Written evidence submitted by the Urban Institute, University of Sheffield, and Mistra Urban Futures

Executive Summary

- This submission summarises evidence from an international comparative project led by Mistra Urban Futures, a leading international research centre on urban sustainability, on how cities are engaging with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda. In particular, our submission compares initiatives in five countries with the UK policy landscape for SDG localisation.

- Cities have a vital role to play in achieving the SDGs. Approaches to SDG localisation internationally include city and regional level pilots, local implementation guidance issued by national governments, local government association campaigns, national and local stakeholder workshops, SDG policy units and working groups, and national strategies for sustainable urban development.

- The UK is currently missing an opportunity to embed the SDGs and NUA in urban policy and planning. Local stakeholders have driven the small number of SDG localisation initiatives that exist in UK cities in the absence of national or local implementation guidance.

- The Government’s SDG action plan should be supported at the highest levels of Government and should include empowerment of cities and local governments to develop appropriate mechanisms to achieve the SDGs, the benefits of using the SDGs as a sustainability framework, UK-specific guidance for local authorities, voluntary local and regional indicators, and initiatives to support and embed SDG localisation.

- Approaches to localising the SDGs will need to be tailored and appropriate to local and national contexts. As such, the SDGs should be seen as a guiding framework rather than prescriptive or restrictive. Considerable resources are required to bring data together to report on the SDGs in such a way as to support intelligent policy-making at the urban level. It is appropriate to consider how local governments can be resourced and supported, within the context of wider city and devolution deals, to mobilise the SDGs to achieve more sustainable urban development. An enabling framework of effective multi-level governance is essential to achieve the SDGs.

Mistra Urban Futures’ work on the Sustainable Development Goals
1. The University of Sheffield’s Urban Institute is part of an international centre for research and advocacy for sustainable cities called Mistra Urban Futures, based in Gothenburg, Sweden. As part of this network, we are collaborating with international partners in the Global North and South to explore how cities are engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals and New Urban Agenda. The cities involved are: Buenos Aires (Argentina), Cape Town (South Africa), Gothenburg and Malmö (Sweden), Kisumu (Kenya), Sheffield and Greater Manchester (UK) and Shimla (India).

2. Mistra Urban Futures is funded by Mistra, the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research; Sida, the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency, and a consortium of partners in Gothenburg. In the UK, we also have local funding from the University of Sheffield.

3. This project has been initiated on the basis that cities play a vital role in sustainable development. Over 80% of the UK’s population live in urban areas.

4. UN guidance states that achieving the SDGs will require the support of government institutions at all levels and Goal 11 focuses on Sustainable Cities and Communities.

5. Additionally, UN-Habitat’s New Urban Agenda, adopted in 2016, sets out a global vision for sustainable development that complements the SDGs with an urban focus.

6. The comparative element of our project examines:
   - How cities are engaging with and implementing the SDGs and NUA.
   - Linkages between these two sustainability agendas.
   - The role of national and local government, private and third sector actors in SDG implementation, monitoring and evaluation in various political contexts.
   - Legislation and/or guiding documentation at the national and local level.

7. This submission draws on emerging evidence from this research about how the UK policy landscape compares with that of other participating countries. Our evidence is based on a review of national policy documentation and interviews with key local stakeholders in participating cities.

Evidence

8. Our evidence relates to the following areas of focus in the inquiry’s Terms of Reference:
• What steps has the Government taken to achieve the Goals?
• Whether the Government can be said to have an action plan on the SDGs?

How are international Governments and other major stakeholders supporting SDG localisation?

9. Our evidence shows that much of the work to define the SDGs has been undertaken in isolation from the daily pressures and realities of urban local authorities and other agencies that will be required to collect, compute and report on the indicators. It is critical, therefore, to consider how the SDGs are implemented locally as well as within national contexts. Through focusing on the urban scale, it is apparent that there are highly variable approaches to national level support for the implementation of the SDGs and the relationship between central/regional/local responsibilities.

10. Approaches to SDG localisation among our international project partners include local pilot initiatives reporting back to dedicated national SDG implementation bodies (Kenya); aligning the SDGs with existing national urban initiatives (India); local implementation guidance from national government (Argentina and Sweden); local government association campaigns (South Africa and Sweden); collaborations and workshops involving national government agencies and local government representatives (Argentina and South Africa); regional policy units and working groups (India and Kenya); and national strategies for sustainable urban development (Sweden). These approaches are outlined in more detail in the paragraphs below. Further information is also contained in a series of city briefs available online.

11. In Argentina, the National Council for Social Policy Coordination (Consejo Nacional de Coordinación de Políticas Sociales, or CNCPS), under the purview of the National Ministry of Social Development, is responsible for setting guidelines for SDG target localisation as well as for monitoring and evaluation. The CNCPS has drafted an SDG Localisation Manual that provides methodological resources for SDG implementation as a management tool for local governments.1 The CNCPS has also signed various cooperation agreements with local government agencies, including one with the government agency in the City of Buenos Aires in 2016, which provides for the implementation of actions to facilitate localisation of the SDG targets. The agreement was presented at an event attended by representatives of government institutions of other provinces involved in the implementation of the SDGs.

12. In India, state-level government in Himachal Pradesh has, through its Planning Department, provided guidance to various state-level departments regarding the constitution of working groups to address the SDGs and map them to the work of departments. Working groups have been asked to formulate a short-term action plan (3 years) and a medium term strategy (7 years) towards achieving the SDGs. To date, SDG work in India has focussed on the national and state level rather than cities. However, Shimla has been selected as a pilot city for the nationwide Smart City Mission (SCM), which is used as a guiding vision for the city. The SDGs are being used as one of the tools to assess the availability of indicators that can serve to monitor the impact of the projects being undertaken under the SCM programme in Shimla.

13. In Kenya, Kisumu is acting as a pilot initiative for the Kenyan Government’s National SDG implementation team, and the SDGs are being incorporated within the 2018-2022 County Integrated Development Plan. A county-level SDG Unit is to be formed within the Department of Economic Planning and Development. The SDG Unit will have responsibility for tracking SDG indicators at the local level, setting and reviewing county-relevant targets, and making national level recommendations regarding SDG integration, implementation and localisation. This will include particular consideration of Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

14. In South Africa, there have been some notable collaborative initiatives towards localisation. In 2015, the Mistra Urban Futures’ pilot project on the draft targets and indicators in Goal 11 brought together the City of Cape Town and the National Treasury for mutual benefit. The former learned what the SDG reporting requirements would be while the latter was able proactively to streamline and refine its indicator report sheet for metropolitan urban areas, to facilitate its annual reporting to the UN on SDG progress. In 2016 Stats SA, the National Statistics Agency for South Africa, organised a series of workshops in Cape Town on localising the SDGs. In 2017, the South African Local Government Association was also involved in raising awareness around the SDGs in municipalities. Currently the Western Cape Provincial Government is in the process of developing an indicator framework and state of development report, which should align with the SDGs.

15. In Sweden, the Government launched a ‘Strategy for Living Cities’ (‘Strategin för Levande städer’) in April 2018, focussing on sustainable urban development and supporting national implementation of Goal 11 and the NUA. The strategy contains general goals for sustainable cities and new milestones to be included in the existing
environmental target system. Special responsibility has been given to the Civil Ministry for the national implementation of the SDGs, while all Government departments are responsible for implementing the SDGs within their respective mandates. The Government has also appointed an independent ‘Agenda 2030 delegation’ comprising external experts to support and stimulate national SDG implementation. The national government launched a national Agenda 2030 action plan in June this year, following recommendations from the independent delegation. The national Agenda 2030 action plan states that some key SDG indicators are important to monitor at local level.

16. Statistics Sweden, the Agenda 2030 delegation and the Council for the Promotion of Municipal Analyses are revising the existing municipal data collection system to address gaps and ascertain how interested municipalities are doing in comparison. They have also committed to working with representatives from municipalities and counties to develop a set of voluntary local indicators based on the SDGs. This work should be completed by March 2019. The Agenda 2030 delegation will also work with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL) to include regional and local implementation of the SDGs in its final report in 2019.

17. The SKL and the Swedish UN Federation are launching a joint communication project to increase knowledge and commitment of the SDGs in municipalities, county councils and regions. Seven municipalities and county councils will participate as a reference group during the pilot year; then more will be able to participate ongoing until 2020. There is no statutory requirement for municipalities, county councils or regions to work with the SDGs; rather SKL suggests SDG localisation should build on voluntary commitment and political anchoring that is responsive to local contexts.

What evidence is there of a coherent UK Government approach?

18. Our analysis has revealed that high-level political commitment and support for the SDGs is a key feature in countries that are particularly progressive in delivering on the SDGs, something that is currently lacking in the UK. Other countries are also further ahead in taking steps to localise the SDGs.

19. Specifically, the UK is currently missing an opportunity to embed sustainable development principles in local policy and planning. There is no implementation guidance available for UK local authorities and, where there are SDG localisation initiatives in some UK cities (e.g. in Bristol, Liverpool, London, Manchester and Sheffield), this process has been driven by local stakeholders.
20. We have worked in Greater Manchester and Sheffield around the localisation of the SDGs. We undertook pilot work in 2015 with Quantum Technology and Strategy to explore these issues with Greater Manchester policy-makers and stakeholders. This pilot identified a number of key challenges: the lack of clear rationale or guidance for understanding the relevance and added value of the SDGs in the face of competing priorities; the disaggregation of data sources needed to report against the SDGs across different scales and sectors; and the lack of debate about the potential operational versus strategic deployment of the SDGs, as a means for wider sustainable transformation.

21. In the post-devolution context, with the election of a Greater Manchester Mayor, our current focus is on the implementation of the SDG targets around participatory institutions, processes and decision-making in the context of devolution. We will be undertaking focus groups and interviews around these issues before the end of 2018.

22. In Sheffield we are interviewing city policy-makers and stakeholders about their engagement with the SDGs and NUA; and we are mapping SDG goals, targets and indicators to existing local policies and plans. Our next step is to further a collaboration with Sheffield City Council to co-organise three events by the end of 2019 to generate a cross-urban discussion around the localisation of the SDGs and NUA.

23. There are three key findings from our work on the SDGs in the UK urban context.

24. First, outside our efforts, underpinned by a commitment to coproducing research with city stakeholders, there appears to be little on-the-ground activity in these cities around the SDGs or NUA. Prior to working with us, city partners in Sheffield and Greater Manchester were aware of, but not acting on implementing, these agendas. The absence of national guidance or priority-setting is one factor that has led to this situation. There is no clear rationale for city-regions to engage, and limited discussion of the potential of the new devolution context in the UK to promote the agenda.

25. Second, addressing the SDGs requires coordinated and coproduced approaches. Our work suggests that universities can play important roles in generating debate and action around the SDGs in partnership with local authorities and other stakeholders. It also highlights the need to work across both horizontal and vertical institutional
boundaries, particularly to identify, access and analyse data held in different places to generate strategic urban intelligence.

26. Third, caution should be exercised in the development of any national-led approach to the implementation of the SDGs. Whilst we have noted the absence of a coordinated UK national approach, we would not recommend a top-down or mandatory approach. A supportive set of guidelines and frameworks are needed, but local translation and political buy-in are also crucial.

Recommendations

27. The Government should assign responsibility for implementation of the SDGs to a senior minister.

28. Noting that other UK stakeholders have repeated calls for a comprehensive and integrated national plan to address the SDGs, we suggest that such a plan should include consideration of the role of cities and local governments in achieving the SDGs and interlinkages with the NUA. This plan should recognise the importance of inter-sectoral work to ensure that the integrative nature of the SDGs is maintained and promoted, rather than rely on sector-based silo approaches.

29. A national plan should be coproduced with and by county and city authorities to identify the added value and benefits from working with the SDGs. These benefits could include: improving coordination between departments and directorates in the respective authorities in terms of both planning and data; encouraging long-term thinking and planning towards a more sustainable society, economy and environment; and positioning cities in a global context whilst providing a platform to talk to citizens about issues that matter locally.

30. Our analysis highlights that a national plan could also provide reassurance around the human resource and reputational implications of localising the SDGs, particularly in the context of national austerity policies and cuts to local government funding. If a national monitoring and reporting framework is adopted, this needs to be resourced locally to avoid placing additional burdens on existing local actors who are already stretched beyond their means.

31. It is important that cities are empowered and resourced. This is particularly important in ensuring the quality, reliability and availability of data that is often held by different actors at multiple scales. Targets and indicators need to be integrated into already existing practices of policy-making.
32. As is already occurring in other countries, the Government, working with national and local stakeholders, should develop UK-specific guidance around localising the SDGs and voluntary local indicators. This guidance could include logical stages of implementation e.g. i) definition of an action plan ii) defining the SDG targets to be prioritised by the city iii) raising local awareness iv) embedding SDG targets within institutional processes v) monitoring and evaluation.

33. The Government and other relevant stakeholders (e.g. UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development, Local Government Association, Core Cities Group) should consider how to support and embed SDG localisation and the NUA, for example through awareness-raising campaigns, local pilots, knowledge-exchange activities and embedded implementation officers/researchers.

34. We would recommend that any national plan should focus on long-term transformative thinking about how to create a more sustainable society. The SDGs and NUA should be mobilised to support this goal, rather than simply used a new set of reporting targets disconnected from systemic sustainable change.

Note on Contributors
This report has been written and compiled by the project researchers working at the Urban Institute, University of Sheffield. It is based on our own work, alongside data and reports from a wide group of international collaborators. The Urban SDG project is led by Professor David Simon (Director, Mistra Urban Futures and Royal Holloway University of London). City reports are authored by local teams including:

**Buenos Aires:** Ileana Versace (The New School Observatory on Latin America)

**Cape Town:** Sylvia Croese (University of Cape Town)

**Gothenburg:** Sandra Valencia (Lead Researcher, Mistra Urban Futures and Chalmers University of Technology)

**Greater Manchester:** Louise Marix-Evans (Quantum), Gill Fenna (Quantum), Beth Perry (Urban Institute, University of Sheffield) and Bert Russell (Urban Institute, University of Sheffield).

**Kisumu:** Michael Oloko (Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology)

**Malmö:** Joakim Nordqvist (Malmö University)

**Sheffield:** Nick Taylor Buck (Urban Institute, University of Sheffield), Kristina Diprose (Urban Institute, University of Sheffield) and Beth Perry (Urban Institute, University of Sheffield).
Shimla: Tarun Sharma (Nagrika NGO) and Aishwarya KS (Nagrika NGO)

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