2016, with the aim of producing a shift from “a low wage, high tax, high welfare society to a higher wage, lower tax, lower welfare society” (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2016). The Review (UK Gov, 2019) refers to the National Living Wage as one of the factors that contributed to a £5.5m rise in GDP between 2015 and 2018. The documents states that this was achieved through supporting the earnings of those in the lowest paid scale whilst preserving the stability of the average weekly pay. Moreover, this policy established that the National Living Wage was also applicable to those aged 25 and older.

The Review (UK Gov, 2019) also mentions the Apprenticeship Levy (DfE, 2021b), already discussed in SDG4, as a policy that supports also SDG8. It does so by “strengthening the role of apprenticeships in the workforce, helping millions of people get onto the career ladder and develop their skills”.

The UK presented one of the strongest responses to modern slavery in the world in 2015 with its Modern Slavery Act 2015 (UK Parliament, 2015). Although this legislation was a significant step in addressing forced labour, human trafficking, and all forms of exploitation, the Act faced criticism for leaving considerable gaps in protection, thereby increasing survivors' vulnerability to being retrafficked (Walk Free, 2023).

More recent strategies focused on improving the arrangements in the workplace for employees. One of them is the amendment of Flexible Working Regulations 2023, removing the requirement for employees to work for 26 weeks continuously before being able to request flexible working (UK Parliament, 2023e). Amendments to the Paternity Leave Regulations 2024 also allowed employees more flexibility, making it possible for them to make use of their leave over non-consecutive weeks and also for longer periods (UK Parliament, 2024b). Changes to the Maternity Leave, Adoption Leave and Shared Parental Leave Regulations 2024 offer increased security during pregnancy and for an 18-month timeframe following maternity or adoption leave (UK Parliament, 2024a).

Workers' vulnerability has also been addressed by the Allocation of Tips Act 2023, which stipulates that employers must ensure the full distribution of all tips and service charges directly to staff, implementing a fair and transparent method for their allocation (UK Parliament, 2023a). Additionally, more effective prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace has been implemented in the Sexual Harassment Duty (Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023), which came into force in October 2024 (UK Parliament, 2024c).

In terms of helping UK businesses, the government implemented the Help to Grow (Management) Scheme in August 2021, which aimed at assisting Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to boost their productivity and create opportunities for

investment through capacity building (Department for Business & Trade, 2021). The programme offers enrolled companies assistance in developing a business plan, as well as training in areas such as leadership, marketing and financial management. In January 2022, an expansion of this programme called Help to Grow Digital was released, offering a grant of up to £5,000 for SMEs to implement digital technology solutions (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2021). Although this part of the programme was supposed to last for 3 years, new business applications were suspended in February 2023. Nowadays, only the management-focused Help to Grow Scheme remains available.

A significant new piece of legislation that is currently under scrutiny in the House of Lords is the Employment Rights Bill, which promises to enhance security for workers, implement new measures to guarantee fair pay, introducing new “family friendly rights”, and modernising trade union legislation (Department for Business & Trade, 2024). If passed, this bill would mark a generational shift in workers' rights (Quilliam, 2025).

## GOAL 11 – SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

In 2017, the UK government published its "plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations" (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs and Department for Transport, 2017). Recognising that NO<sub>2</sub> pollution is primarily localised rather than a diffuse greenhouse gas, the document summarised the government's previous actions and investments in air quality, while also offering guidance for local authorities to extend these efforts. It outlined various funding streams available to local authorities for implementing proposed initiatives, ultimately emphasising the national ambition to establish the UK as a global leader in air quality.

Still in 2017, the UK also launched the "plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations", which is part of an integral component of a wider governmental strategy to decrease exposure to a series of hazardous pollutants. Among these, particulate matter (PM) was a key focus, as the World Health Organization's (WHO) designated it as the most harmful pollutant to human health (UK Gov, 2019).

The Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper was introduced in 2018 as an initiative designed to foster integration and address segregation across Britain (HM Government, 2018b). This strategy emphasised the importance of shared values and community engagement, outlining specific policy proposals, including the creation of an Integrated Communities Innovation Fund.

A year later, the government released a consultation to the strategy which revealed several critiques from participants (HM Government, 2019a). Some considered the definition of "integrated communities" too narrow, noting a lack of explicit reference to

mutual understanding, tolerance, civic participation, and citizenship. Critics also felt the definition should more broadly encompass individuals and communities facing social exclusion or discrimination. Furthermore, respondents pointed out a disproportionate focus on minority groups and migrants in the Green Paper, suggesting it didn't adequately address the role of all communities, including long-term residents, in supporting integration efforts. The term "British values" also drew criticism, with respondents arguing it lacked clear definition. The government's response to these concerns, stated in the same document, appeared to be a justification of their existing approach, rather than an engagement with the feedback aimed at refining the strategy.

In 2019, focusing again on improving air quality, the UK released a more comprehensive document, the Clean Air Strategy, aimed at significantly mitigating the financial impact of air pollution. Projections from the strategy indicated potential annual savings of £1.7 billion by 2020, escalating to £5.3 billion from 2030 (UK Gov, 2019). Fundamentally, the strategy articulated its purpose as addressing "all sources of air pollution" to achieve healthier air, environmental protection, and economic growth (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2019). It appears that the government cannot publish new strategies or plans without framing them around the aim of "boosting the economy". This suggests that environmental benefits, such as ensuring clean air, are not considered sufficient justification for policy development when economic growth is not envisioned.

The UK's Voluntary National Review indicated that approximately £500 million, linked to the nationwide Clean Air Strategy, would be allocated to support the development of local initiatives. Some of these plans included the implementation of charging Clean Air Zones (UK Gov, 2019). As of June 2025, 12 cities are part of the Clean Air Zones, Low Emission Zones and the London ULEZ (Tyers and Smith, 2023).

The Review also emphasised a collaborative initiative, led by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and its partners, aimed at improving data collection (UK Gov, 2019). This effort was designed to assess domestic progress against the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and to generate updated estimates of disaster-related fatalities linked to the hazards identified in the National Risk Register (UNDRR, 2015; HM Government, 2025).

Still in the topic of Disaster Risk Reduction, the UK regularly updates and reviews the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which undergoes a post-implementation review every five years. In March 2022, the latest of these reviews was submitted to Parliament. This legislation establishes the UK's framework for civil protection, outlining the nation's approach to emergency and disaster preparedness and response (Cabinet Office, 2022).

In October 2023, a substantial legislative effort to update the UK's planning framework and grant greater authority to local communities was enacted: The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023. The Act aims to accelerate the planning process, ensure developer accountability, reduce administrative burden, and prompt more councils to establish plans for new housing construction (UK Parliament, 2023b).

Among its stipulations, the Act requires developers to send formal commencement and annual progress reports to local planning authorities, making it easier for authorities to issue completion notices for unfinished sites. It also introduces a new ability to turn down applications from developers who have failed to construct previous projects in a timely manner. Prior to their full rollout, these measures will undergo public consultation; a subsequent consultation is planned to explore a financial penalty to further encourage accelerated construction (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2024).

Also in 2023, Natural England, the official advisory body to the government on England's natural environment, introduced the Green Infrastructure Framework. The framework is centred on aiding the development of greener towns and cities, outlining the advantages of green infrastructure, defining what their effective implementation entails, and describing the steps involved in their planning, design, and upkeep (Natural England, 2023).

The framework's goal is to stimulate a 40% increase in green coverage within urban residential zones and to promote fair access to green spaces nationwide. It provides a website that includes consultation areas tailored for specific audiences, including Local Authority Planners, Developers, Practitioners, Policy Makers, Community Groups, and applicants for Nature Towns and Cities accreditation (Natural England, 2025).

As a further development to the Clean Air Strategy, the UK government introduced, in 2023, two new targets for fine particulate matter (PM2.5) in England, stated in The Environmental Targets (Fine Particulate Matter) (England) Regulations 2023. These targets aim to achieve an annual mean concentration of 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  across England by 2040. Additionally, the regulations mandate a 35% reduction in population exposure to PM2.5 by 2040, using 2018 as the baseline year (UK Parliament, 2023d).

## GOAL 13 – CLIMATE ACTION

To align economic growth with environmental sustainability, the UK government put in place a scheme called Contracts for Difference, focused on low carbon technologies (Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 2016). A Contract for Difference (CfD) is a legal agreement between a low-carbon electricity generator and the Low Carbon Contracts Company (LCCC), a government-owned entity. The central objectives of this

initiative encompass ensuring a reliable electricity supply by diversifying energy sources, as well as ensuring that the UK has enough capacity to lower the risks of power outages. Additionally, the scheme is designed to foster the investment in sustainable, low-carbon technologies, which is key to achieving both the EU 2020 renewables target and the UK's 2050 goal of reducing carbon emissions by at least 80% compared to its 1990 levels. A final aim of this scheme is to improve value for money for consumers, ensuring the affordability of electricity bills while facilitating infrastructure investment (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2019).

The Tourism Sector Deal (HM Government, 2019b) also addressed sustainability principles by focusing on mitigating the negative consequences of high-season tourism. Additionally, mentioning support of the Clean Growth Grand Challenge (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2017), the Deal explicitly committed to creating and implementing a sustainable development plan.

Following the pandemic, the government strategy regarding the tourism industry has shifted – the aim was to get the industry back on track. The Tourism Recovery Plan, launched in 2021, had a clear focus on sustainability, mentioning the word “sustainability” throughout the document and providing an entire section dedicated to explaining how this would be achieved (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2021). The Sustainable Development Goals, however, have not been mentioned in the text. It is also worth noting that the Clean Growth Grand Challenge, along with the other Grand Challenges, were withdrawn in 2023.

The ‘National Adaptation Programme 2018 to 2023’ was a 128-page document which reported on the accomplished actions of the government in response to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA). It also raised further action points that the UK planned to take within the following five years to adapt to climate change, considering not only the threats it posed but also any opportunities that may come out of it (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2018). The choice of vocabulary in this document—particularly the use of “opportunities”—appears deeply inadequate, given the millions of lives already lost due to climate change. Such language reflects the marketisation of viable solutions to prevent human extinction. Furthermore, the tone of the document suggests a lack of urgency; it conveys the impression that there is ample time to address problems that are, in fact, an immediate necessity. For instance, statements such as “Adaptation, by its very nature, needs to be seen in the context of a changing climate over a long period of time. It is recognised that the process to adapt takes place over decades” reinforce this perception. This raises the question of what further evidence or consequences would be required for the UK government to adopt a genuine sense of urgency regarding climate change.

National Adaptation Programmes are part of the requirements set out in the Climate Change Act 2008 which mandates that an updated government strategy in response to

climate change must be published every five years. The 2018-2023 document cites the 'NHS Sustainable Development Unit' and 'Sustainable Development Management Plans', but does not make any direct links to the UN Goals.

The most recent National Adaptation Programme (2023-2028) mentions 'government sustainable development goals', rather than global or UN goals (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2018). The Climate Change Committee (CCC) cautioned that the new plan is insufficient to fulfil the necessary actions to address the escalating impacts of climate change. The committee recommended that the UK government learn from other nations that have successfully enhanced their ability to respond to climate change by improving their systems for monitoring and evaluating its impact (Climate Change Committee, 2024).

In 2022, the UK imposed a plastic packaging tax. This policy seeks to encourage increased use of recycled plastic and mitigate plastic waste. The tax applies to manufacturers or importers of 10 or more tonnes of plastic packaging within a year, specifically when their products contain less than 30% recycled plastic (HM Revenue & Customs, 2021).

## RQ5. What wider critiques have been made of the policy response to these SDGs in each context?

### Methodology

The data collected to address RQ5 was retrieved from the Web of Science database. The articles and reviews mentioned below were published between 2016 and 2025, following the launch of the SDGs in September 2015.

The search in the Web of Science, conducted on June 10, 2025, retrieved 76 publications published between 2016 and 2025. This query was carried out using the following commands: Topic = ("sustainable development goals" OR "SDGS") AND ("United Kingdom" OR "UK" OR "Britain" OR "England" OR "Great Britain"); Document types = (ARTICLE OR REVIEWS); Title containing = ("United Kingdom" OR "UK" OR "England" OR "Great Britain" OR "Britain"); Timespan: 2016–2025.<sup>1</sup>

The analysis of the results made by the Web of Science show that 39 of the articles and reviews listed pertained to the field of Environmental Studies/Sciences and 16 to Green Sustainable Science Technology. In smaller numbers, 7 of them were in the field of

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<sup>1</sup> The results of this search can be found here: <https://www.webofscience-com.sussex.idm.oclc.org/wos/woscc/summary/b261cff8-e9f2-4241-a221-fb1f8e78885c-016827ab07/relevance/1>

Management, 6 in Education, 5 in Business, 5 in Geography, 4 in Construction Building Technology, 4 in Economics and 4 in Energy Fuels. It is important to note, however, that not all of those articles were used in the discussion directed at RQ5 because not all of them addressed topics directly relevant to our research question. Other sources were used in this review, such as the SDGs publications database and Google Scholar.

## Review

Researchers and policy advisors who explored the UK response to the SDGs have unanimously emphasised that the country is far from achieving most of the targets by 2030 (UN Global Compact Network UK, 2022; Whitehead, 2022; Benn *et al.*, 2023; Tracey and Stott, 2024). The latest UN Measuring Up 2.0 Report states that at least 132 targets, out of 169, are domestically relevant to the UK, but the country delivered so far an inadequate policy response for 64% of them, and a weak response or no response at all to 11% (UN Global Compact Network UK, 2022).

The report also flags that the UK's 2019 Voluntary National Review, although initially welcomed by stakeholders, drew criticism for lacking authentic engagement with individuals and organisations. It was also faulted for presenting an unambitious and vague roadmap for achieving the SDGs, and for failing to inspire action beyond maintaining the status quo (UN Global Compact Network UK, 2022).

The lack of engagement of the UK government with the SDGs was highlighted as one of the most, if not the most, serious obstacle in achieving the goals (UN Global Compact Network UK, 2022; Whitehead, 2022; Benn *et al.*, 2023). This aligns with the perception that there is a “marginalisation of the nation state” in which the government is seen “as part of the problem rather than part of the solution” (Tracey and Stott, 2024). Those in the most powerful positions in the government have seldom mentioned the SDGs, demonstrating that the goals never really became a priority in the political agenda. The veiled but evident position of the UK government regarding the SDGs is that the goals are relevant exclusively from a foreign policy and international development perspective (UN Global Compact Network UK, 2022).

The government's approach to the SDGs has been notably diffuse and inconsistent, a tendency that became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some argue that the SDGs became unattainable due to delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Tracey and Stott, 2024), while others contend that the pandemic's impact was exacerbated by the UK government's insufficient commitment to the SDGs (UN Global Compact Network UK, 2022; Benn *et al.*, 2023).

Another key indicator of the UK government's misalignment with the SDGs is the lack of effective tools for accurately measuring poverty (Benn *et al.*, 2023). This deficiency results in significant blind spots in the UK's strategy for achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in addressing multidimensional poverty. A striking

example is the UK's classification as having achieved the target for the indicator 'Proportion of urban population living in slums,' despite the fact that 3.5 million households live in dwellings in bad conditions. Those include dampness and other hazards identified under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System, which pose serious risks to residents' health (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2024). Labelling this SDG indicator as 'achieved' is particularly problematic given the wealth of available data. This assessment becomes particularly questionable when the current measurement framework seems to obscure the actual situation, thereby presenting a misleading portrayal of progress.

It is also interesting to think about this issue considering the current housing policy of the English government. zu Ermgassen *et al.* (2022) argues that the planned pace of housing expansion may be in conflict with England's biodiversity and climate goals. Estimates indicate that, under existing policies, housing development alone could consume 104% of England's cumulative carbon budget between 2022 and 2050. The researchers emphasise that meeting growing housing needs may be possible without rapid expansion by improving affordability through strategies that increase low-carbon retrofits while decelerating new development. However, while such approaches could significantly reduce emissions, they face substantial obstacles, including challenging political dynamics and deeply rooted economic constraints (*ibid*, 2022).

Beyond the millions of people living in inappropriate conditions, the UK also has millions more living with rent overburden. As discussed in RQ1, over 18% of the UK's population spends more than 40% of their income in rent (SDG Index, 2025). This indicator can be linked to other – multidimensional – poverty indicators, such as lower formal educational achievement among families in poverty. Research shows that whilst a lack of educational success in childhood does not directly cause short-term poverty, it has been identified as the leading cause for poor children to continue experiencing poverty in adulthood (Brigid Francis-Devine, 2025).

Therefore, the lack of proper tools to measure multidimensional poverty, as raised in Benn *et al.* (2003), ultimately has a negative impact in the measurement and understanding of all SDGs. Regarding child poverty specifically, the authors also flag that there is a considerably wider range of data available but none of it is used as an SDG performance metric by government departments.

A similar issue of inadequate measurement has been identified in another domain: the construction sector. This sector is particularly relevant to our policy review due to its alignment with several SDGs. It contributes to SDG 13 through climate adaptation engineering, supports SDG 11 by its involvement with the housing market and urban infrastructure, and is linked to SDG 8 by addressing the occupational conditions experienced by on-site workers.

Studies of UK businesses in the construction industry indicate that while SDG measurement practices are theoretically adopted, they are seldom implemented in practice, and progress is rarely monitored (Mansell, Philbin and Konstantinou, 2020; Watts, 2024). Furthermore, research on the approach adopted by the UK's largest housebuilders show strong consistency with the concept of weak sustainability (Roper, 2012, as cited in Jones and Comfort, 2021), in which economic growth is prioritised at the expense of environmental responsibility (Jones and Comfort, 2021). It is also important to note that sustainability reports often omit many of the SDGs, and when they are mentioned, very few receive meaningful engagement (Watts, 2024). This, coupled with the limited understanding of the SDGs among construction professionals, highlights a clear disconnect between sustainability reporting and on-the-ground perceptions (ibid, 2024).

When it comes to climate-related disaster prevention and management, several governance challenges persist in the UK. Beyond the absence of clear metrics to assess adaptation progress, as previously discussed, these also include limited coordination between government departments and insufficient mechanisms to ensure equitable protection for all communities (Carvalho and Spataru, 2023). Research indicates that policy responses in the UK have predominantly focused on post-disaster recovery, with comparatively less emphasis on proactive risk reduction and preparedness. This reactive approach is further complicated by a fragmented governance structure: flood management is supported by a comprehensive legal framework, droughts are largely addressed within the water sector, and heatwaves are treated mainly as public health issues. Such sector-specific responses create significant gaps in addressing the complex, interconnected risks posed by these hazards (ibid, 2023).

It is important, however, to acknowledge the positive outcomes observed in cases where robust measurement methodologies were applied. The construction of the Boston Tidal Barrier across the River Witham in Lincolnshire, completed in 2020, is an example of how civil engineering projects can successfully apply sustainability principles, promoting a remarkably positive societal impact (Pollard *et al.*, 2021). The SDGs framework served as the foundation for effective communication and understanding of the community benefits of this £100m climate adaptation project, which safeguards more than 13,000 residential properties from tidal flooding and is recognised for contributing to all 17 SDGs. Scholars advocate for aligning SDGs with climate adaptation initiatives during the preliminary planning and early design phases as this strategic integration facilitates the realisation of optimal benefits for the broader stakeholder's community (ibid, 2021).

In relation to the decent work objectives outlined in SDG 8, a key observation is that, despite the UK's well-established regulatory framework for managing physical, environmental, and psychological workplace conditions, occupational risks persist

(Dodd, Hooley and Burke, 2019). One illustrative example is the number of workplace fatalities: despite a general downward trend, 138 workers died in 2023/2024, with 51 of these fatalities occurring in the construction sector – more than in any other industry (ibid, 2019; HSE, 2024). As for white-collar industries, work-related ill health – particularly stress and musculoskeletal disorders – remains widespread (Dodd, Hooley and Burke, 2019).

Still in the theme of decent work, as discussed in RQ1, the UK was one of the pioneering countries in addressing modern slavery with the release of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (UK Parliament, 2015). However, research indicates that, despite some progress in Modern Slavery Disclosure (MSD), overall reporting remains limited. Moussa, Allam and Elmarzouky (2023) argue that corporate compliance with Modern Slavery Disclosure (MSD) tends to emphasise symbolic elements – such as outlining organisational structures – rather than engaging with substantive practices like “key performance indicators (KPIs), due diligence, risk assessment and management, and training”. The scholars also flag that this tendency is likely driven by efforts to reduce regulatory exposure or to shape stakeholder perceptions.

The researchers also suggest an interesting connection between this topic and gender – which we can link to SDG 5 although the article emphasises more SDG 8 – noting that companies with higher female representation on their boards tend to demonstrate greater transparency in their modern slavery disclosures (Moussa, Allam and Elmarzouky, 2023). Building on this, they argue that the diverse perspectives brought by female board members play a crucial role in reshaping boardroom dynamics and counterbalancing the influence of CEO power (Allam, Moussa and Elmarzouky, 2024).

Still in the topic of SDG 5, research reveals that, despite formal commitments to equality in UK public universities, backed by labour laws and data collection aimed at promoting fairness, significant and overlapping inequalities persist in academic employment (Belluigi, Arday and O’Keeffe, 2024). These disparities are evident even in fields where women are the majority. The study also highlights that women, particularly those from racialised backgrounds, remain underrepresented in senior academic roles (ibid, 2024). This is an indicator that current legal and institutional measures have been insufficient to dismantle systemic inequalities so far.

Social innovation is another topic that frequently emerges in discussions around SDG embeddedness. In the context of climate policy, initial approaches prioritised government-led regulatory frameworks to curb dependence on carbon-based economies, but recent strategies have increasingly emphasised private sector innovation as the driving force for change (Tracey and Stott, 2024). Social innovation’s rapid growth in the UK is often viewed as a means to deliver welfare more efficiently and with reduced bureaucracy. However, this perspective overlooks the unequal distribution of these benefits (ibid, 2024).

The inequality overlooked in social innovation is also present, and has its roots, in the global financial system. In 2022, the UN Secretary-General noted that the current global financial system was originally designed by wealthy nations to advance their own interests. As a result, it perpetuates and deepens global inequalities, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive structural reform (UNSG, 2022, as cited in Benn *et al.*, 2023). Research suggests that for the UK to meaningfully support a “radical reform of the global financial system”, it must deepen its engagement with the Global South (Benn *et al.*, 2023).

A recent analysis indicates that UK banks are increasingly aligning their operations with the SDGs as a strategy to appeal to investors and enhance customer trust. Nevertheless, their ongoing financial backing of fossil fuel ventures reflects a limited commitment to climate-focused SDGs. To address this gap, the study advocates for government intervention, proposing that banks be required to dedicate a minimum portion of their financial offerings to low-carbon, SDG-compliant initiatives (L. Harris and Wonglimpiyarat, 2024).

There's much that the UK can learn from other countries, especially in Asia, when it comes to ensuring the purposeful and genuine engagement of their companies with the SDGs. Thailand, Japan and South Korea seem to be some of the only countries where the private sectors' engagement with the SDGs do not happen merely at a superficial level, what is usually known as Greenwashing and Bluewashing. The active involvement of those governments in ensuring a true implementation of the SDGs is one of the explanations for this disparity, and their greater success, in relation to the rest of the world (Tracey and Stott, 2024).

The Measuring Up 2.0 report claimed that while greater business involvement with the SDGs is essential, it must evolve from mere public speech to genuine strategic integration (UN Global Compact Network UK, 2022). It is clear that more UK organisations across all sectors need to actively incorporate the Goals into their core operations. However, this review reflects the views of numerous scholars and policy advisors who consistently argue that stakeholder commitment, while important, is insufficient without clear governmental direction and a coordinated national framework.

Joyce and Long (2023) mapped the Levelling Up Mission, launched in a 2022 White Paper which ultimately led to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 (UK Parliament, 2023b), as discussed in RQ4. The researchers argue that although this White Paper was not an explicit response to the SDGs, it shares the same “mission-based” approach with the UN 2030 agenda. They also show that the Levelling Up mission can be directly applied to the SDG targets across numerous Goals – including 4, 8 and 11, within the scope of our RQs – thereby emphasising the domestic importance of the SDGs for the UK.

However, major flaws were flagged in the Levelling Up Mission, including a notable neglect of environmental considerations, leaving its alignment with the UK's environmental goals uncertain (Joyce and Long, 2023). You may recall that, in RQ3 and RQ4, several policies and legislations that focused on the environment were listed. Joyce and Long (2023) suggest that adopting an SDG-based framework could help the government and public to make connections between such policies and legislations and other domestic goals, like those raised in the Levelling Up Mission.

Benn *et al.* (2023) argue that the UK lacks the necessary commitment to a global reform aimed at reducing global inequalities. They emphasise the country's poor dialogue with low-income countries. However, the article seems to build hope based on the UK's International Development White Paper (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2023, as cited in Benn *et al.*, 2023), which manifested a concern with being trusted again by the Global South (Benn *et al.*, 2023). Unfortunately, any timid intention previously shared by the government to execute historical reparations through a global reform has been shadowed by the latest unfolding of events. This year, the development minister announced funding cuts to overseas programmes focused on education and gender equality, stating that "the days of viewing the UK government as a global charity are over" (Fisher and Sheppard, 2025). UK aid funding has been steadily declining across all sectors, with the current year marking a further reduction from 0.5% to 0.3% of Gross National Income (GNI). This follows an earlier cut in 2021, when the aid budget was scaled back from 0.7% to 0.5% in response to the economic pressures brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic (Brien and Loft, 2025).

This review has provided an overview of the key critiques surrounding the UK's policy responses to the SDGs, revealing a generally discouraging picture. It has aimed to present a range of perspectives from both scholars and policy experts to offer a more nuanced understanding of the challenges involved. While not covered in here, it is worth noting that the 2022 Bond Report offers an in-depth analysis of each SDG target within each goal and may serve as a valuable resource for further exploration (Bond, 2022).

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