



# Voluntary Local Reviews: A handbook for UK cities

*Building on the Bristol experience*



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## Introduction

This handbook is a tool to assist UK cities in the production of a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) of progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This handbook aims to provide ideas about how to undertake a VLR, streamline the process for UK cities by presenting key information about sourcing local data, and offer reflections on the challenges confronted in the production of the UK's first VLR for the city of Bristol in 2019.

This handbook draws heavily on our experience working with the Bristol City Office to understand the relevance of the SDGs in the UK local government context. It draws upon our own reflections to producing a VLR<sup>i</sup> and the reflections of our counterparts in other cities around the world who have done the same. Given the diversity of VLRS that have now been produced, we have compiled as much information as possible about the different types of VLRS that have been undertaken around the world to illustrate the variation in types and styles. Moreover, this handbook condenses some of the information contained within the VLR handbook created by students at Carnegie Mellon University<sup>ii</sup> and applies a UK lens to the process.

We begin by introducing the Sustainable Development Goals before discussing what a Voluntary Local Review is and why a city might want to undertake one. From there we explore various approaches to conducting a VLR. First, we compare the 10 current examples of VLRS that are publicly available. We then provide guidance on where UK cities can find locally disaggregated data and discuss methods for stakeholder engagement to gather qualitative information. We conclude with a discussion of challenges we encountered preparing a VLR and a list of further resources.

We hope this handbook, as well as Bristol's VLR, will help other UK cities to share their experiences of adopting the SDGs, and their progress towards achieving them.

## What are the SDGs

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – also known as the Global Goals – are a set of 17 goals developed and adopted by the United Nations and its 193 member countries in September 2015<sup>iii</sup>. They build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that preceded them and are unpinned by 169 targets and 244 associated indicators. These global objectives for 2030 are universal, covering everyone in all countries, not just the developing countries which were the focus of the MDGs. While the MDGs saw improvements in many countries in terms of national averages, concerns that they focused on relatively better off people in developing countries led to the SDGs focus of 'leave no one behind'.

SDG success will require their integration into all sectors of society and all levels of government. As well as national governments, regions and cities will be essential to achieving the SDGs, and so need to adopt relevant goals and include the SDGs in planning processes so that meaningful local progress can be made. This is especially true of cities given their high concentration of people and relevant challenges, such as employment, safe and sustainable transport, food security and waste management. The concentration of population also offers a greater opportunity to rapidly provide transformational change to higher concentrations of people.

Many cities have already begun to adopt the SDG framework into their planning and budgeting processes. As all the SDGs have targets that are directly related to the responsibilities of sub-national governments this has been a key first step in understanding the SDGs at a local level. This is also true of operations in UK cities.

The array of economic, environmental and social issues and inequalities that UK cities face greatly overlap with the SDG targets. While some targets are focused at the national level or address non-urban contexts, a large proportion of them will require significant action at the city level to deliver the goals. The World Urban Forum states that “65 percent of the 169 targets behind the 17 SDGs will not be reached without proper engagement of and coordination with local and regional governments.”

The SDGs offer a great opportunity for UK cities to attempt to address these problems as part of a global movement, however until recently there was no structured way for cities to share their efforts towards the SDGs with others. In July 2018, New York City launched its Voluntary Local Review and became the first city worldwide to directly assess its progress towards the SDGs and to present it the UN.

### What is a Voluntary Local Review

A Voluntary Local Review is a tool to report sub-national progress towards achieving the SDGs.

Every year the SDGs are reviewed at the High-Level Political Forum, a two-week meeting at the United Nations in New York City. Because the SDGs were written for and adopted at the national level the traditional form of reporting is through national reviews. These reviews are not mandatory and are called Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). In 2018, a handful of cities decided to adopt this framework at the local level and developed the Voluntary Local Review (VLR). Since then 10 VLRs have been published by cities around the world, with many more stating they will produce a VLR or currently in the production of a VLR.

The format of a VNR (and consequently a VLR) is based on the guidance laid out in the handbook for the preparation of VNRs produced by the Division for Sustainable Development of the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)<sup>v</sup>. The UN DESA handbook details a possible structure for a country to undertake a VNR as

well as the typical methodology they expect for a VNRs. However, VNRs are incredibly variable in their nature because there is no required content. Similarly, the 10 VLRs that have been undertaken are all variable in their nature as well. Table 1 shows a rough overview of the key components of most VLRs.

Currently, there is no specific mechanism for cities to present their reports to the UN and a VLR has no official status in the UN system. However, as cities are increasingly being seen as important actors in the delivery of the SDGs, and as more cities are adopting the VLR as tool to communicate their efforts, their significance is growing. Repeated calls for improved representation of subnational government in the VNRs will also increase the importance of VLRs. The UK's VNR was one of only a handful of VNRs that have been undertaken so far that included reference to subnational governments<sup>v</sup>, but many civil society stakeholders call for better and further consultation and inclusion of local and regional government<sup>vi</sup>.

Table 1 Key components of a VLR

1.	Introduction
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Background to your city</li> <li>▪ Why are the SDGs important to your city</li> </ul>
2.	Policy and enabling environment
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What is the history of the SDGs in your city</li> <li>▪ How does your city use and understand the SDGs</li> <li>▪ Who is responsible for the SDGs</li> </ul>
3.	Methodology
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Quantitative evaluation</li> <li>▪ Qualitative evaluation</li> <li>▪ <i>If relevant:</i> Summary of stakeholder consultation mechanism</li> </ul>
4.	Review of SDGs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Statistical portrait of progress</li> <li>▪ Qualitative examples of projects and initiatives</li> </ul>
5.	Discussion
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analysis of gaps</li> <li>▪ Challenges faced in production</li> </ul>
6.	Conclusions and future initiatives

## Why undertake a Voluntary Local Review

The benefits of a VLR impact a city at every scale from city government operations, to the wider city ecosystem, and even to the engagement and perception of cities on the global stage. Building from our experience, discussions held with other cities and the work of researchers at Carnegie Mellon University Heinz College<sup>ii</sup>, we have compiled a list of reasons why cities might undertake a VLR.

### *City government*

1. **De-siloing:** The VLR provides an opportunity to consider how the holistic agenda of the SDGs relates to the operations of city government. This can encourage city officials to break down siloes and consider the interactions of their work with other areas of council operation.
2. **Data led policy:** The SDG agenda is holistic and encompasses most—if not all—of the work a council in the UK performs. Consequently, monitoring the performance of these goals can provide a key to data led policy for sustainable urban development.
3. **Leave no one behind:** At the heart of the SDGs is the leave no one behind agenda. The disaggregation of indicators by geography, age, gender, ethnicity and/or disability status allows city governments to consider whether their approach and policies are improving equality.
4. **Highlighting strengths and weaknesses:** VLRs can highlight to city governments where the city is performing well and where there are gaps in activity. This can provide opportunities for innovation or new organisations to tackle the areas of lack and opportunities to share best practice from areas of strength.

### *Citywide*

5. **Shared language:** As a public document the VLR serves as a mechanism for consolidating a common vocabulary that can help local actors share experiences and learnings with counterparts in other cities in the UK and around the world.
6. **Multi-sectoral partnerships:** The common language of the SDGs provides an opportunity for city stakeholders to better collaborate with each other. The SDGs and VLR can be an effective tool to signpost individuals and stakeholders interested in working on a specific area of local development and can provide a shared language to help build new multisectoral partnerships.
7. **Stakeholder engagement:** The VLR process offers an opportunity to raise awareness by engaging with citizens and organisations through consultation to understand what is being done to deliver the SDGs locally. Moreover, it can help Councils to better understand the activity of organisations in the city and better engage with stakeholders, many of whom already see the SDGs as key to their work.
8. **Transparent accountability:** Voluntary National Reviews have been criticised for lacking genuine transparency. Many of the cities that have undertaken VLRs have thus embraced their strengths and weaknesses and shown both areas of success and areas of failure, something that many VNRs have failed to do.
9. **Monitoring progress:** The VLR format provides a potential tool for monitoring a city's progress towards not only the SDGs, but also local priorities. In other words, the VLR is an instrument for simultaneously reporting 'locally' to citizens and 'globally' to networks and institutions supporting global collective action to address global challenges.

### *Global connections*

10. **City leadership:** Undertaking a VLR demonstrates city leadership on crucial global challenges that affect our citizens on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, it helps express solidarity with city leaders on a global agenda which cities do not currently have a strong platform to influence.
11. **Shared learnings:** VLRs provide an opportunity to highlight the successes and failures. This allows cities to identify common challenges and share ideas and innovations to combat areas of weakness.
12. **Global citizenship:** We live in a world where many of the decisions made and actions taken in our cities impact on millions of others around the round. The unresolved challenges of democratic accountability in the global age is that we are not only accountable to those in our own patch. A VLR demonstrates that a city is taking responsibility for their actions to human beings everywhere.



## How to undertake a Voluntary Local Review

While VLRs follow the structure laid out in the UN DESA Handbook for VNR, there is no internationally agreed template for undertaking one. Currently there are 10 published VLRs with most of these VLRs published on the IGES VLR lab<sup>vii</sup>. The table below gives an indication of some of the key differences between the VLRs that have been produced for different cities by highlighting (a) how many SDGs are covered by each VLR, (b) the lead organisations/authors, (c) whether the focus is on city government action or wider stakeholder action, and (d) how many SDG indicators are covered.

Table 2 Comparison of VLRs (for bibliography see annex)

City	SDG focus	Lead Organisation	Statistical Indicators	Population
Bristol	All 17	Academic + City	100+	459,300
Bueno Aires	HLPF focus + SDG5	City	<30	2,089,000
Helsinki	HLPF focus	City	30-100	650,058
Kitakyushu	Local Priority SDGs	Academic + City	<30	966,628
Los Angeles	HLPF Focus + 3 Local Priority SDGs	City	100+	4,000,000
New York	HLPF focus	City	100+	8,623,000
New Taipei City	All 17	City	<30	3,972,204
Oaxaca	All 17	Regional	100+	4,120,410
Santana De Parnaíba	Local priorities (7 SDGs)	Partner NGO Consultant + City	100+	126,574
Shimokawa	All 17	Academic + Town	30-100	3,355
Taipei City	Local Priorities (7 SDGs)	City	30-100	2,660,000
Toyama	All 17	Academic + City	<30	418,304

### Resourcing and management

Approaches to resourcing the production of VLRs broadly fall into three categories: City government led, academic partnership, other sources.

*City government led.* Buenos Aires, Helsinki and New York have all published VLRs funded and supported directly by city government employees. Similarly, Los Angeles was supported directly by the Mayor's Office with funding support from the Hilton Foundation.

*Academic partnership.* In Bristol, funding for the production of the VLR and the implementation of the SDGs came from a partnership between the University of Bristol and the Bristol City Office. Similarly, the three Japanese cities that have undertaken VLRs (Kitakyushu, Toyama and Shimokawa Town) were all directly supported by the Institute for Global Environment Strategies (IGES) working in partnership with the relevant city agencies.

*Other sources.* Oaxaca state in Mexico was supported by the work of German Cooperation for Sustainable Development (GIZ). Santana di Parnaíba in Brazil was support by Gaia Education, an international organisation with a focus on sustainability education.

Within the UK context, there are no dedicated funding mechanisms to resource the research and production costs of producing a VLR. Given limited local government resources, it is also challenging for city governments to undertake such an exercise without some form of support. A partnership-based approach is therefore recommended.



Bristol's VLR was the product of a sustained (and ongoing) partnership between the City Council and the University of Bristol. This initially began with a postgraduate student research project aimed at assessing the relevance of the SDGs for Bristol. This evolved into a formal project and a dedicated post was created with initial funding from the University Strategic Research Fund. The Bristol SDG Research and Engagement Associate began by working with Bristol City Council and the Bristol City Office to assess the relevance of the SDGs to the newly developed One City Plan.

Similar partnerships could be leveraged in other UK cities. At a minimum, establishing student research projects is a means of broadening university student experience while also providing valuable research support to resource-constrained local governments. More proactive universities may be open to developing initiatives similar to that which emerged in Bristol. But other partnerships are worth exploring. Many private sector firms now have considerable experience of the SDGs within their own organisations and may consider supporting a VLR initiative. Similarly, there are a wide range of civil society stakeholder across the UK supporting SDG implementation.

### Structuring the delivery

The basis of a VLR is monitoring the progress of your city or region towards achieving the SDGs. This can be done in a variety of ways. A *city-led review* will largely contain information on council policies and can be drawn from existing city strategies and monitoring frameworks if these have been mapped against the SDGs. This form of review can be very effective at improving conversations within the city government but may not accurately reflect the diversity of action in the city more broadly.

A *citywide review* will consider how organisations across the city and across sectors are working to deliver the SDGs. This approach considers the activities that stakeholders within the city are undertaking to meet the SDGs as well as how the local government is part of this. This requires a higher level of engagement with non-governmental stakeholders, but can be an important mapping exercise to understand the variety of activities occurring within your city. It is difficult to be comprehensive in this type of review and can be hard to make sure every organisation that is consulted has their activity included in the review.

A *regional review* can provide the government the opportunity to engage more holistically with a wider set of SDG targets and indicators. Regional reviews will require greater coordination still across governmental activity. However, regional reviews have the scope to consider both rural and urban components and hence more of the environmental SDG targets. Regional reviews also offer an opportunity to reflect on coordination at the combined authority level.

To date there have been two principle models used in the production of a VLR. The handbook produced by Carnegie Mellon University describes these as the Hub and Spoke model and the Commission or Working Group model.

1. *Hub-and-Spoke*. This model is characterised by a staff member coordinating most if not all of the VLR process. This model increases the likelihood of information sharing and makes the model easier to fund. However, it can be hard to generate momentum with this model of production.
2. *Commission or Working Group*: While this using a core group working to deliver the VLR provides opportunities to quickly engage a larger number of departments and stakeholders, this model is harder to fund and manage. With no clear funding for the work it can be difficult to get engaged staff members meeting with a high enough frequency.

## Assembling the elements of a Voluntary Local Review

Typically, VLRs contain a combination of quantitative and qualitative information. This comes in the form of three components:

- i) How local government activities and policies are meeting the SDGs
- ii) How organisations or communities based in the city are delivering on the SDGs
- iii) Quantitative data to demonstrate where there is currently trends towards missing or meeting the SDGs.

The depth and breadth of these varies based on the resources available and the awareness and engagement of organisations in the city of the SDGs. Bristol's VLR presented information on all three elements. The following is how we collected and included that information.

### Mapping city strategies

One of the first steps taken towards producing a VLR is understanding what existing policies and strategies are in place that meet the SDGs. Many cities have already undertaken this work and their efforts can be used as an example. Mapping can be undertaken at the SDG level displaying how broader strategies meet each SDG or down to the target level to demonstrate how individual policies and initiatives are helping to meet the SDG targets.

In New York City the Global Vision Urban Action mapping produced two documents highlighting how the SDGs mapped onto the OneNYC plan and also how the OneNYC plan mapped onto the SDGs<sup>viii</sup>. This two way mapping demonstrates the full range of connections between the plans. Buenos Aires VLR<sup>x</sup> contains a mapping of their city strategies against all the SDGs as does Helsinki's VLR<sup>x</sup>.

In Bristol this mapping took place before the production of the VLR. Working alongside the One City Office team, Bristol's One City Plan was mapped against the SDGs<sup>xi</sup> and this informed the data used and the initiatives included in Bristol's VLR.

### Data collection for UK cities

A core component of the VLR is the data presented in the report. Most VLRs contain a quantitative and qualitative assessment of progress towards the SDGs. Depending on the type of VLR being undertaken (City Government or Citywide) a VLR will have different approaches to the data used. A citywide approach might focus more on sharing data about the city, whereas a city government VLR might chose to focus on case studies about city government activities. Ideally a mix of the two will help to provide a good blend of both empirical data, and practical action.

As part of the production of Bristol's VLR a mass of over 140 indicators for Bristol were collected. The reasoning for the selection of these indicators can be found in the UN SDSN TRENDs case study that was prepared by the University of Bristol Cabot Institute for the Environment. These indicators came from a range of sources but to help other UK cities undertaking a similar feat we have presented the key lists of data so that practioners can more easily produce a VLR. Working with the Bristol City Council data team we used indicators that related to the IAEG-SDG indicators, but if these indicators were not available at the local level we used the closest available.

Where possible we selected indicators that could be disaggregated to the Local Authority level. Some indicators had information at the ward level but these indicators were usually recorded locally in Bristol. For some SDGs there were no key data sources. Moreover, some indicators required computation. We aimed to provide indicators disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and geography where possible. There were however a large number of data gaps on these protected characteristics, as

well as for disability status.

Another challenge on UK data came from the integrated nature of UK cities. However, many local authority areas do not represent the full and dynamic nature of how a city interacts with its surrounding region. In Bristol, the local authority only contains about 70% of the total population of the 'Bristol Built-Up Area' and just half of the city region population of 1.1 million. This wider functional urban area contains multiple towns and cities situated in different local authority areas, which are nevertheless deeply socially, economically and environmentally integrated. Much of a city's workforce will live or work under the jurisdiction of other councils. Flows of people, goods, money and pollution cross these council borders on a daily basis. While each local authority is responsible for serving citizens within their boundaries, these flows create de facto interdependence. This jurisdictional complexity in a functionally integrated urban region creates coordination challenges when it comes to delivering and monitoring the SDGs. For the case of Bristol we focused on monitoring data at the local authority level for simplicity but

Goal	Key Data Source	Secondary Data Source
SDG 1: No Poverty	<a href="#">End Child Poverty</a>	
SDG 2: Zero Hunger	Obesity and Malnourishment: <a href="#">Public Health England</a>	Local council information on food insecurity
SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing	Variety of Public Health Profiles: <a href="#">Public Health England</a>	
SDG 4: Quality Education	<a href="#">Department for Education</a>	Adult Education and Training: <a href="#">ONS Annual Population Survey</a>
SDG 5: Gender Equality	Local Council information (election and pay gap)	
SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation	Local Water Company	
SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy	<a href="#">Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy</a>	
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	Nomis web portal: <a href="#">Local Authority Profile</a>	
SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Nomis web portal	ONS; Local Council
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities	Wage: Nomis web portal: <a href="#">Annual survey of hours and earnings</a>	Racial & Disability: Local Quality of Life Survey, Local Council
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	Local Council data	Public Health England: <a href="#">Wider Determinants</a>
SDG 12: Responsible Production and Consumption	Local Waste Authority	
SDG 13: Climate Action	Local Council data	Local Quality of Life Survey
SDG 14: Life Under Water	Environment Agency: <a href="#">Water Body Status Classification</a>	
SDG 15: Life On Land	Data gap	
SDG 16: Peace Justice and Strong Institutions	Local Police Force Data	Public Health England: <a href="#">Wider Determinants</a>

Table 3 SDG Data sources for UK Cities

recognised the interdependence with the surrounding councils. One of the next steps for our work in Bristol is to consider how we can better integrate the SDGs into wider regional planning in coordination with other local authorities and with the combined authority.

One of the key sources for our report was the Bristol Key Facts Document<sup>xii</sup>. This is a report that is updated annually and pulls together information on some of the Council's most important issues into one document. While this report was not mapped onto the SDGs it did contain the sources or data for many targets.

Another similar important resource was the Bristol Quality of Life Survey<sup>xiii</sup>. Every year The Quality of Life (QoL) survey provides a snapshot of the quality of life in Bristol. The 2018 survey was sent to a random sample of 29,000 Bristol households. It gives local residents an opportunity to voice their opinions about issues close to their hearts and their views on local public services. It has been an annual survey since 2001 but does change over time. The statistics can be analysed at a ward level and also by equality groups such as age, sex and ethnicity. The survey is the council's main tool for providing neighbourhood level statistics and public perception information. There are over 200 indicators, with most data available by ward, equality group and areas of deprivation.

Lastly a major source of data came from the Councils' internal performance framework. These indicators are decided by the Council and updated annually. Some of these indicators came from the same sources as mentioned above (PHE, DoE, Defra, EA, Avon and Somerset Police).

### Data presentation

One consideration we had to make on data was about how best to display progress towards the SDGs. For Bristol's VLR we include data on every SDG. This meant we have over 140 indicators. This left us with a challenge regarding how best to present this data.

We chose to select a couple headline indicators that would describe key information about each SDG. These were presented as a percentage change in the indicator value since the first date it was recorded. The difficulty with this was that some indicators were small and showed small changes in size. For example malnutrition in Bristol increased between 2010 and 2018 but because the original rate was small and the increase was small the percentage change was large. Comparatively, the rise in obesity and overweight children was large but the initial rate was large meaning the percentage change seen was actually small. Most other VLRs focus solely on individual indicators and present them in a stand alone fashion. This is more feasible when a VLR is focused on fewer SDGs. It provides more space to discuss the data trends and indicators in question.

Another issue that arose was evaluating progress — i.e. whether we were on track to meet specific SDG targets. In the data annex for Bristol's VLR, each indicator has been given a colour to indicate whether progress is being made. Green represents a positive move towards achieving the target, amber represents little or no change and red represents a move away from achieving the target. These colours do not represent success in achieving the goal at the current rate, but instead the *trajectory* of the indicator. The work to accurately understand whether we will meet all the targets is a much more complicated piece of data analysis that we didn't have capacity to undertake.

Initially we considered producing a traffic light analysis to compare progress towards each of the 17 SDGs. We planned to determine the rating based on the proportion of indicators that were progressing towards their target as the main factor in deciding the colour of the SDGs. After this we would use the equality of success in this indicator based on any available disaggregation of the indicator. Upon

reflection we felt this analysis was arbitrary and crude. There is no obvious way to weight diverse indicators within each SDG. As a result, missing data or indicators moving in different directions within a goal would render any summary judgement arbitrary, a RAG system only works in this case if all indicators within every goal are available and moving in the same direction (i.e. positive or negative). Moreover, it is hard to tell whether indicator trends over short periods of time represent stochastic error or a genuine trend. Given these issues, we chose not to use a RAG rating system at the goal level.

### Case studies

For a city attempting a city government focused VLR, the case studies contained within a VLR will likely be initiatives and policies the Council has developed. As a result, much of the information that will be used for this can be taken from other council documents and can be easily drawn upon once a Local Authority's strategies have been mapped against the SDGs.

Instead of focusing solely on the work of the city council, Bristol assessed its wider city progress through consulting city stakeholders about how their work contributes to the SDGs. We aimed to capture a broad and diverse cross-section of organisations in the city by making the process as easy to engage with as possible. This meant altering some of the language about the goals and adapting the text we used to make the themes engrained in each of the SDGs more accessible for those who have had no previous connection to the SDGs.

Our survey was by no means exhaustive; however, it provided a snapshot of the activities of nearly 90 different organisations. We used a web-based survey structure to collect a large quantity of data for our case studies. This method was free and quick however it had limitations in the quality and uniformity of response. Due to time constraints, a deeper more rigorous consultation exercise was not possible, however where the information provided was unclear or the survey was incomplete a follow up conversation was held to develop the response in more detail.

### Survey dissemination

To make sure we reached as many organisations as possible we used the many and varied networks in the city to disseminate information about the review and the consultation. Bristol is fortunate to have a network dedicated to the SDGs, the SDG Alliance. This was established in 2016 and has since grown to include over 120 different stakeholders.

Our primary networks were the SDG Alliance (a network of actors in the city interested in an engaged with SDGs in the city), the local business network (Business West) and the Chamber of Commerce, the voluntary sector network (Voscur), and the environmental network (Bristol Green Capital Partnership). This allowed us to ensure that the economic, environmental and social components of the SDGs were well represented in our consultation.

To develop our understanding of the activities occurring in the inclusion and diversity sectors we reached out to the Black South West Network, the Inclusive Cities Project, Bristol Women's Voice, LGBT Bristol and the Bristol Interfaith Group.

Lastly, to get a better understanding of the activities occurring at the ward and neighbourhood level we sent information about our consultation survey to every elected councillor. We felt these councillors would have the best connection to the daily lives and community organisations based in their ward.

## Survey structure

The main question within the survey simply asked whether the respondent or their organisation worked to deliver any of the SDGs in Bristol. We did not use the SDG numbers but instead used the definition of the goals to provide information on the nature of the theme of the goal. Most goals are fairly self-explanatory but for those which were not clear we provided a more detailed description for ease of understanding.

Does your organisation take part in any activities, projects or initiatives that contribute towards achieving the below goals in Bristol? (tick all that apply)

- 1) Reducing poverty
- 2) Ending hunger and food insecurity
- 3) Improving the health and wellbeing of citizens in Bristol
- 4) Improving the provision of inclusive, high quality education
- 5) Reducing gender inequality
- 6) Improving water quality and sanitation
- 7) Providing clean and renewable energy
- 8) Supporting inclusive economic growth and decent work for all
- 9) Development of resilient infrastructure; promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization; or fostering innovation
- 10) Reduce inequalities of all types and varieties
- 11) Improve the safety, resilience and inclusivity of Bristol and its communities
- 12) Ensure responsible consumption and production patterns
- 13) Take action towards tackling climate change
- 14) Conserve and protect water-based ecosystems
- 15) Conserve and protect land-based ecosystems
- 16) Reducing crime and violence or promoting peace, justice and accountable public institutions
- 17) Enhance the delivery of the SDGs through Global Partnerships

*Table 4 Key survey question to identify Bristol-based activities*

Based on the answers given to the question in table 4, respondents were then directed to goal relevant pages with a specific question about that goal. This allowed for more agile navigation through the questions and shorter time completing the survey.

Each SDG had a similar set of questions associated with it. The first question, gave respondents space to describe the initiative, project or work they do towards meeting that specific goal. The second question provided information about the spatial scale that the project occurs (within their organisation, within a community or neighbourhood, at the city-level, other). The third question focused on whether the work was undertaken in partnership with other organisations. Lastly, we asked whether there was any evidence of the outcomes of the project or initiative. The uniformity of questions allowed for a comparable set of responses across all 17 goals that meant we could conduct basic statistical analysis on the types of activity respondents were undertaking and how it was serving the city. It is hoped this will

help inform new policies and initiatives in future towards meeting SDGs that are currently underserved or spatial scales that have currently been ignored.

- a) What level does this activity or initiative occur at? (citywide, ward level, community initiative, within your organisation, other)
  - i. Within your organisations
  - ii. Within a community
  - iii. Citywide
  - iv. Other
- b) Did/do you work in partnership with any organisations to deliver this project?
  - i. Yes
  - ii. No
  - iii. If yes, please note the organisations that you partnered with
- c) Do you have any evidence of outcomes or impacts associated with these activities that you would be willing to share? If yes, we may contact you via email to collect this evidence.
  - i. Yes
  - ii. No

*Table 5 Three questions asked about every SDG*



## Challenges

### *Boundary questions*

One of the key challenges we faced relates to jurisdictional complexity and it is reflected in questions around appropriate scales and boundaries for monitoring the SDGs sub-nationally. Most statistics are reported for administrative or statistical areas that don't necessarily map neatly onto de facto urban areas or functionally integrated regions. Those working in a local authority will know the overlap and interconnections they have with other LAs and this is even more the case in urban areas. As a result, indicators of carbon emissions or wage inequality or hunger measured within a Local Authority Area may not reflect the realities and experiences of communities that feel part of the city but happen to live outside its administrative borders. The geography of measurement has a substantial influence on the picture that emerges about how the 'city' is performing. The question of where we should measure what is an important one to address in future. One of the next steps for our work in Bristol is to consider how we can better integrate the SDGs into wider regional planning in coordination with other local authorities and with the combined authority.

### *Disaggregating data is essential*

Much of the data for Bristol's VLR was drawn from the Office for National Statistics or Public Health England. While the quality of this data is considered quite high, the spatial resolution is generally quite coarse; much of this report relies on indicators at the local authority scale. This makes it difficult to identify inequalities within the city across wards, which is absolutely necessary to assess whether we were meeting the 'Leave no one behind' ethos of the SDGs. Where we were able to spatially or demographically disaggregate data, we often found divergent outcomes or trends across the city, suggesting significant inequalities. Reporting at the city-wide scale may therefore mask substantial variation in the lived realities of diverse communities across the city. Using an indicator that can be disaggregated by geography, gender, ethnicity and disability provides a valuable insight into where the successes and failures of a local authority in meeting the SDGs.

### *Data deficits and doubts*

We encountered several data deficits in the course of preparing this report, with notable gaps or problems related to poverty, gender equality, food insecurity, ecology and resource efficiency. Moreover, credible data sources sometimes disagreed on similar phenomena. For example, there is little reliable time-series data on poverty at the local scale. The English indices of multiple deprivation, which are the primary poverty indicators used by government, are only reported every five years. The last two available years of data are 2010 and 2015. Both Public Health England and End Child Poverty publish time-series for the proportion of children living in poverty, which was used as a proxy. However, Public Health England showed decreasing rates of children in poverty, compared to End Child Poverty's increased rates since 2013. Relying, as Public Health England do, on eligibility data<sup>xiv</sup>, is problematic due to known issues with HMRC statistics, changes to the calculations of total child population, changes to in and out of work poverty calculations since the introduction of Universal Credit, and differences in how employment trends are recorded at the local level. In this case the End Child Poverty data was deemed more accurate at the local level<sup>xv</sup>. However, neither source provides data on other vulnerable groups that would ideally be monitored. To monitor SDG 1 locally, we need better poverty data.

The same is true for Goals 2, 5, 8, 12, 14 and 15. In other cases, concerns exist about how to interpret the data. For example, the most widely used measure of food insecurity is the total number of food bank users for a given period, but this can be deceptive. Food bank users often represent a small proportion of

the population who are food insecure. Canada has monitored household food insecurity since 2005 and have found that while 13% of Canadians struggle with food insecurity, only 20–30% of these individuals reported visiting a food bank for help<sup>xvi</sup>. Fortunately, the 2018 Bristol Quality of Life survey asked questions about food insecurity for the first time. Similar concerns around the interpretation of data related to domestic abuse, sexual offences, human trafficking and modern slavery. It is difficult to know if negative trends in these indicators reflect worsening conditions or improvements in reporting. In sum, there are extensive data gaps and doubts about how to interpret key indicators that need to be addressed to monitor the SDGs effectively at the subnational scale.

#### *Inappropriate indicators*

As many other cities have discovered, the SDG indicators were not developed with cities in mind, and some are inappropriate for relatively wealthy contexts. We found many indicators were simply inappropriate for the city scale. The indicators for SDG 9 show that it isn't particularly useful to assess local economic development in relation to the percentage of manufacturing in value added or manufacturing employment as a proportion of total employment (indicators 9.2.1 & 9.2.2). While these may be more salient in a region transitioning out of low productivity agriculture, they aren't necessarily appropriate in a city benefitting from a high-value service sector.

Similarly, SDG 17 is largely focused on international partnerships. Bristol benefits from a strong community dedicated to supporting sustainable development in other regions, and we have reported on some of this activity. However, in the spirit of the SDGs we opted to include information about local partnerships for local delivery in recognition of the importance of partnerships to achieve collective goals at any geographic scale and there is no formal way of monitoring this in the SDG indicators. Overall, as we discovered in the preparation of this report and through consultation with teams working on monitoring SDGs in other cities, there is a clear need for a standard set of indicators for cities that are spatially appropriate and globally applicable.

#### *Cities need support to transform ambition into action*

Bristol has set ambitious targets to tackle climate change. The strength of civic will to confront this global challenge is clear but achieving carbon neutrality by 2030 is a daunting and complicated challenge. Local authorities in the UK have some levers of influence to support the transition to a low carbon world. However, most subnational governments simply don't have the power or resources to drive this transition alone. A collaborative approach that brings together organisations from across sectors and government authorities at multiple spatial scales is required. An important part of undertaking a VLR is providing a stronger voice for subnational governments in national and international conversations. Cities and regionals are increasingly taking the lead in confronting global challenges but the need support to follow through and deliver on the SDGs.

## Sharing your Voluntary Local Review

There is no formal mechanism to share a VLR at the UN. However, there are a number of opportunities to share your report with a wider audience. Firstly, in July 2019 the English Local Government Association (LGA) unanimously passed a motion to work towards local level partnerships on the SDGs<sup>xvii</sup>. They are now beginning a process of understanding the SDGs and their relevance to their work and will likely be interested in UK city VLRs.

In 2019 the UK government presented its first Voluntary National Review at the UN<sup>xviii</sup>. While this report contained reference to subnational governments and their activities towards the SDGs, there were still calls from many in the UK civil society community for greater representation of local government in the VNR<sup>xix</sup>. This could provide a future avenue to share the findings of a VLR through a VNR.

Additionally, every year United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) produce a report on local action towards the SDGs<sup>xx</sup>. This report is presented at the HLPF and highlights the action and activity of cities all across the world. Their report in 2019 included a large section on VLRs and they are hopefully of an increased-up take. Similarly, Local 2030 is the UN branch for local adoption of the SDGs and houses many local case studies of action towards the SDGs.

The Institute for Global Environment Strategies (IGES) is a research institute that helped developed the VLRs for Kitakyushu, Shimokawa and Toyama. They have developed an online platform for cities to share their VLRs and currently are the only centralised hub of all the VLRs that have been undertaken to date.

The last option is to attend the UN High Level Political Forum and share your report at a side-event at the UN. This option is the most complex as a host venue is required as well as the support of other cities or interested stakeholders and organisations to host such an event. Additionally, space is limited, however every year the Local 2030 events occur where city representatives often have space to share their experiences and learn from others around the world working on city level adoption of the SDGs.

## Appendix

### Annex 1: General VLR Resources

UCLG Learning module 3 - Reporting to National and Local reviews:

<https://www.learning.uclg.org/module-3>

Brookings Institution City Leadership:

<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/City-leadership-on-the-SDGs.pdf>

Carneige Mellon University and Brookings Institution: A Voluntary Local Review Handbook for Cities:

[https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/VLR\\_Handbook\\_7.7.19.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/VLR_Handbook_7.7.19.pdf)

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs – Global Goals, Global Cities: Achieving the SDGs through Collective Local Action:

[https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/report\\_global-goals-global-cities\\_190923.pdf](https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/report_global-goals-global-cities_190923.pdf)

Institute for Global Environmental Strategies VLR lab:

<https://www.iges.or.jp/en/sdgs/vlr/index.html>

United Cities and Local Governments and Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments: Towards the Localisation of the SDGs, 3<sup>rd</sup> report:

[https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/UCLG\\_GTF\\_LocalizationSDG.pdf](https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/UCLG_GTF_LocalizationSDG.pdf)

Local 2030:

<https://www.localizingthesdgs.org>

UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Trends : Aligning Bristol's One City Plan with the SDGS:

<https://www.sdsntrends.org/research/2019/4/15/local-data-action-england-bristol>

## Annex 2: Specific SDG Questions

**SDG 1:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to reduce poverty in Bristol? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 2:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to end hunger and food insecurity in Bristol? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 3:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to improve the health and wellbeing of employees or citizens of Bristol? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 4:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to improve the delivery of quality, inclusive education and life-long learning for Bristolians? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 5:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to achieve gender equality and empower women in Bristol? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 6:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to ensure availability and sustainable management of water resources in Bristol? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 7:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable energy? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 8:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to support inclusive economic growth and decent work for all in Bristol? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 9:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to: support the development of resilient infrastructure; promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization; or foster innovation? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 10:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to reduce inequalities within Bristol? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 11:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to expand access to: affordable housing; affordable and accessible transport; safe and accessible green space; or inclusive decision-making processes in the city? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 12:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to ensure your production and consumption patterns are sustainable and socially responsible? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 13:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to combat climate change and/or its impacts? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 14:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to conserve and protect water-based ecosystems in/beyond Bristol? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 15:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to conserve and protect land-based ecosystems in/beyond Bristol? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 16:** What activity/activities does your organisation undertake to reduce crime and violence or promote peace, justice and accountable public institutions? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

**SDG 17:** Is your organisation working in partnership to provide finance, technology, trade opportunities or capacity building to deliver the SDGs internationally? (please detail the initiative in a few sentences or paragraphs)

### Annex 3: Voluntary Local Review table bibliography

Full references for the subnational and Voluntary Local Reviews that have been published and shared to date.

**Bristol:** Fox and MacLeod (2019) Bristol and the SDGs: A Voluntary Local Review of progress 2019. University of Bristol's Cabot Institute for the Environment. Accessed at: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cabot-institute-2018/documents/BRISTOL%20AND%20THE%20SDGS.pdf>

**Buenos Aires:** Buenos Aires Ciudad (2019) Voluntary Local Review. Building a Sustainable and Inclusive Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires Ciudad. Accessed at: [https://www.iges.or.jp/files/sdgs/pdf/vlr/buenos\\_aires\\_voluntary\\_local\\_review\\_1\\_0.pdf](https://www.iges.or.jp/files/sdgs/pdf/vlr/buenos_aires_voluntary_local_review_1_0.pdf)

**Helsinki:** City of Helsinki (2019) From Agenda to Action – The Implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Helsinki 2019. Accessed at: <https://www.hel.fi/static/helsinki/julkaisut/SDG-VLR-Helsinki-2019-en.pdf>

**Kitakyushu:** Ota, Hosoda and Hayashi (2018) Kitakyushu City: The Sustainable Development Goals Report. Institute of Global Environmental Strategies. Accessed at: [https://iges.or.jp/en/publication\\_documents/pub/policyreport/en/6569/Kitakyushu\\_SDGreport\\_EN\\_201810.pdf](https://iges.or.jp/en/publication_documents/pub/policyreport/en/6569/Kitakyushu_SDGreport_EN_201810.pdf)

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**New York (2018):** NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs (2018) Global Vision, Urban Action: Voluntary Local Review, New York City's Implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. OneNYC. Accessed at: [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/international/downloads/pdf/NYC\\_VLR\\_2018\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/international/downloads/pdf/NYC_VLR_2018_FINAL.pdf)

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**New Taipei City:** New Taipei City Government (2019) New Taipei: A Liveable and Thriving City – New Taipei City Voluntary Local Review for SDGs. New Taipei for SDGs. Accessed at: [https://issuu.com/centify/docs/0909\\_vlr\\_\\_all](https://issuu.com/centify/docs/0909_vlr__all)

**Oaxaca:** Government of the State of Oaxaca (2019) Voluntary Subnational Review. Accessed at: <https://archive.iges.or.jp/files/sdgs/pdf/vlr/Voluntary%20Subnational%20Report%20-%20Maria%20Elias.pdf>

**Santana De Parnaíba:** SDG Working Group of Santana de Parnaíba (2019) Santana de Parnaíba 2030: Vision Connected to the Future. Prefecture of Santana Di Parnaíba. Accessed at: [https://archive.iges.or.jp/files/sdgs/pdf/vlr/Santana\\_de\\_Parna%3%ADba\\_2030\\_Vision\\_%20Connected\\_to\\_the%20Future.pdf](https://archive.iges.or.jp/files/sdgs/pdf/vlr/Santana_de_Parna%3%ADba_2030_Vision_%20Connected_to_the%20Future.pdf)

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**Toyama:** Nakano, R., Fujino, J., and Kataoka, Y. (2018). Toyama City the Sustainable Development Goals Report - Compact City Planning based on Polycentric Transport Networks. Institute for Global Environmental Strategies. Accessed at: [https://iges.or.jp/en/publication\\_documents/pub/policyreport/en/6575/EnglishToyama0726.pdf](https://iges.or.jp/en/publication_documents/pub/policyreport/en/6575/EnglishToyama0726.pdf)



## Endnotes

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- <sup>ii</sup> Deininger et al (2019) Cities Taking the Lead on the Sustainable Development Goals: A Voluntary Local Review Handbook for Cities. Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College of Information Systems and Public Policy. Accessed at: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/VLR\\_Handbook\\_7.7.19.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/VLR_Handbook_7.7.19.pdf)
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- <sup>viii</sup> Mayor's Office for International Affairs (2017) Global Vision | Urban Action: A City with Global Goals Part I & II. New York City Mayor's Office. Accessed at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/international/programs/global-vision-urban-action.page>
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<sup>xx</sup> United Cities and Local Governments and Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (2019) Towards the Localisation of the SDGs, 3<sup>rd</sup> report. UCLG. Accessed at: [https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/UCLG\\_GTF\\_LocalizationSDG.pdf](https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/UCLG_GTF_LocalizationSDG.pdf)