

UK Report

Sustainable Governance Indicators 2024

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Executive Summary

Over the past two years, a widespread sentiment has emerged that “Britain is not working.” This perception is partly due to crisis fatigue and a sense that after thirteen years of Conservative Party rule (the first five as a coalition government), it is “time for a change.” Additionally, people encounter increasing problems in public services in their daily lives. The UK government, responsible for services in England and overseeing spending for devolved governments, faces criticism for issues ranging from unfilled potholes and crumbling school classrooms to unreliable trains, difficulties in obtaining healthcare, and persistent problems in social care. A recent study highlights that “almost across the board public services are failing to deliver for citizens.”

In the UK government, the prime minister has considerable powers of appointment and patronage. While this can facilitate centralization, it can also lead to difficulties when conflicts arise at the heart of government. Evidence presented to the public inquiry into the pandemic has revealed numerous political and administrative shortcomings within the UK central government, including ministerial indecision in handling the crisis. The “first-past-the-post” electoral system usually ensures strong governance, but political instability has been the norm since the Brexit referendum announcement in early 2016. The UK has seen five prime ministers since then, with one famously outlasted by a lettuce, as demonstrated by Bild Zeitung. Frequent turnover of cabinet ministers in key policy areas such as housing and transport has further contributed to uncertainty. The Maude review of the UK civil service suggests that a fresh approach is needed regarding the extensive powers vested in the prime minister and civil service accountability.

Despite these challenges, the UK has sound provisions for sustainable governance, with policies and frameworks aligned with many central goals of the SGI and similar positive initiatives in devolved governments. Recent UK government initiatives, such as the Innovation Strategy and the approach to the circular economy, are promising but remain untested. However, as noted in several responses in this report, implementation is often deficient, targets are not met timely, and there are inequalities in service delivery. One example is the “temporary” reduction in the overseas aid budget in 2020, now not planned to be restored until late in the decade, despite being a legal obligation. Another

example is the delay in intermediate targets for moving toward net zero, even though the UK has made good progress and has a strong legal commitment. Criticisms have also been directed at governance mechanisms such as impact assessments, which appear robust but fall short in practice.

The interlinkages between policy areas also deserve attention. A lack of social housing affects recruitment in low-paid jobs such as social care, whose shortcomings add to the pressures on an already struggling healthcare system. High migration has partly resulted from failures in skills policy, pushing employers to recruit from abroad, particularly in social care, a practice tacitly encouraged by the government despite political concerns about the social consequences. Inflexible planning systems inhibit house building and infrastructure development, while local service provision has been constrained by years of budgetary restraint. The stagnating economy and cost-of-living pressures stem partly from a weak record on productivity, affected by low business investment. While public finances are sustainable, they are stretched.

The protracted saga of Brexit, followed by the pandemic, has undeniably created major governance problems. Some of these concerns are now being addressed, but the political system often lurches from crisis to crisis, as evidenced by the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The legacies of these problems and the need to rethink crucial elements of sustainable governance, starting with the health service, are undeniable.

Key Challenges

The key challenges for the UK stem from the issues highlighted in this report. After years of political turmoil, the first priority is to restore trust in both politicians and governance mechanisms. With a UK general election imminent, voters have their opportunity to influence change, but political leaders must present manifestos with realistic promises and ensure the effective implementation of existing policies on biodiversity, innovation, and the circular economy.

Effective communication of government messages is crucial for sustainability. For instance, while the UK has made significant progress toward net zero and has been globally influential, recent decisions to delay targets for electric vehicles and to issue new oil and gas exploration licenses suggest backsliding. Although there are valid arguments for these adjustments, particularly to ease

the short-term burden of the transition, mixed messages can undermine public commitment.

Several public services require a fresh approach, with health and social care being the most pressing. Successive governments have neglected social care, exacerbating the problems of the National Health Service (NHS). Inadequate funding for social care blocks the pathways from acute hospital care to community-based palliative or chronic care. Despite the NHS's revered status in public opinion, its shortcomings must be acknowledged. The lack of emphasis on prevention over treatment has led to a service struggling to meet demand. Additionally, low pay in the care sector hinders recruitment, much of which relies on migrants.

Housing shortages also need addressing, as supply has not kept pace with demand. Credible targets for housebuilding, including more and better social housing, are essential. The challenge lies not in identifying what needs to change, but in decision-makers and leaders having the courage and capacity to act. Low economic growth and persistent inflation reflect poor business investment and productivity growth. While steps have been taken to provide better incentives for investment, complementary actions are needed to bolster skills and strengthen lifelong learning.

In other policy areas, including public administration, infrastructure, and public finances, a sharper focus on practices and delivery is essential. Following the fiasco of the canceled HS2 high-speed rail project and the excessive cost of the remaining section, a fundamental shake-up of infrastructure planning is necessary. Recognizing that deficient provision harms both growth prospects and sustainability, civil service reform and reconfiguring how the center of government functions should also be priorities. With taxes at record levels and net public debt exceeding 100% of GDP, the fiscal framework needs to be recast.

Intergovernmental relations also require attention. Domestically, the continued dominance of Westminster, especially on funding, creates tensions that call for a re-examination of the powers and capacities of devolved administrations, metro mayors in England, and local authorities. For example, the UK Internal Market Act has caused confusion and concern among devolved governments. Relations with the EU have somewhat recovered since the Windsor Framework agreement and the UK's re-admission to the Horizon program. However, with a review of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement due by 2026, more needs to be done to rethink the post-Brexit settlement. Economic cooperation is crucial, as are other areas of common interest, such as climate action, security, and managing migration flows.

An overarching theme is the need to connect sustainability policy aims to effective governance. The UK's variation on this theme highlights the disconnect between its reputation for majoritarian democracy, characterized by a power-hoarding central government, and the complex reality of governance, which requires collaboration with numerous governmental and non-governmental actors to achieve policy goals (Cairney and Kippin 2024).

Democratic Government

I. Vertical Accountability

Elections

Free and Fair
Political
Competition
Score: 9

There are limited restrictions on who can run for election as a member of Parliament, notably excluding serving members of the police, the civil service and the armed forces, as well as judges, although if someone in one of these groups resigns, they are free to stand. People subject to bankruptcy are also excluded, and any candidate for election must post a £500 deposit, which will be lost if an insufficient share of the vote is not obtained.

In practice, there is lively political competition, and, on occasion, a long list of “fringe” candidates will appear on ballot papers in addition to representatives of the main political parties. Systems are in place to record donations and monitor compliance. Although the media tend to focus most on the established parties, there is no evident bias against any form of minority in coverage. As in many countries, there is concern about social media manipulation. It is also now common for political parties to use social media to criticize their treatment on broadcast media (Ford et al. 2021, 306).

Broadly similar rules apply for subnational government and the devolved administrations (Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales), with an Electoral Commission overseeing the process.

A “returning officer” has responsibility for ensuring the fair conduct of elections.

Free and Fair
Elections
Score: 9

Citizens must register in their local area to be eligible to vote, but the system is straightforward and fair. Voting in person takes place at local polling stations, which are sufficiently numerous to ensure easy access. The process is simple and free from obstacles or intimidation. Local authority staff check names and addresses to verify voter eligibility. In the most recent local elections held in

May 2023, identity checks were implemented for the first time in England. The Electoral Commission (2023) reported that due to these new requirements, 0.25% of voters were unable to vote, 4% decided not to vote, and those without relevant ID, such as people with disabilities, faced higher difficulties. Identity checks will also be used in general elections starting October 2023.

The ballot is secret, and there are measures in place to ensure polling stations are secure. While some campaigners, like the Electoral Reform Society, advocate for more assistance for voters with disabilities to access polling stations, provisions for proxy or postal voting are available.

There are clear procedures for postal voting. Although there have been occasional, isolated allegations of voting irregularities such as double voting or impersonation, these incidents are exceptions. Vote counts are conducted scrupulously.

Quality of Parties and Candidates

Socially Rooted
Party System
Score: 8

For the Westminster Parliament, the “first-past-the-post” system has been in place for several generations. This system almost always results in a majority for either the Conservative or Labour parties, which have been the dominant political forces over the past century. Although there was a coalition government between 2010 and 2015, and instances where the party with the largest number of Members of Parliament had to rely on less formal arrangements to remain in power, these are exceptions.

The Conservatives are right-of-center, encompassing a range from hard right to soft right, while the Labour Party is center-left, typically including some hard left members of Parliament. This internal diversity is a feature of the system. In 2015, the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was from the hard left, but a significant defeat in the 2019 election likely discourages the selection of another leader from that wing of the party. The current leader, Keir Starmer, emphasizes competence over ideology. Similarly, the Conservatives underwent a rebalancing in 2022 following Liz Truss’s brief and problematic tenure as Prime Minister, during which she pursued right-wing economic reforms.

Political parties present manifestos, which are publicly available, and they are expected to broadly attempt to fulfill these commitments, although the realities of governance often lead to some promises being shelved. The differences between the main parties’ manifestos can vary, depending on the internal dynamics within each party. In practice, smaller parties have minimal

influence except in rare instances when the leading party has no majority or a very small one.

The situation is quite different for the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales. Both use the mixed-member proportional system, which reduces the likelihood of a single-party majority, allows smaller parties to secure more representation, and increases the likelihood of coalition governments. However, since 2007, the Scottish National Party has defied this expectation by forming single-party governments, either as a minority (2007-2011, 2016-present) or a majority (2011-2016). In Wales, since 1999, Welsh Labour has formed minority single-party governments or majority coalition governments, including the current minority single-party government since 2021.

In Northern Ireland, the 1998 Belfast Agreement mandates a power-sharing executive with representatives from both the Nationalist and Unionist communities. After the 2021 election, which resulted in a narrow Nationalist majority, Sinn Fein had the right to nominate the First Minister for the first time. However, a Unionist boycott, partly in protest of Brexit’s impact, delayed the formation of the executive until 2024.

Overall, representation of different interests is achieved over time, provided there is a change in the governing party. Long periods of one party in power can favor certain interests, but shifts in governance help balance representation.

Effective Cross-Party Cooperation
Score: 7

The main UK political parties seek to uphold liberal democratic values, but Brexit (and its implications) has prompted some contestation regarding which institutions should be most supported, such as when asserting the sovereignty of Parliament in relation to legal rulings. More generally, in Westminster, aggregation is done within parties more than by cross-party cooperation, and whipping is used regularly to push through legislation proposed by the party of government rather than seek routine cross-party support. The opposition, for the most part, seeks to oppose.

However, cooperation can happen on bills that lack a strong ideological base, and cooperation does arise in the various stages of passing legislation, including through opposition amendments being accepted or in parliamentary committees. In addition, the second chamber – the House of Lords, which has a sizable number of cross-bench members who are not affiliated with a particular party – will often propose and have accepted amendments that are the result of cross-party deals or a form of bargaining with the House of Commons, even though the latter has the final say.

In key respects, the encouragement of cross-party cooperation is more institutionalized in devolved systems, such as via the committee systems in Scottish and Welsh parliaments and the requirement for coalition government in Northern Ireland (Birrell et al. 2023).

Access to Official Information

Transparent
Government
Score: 7

The UK Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, passed in 2000, and the Scottish Parliament's Act of 2002, are designed to promote transparency and public access to information. As explained by the Information Commissioner's Office, an independent body established to uphold information rights, the UK FOI law allows access to official information in two ways: public authorities must publish certain information about their activities, and members of the public can request information from public authorities. The Scottish Parliament's Act goes even further in favoring the release of information.

The passing of the UK FOI Act marked a significant shift in the government's approach, which had previously leaned more towards withholding information. Interestingly, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair later expressed regret in his memoirs about enacting the law, calling it a vivid example of "stupidity" and expressing concerns that it could be abused by journalists looking for scandalous information.

Despite the FOI laws, there is evidence that the government can still be slow to respond or may "stonewall" requests. A 2020 assessment by Open Democracy identified five key problems and criticized the Cabinet Office for trying to control and deter requests. The issue of FOI has resurfaced during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic inquiry, launched in 2023, particularly concerning allegations that UK ministers and their advisers deleted WhatsApp and other messages to avoid scrutiny of their informal decision-making processes.

In the past decade, the government has improved access to information by creating a single portal, ".gov.uk," for all public information. This central website is considered a success, with the government frequently citing its high rankings in international transparency indexes, such as the Open Data Barometer, which in 2018 ranked the UK second only to Canada.

II. Diagonal Accountability

Media Freedom and Pluralism

Free Media
Score: 8

The UK government faces robust media scrutiny from both the press and broadcasters. Broadcasters are formally required to ensure political balance, with OFCOM, an agency tasked with monitoring and investigating complaints, overseeing this obligation. Despite regular criticism from politicians across the political spectrum, the main public broadcaster, the BBC, continues to be regarded as fair and uninhibited in its criticism of the government. In 2023, the BBC updated its social media guidance following complaints from the UK Conservative government about a tweet critical of government immigration policy by one of the BBC’s most famous presenters. Similar debates occur in Scotland regarding media criticism of the SNP-led Scottish government.

The recent establishment of GB News, which takes a distinctly partisan (broadly right-wing) stance, has challenged the assurance of balance in media coverage. This challenge has intensified, especially as GB News has given programs to serving members of Parliament without providing corresponding opposition voices. However, GB News remains far from becoming a UK equivalent of Fox News.

Press freedom faced challenges in the late 2000s following hacking and other scandals, but the government largely resisted calls for restrictions. The print industry is regulated by the Independent Press Standards Organisation, which aims to “hold newspapers and magazines to account for their actions, protect individual rights, uphold high standards of journalism, and help maintain freedom of expression for the press.”

The Online Safety Bill, aimed at regulating harmful content, became law on October 26, 2023, after a long and highly contested passage through Parliament. Media groups, not just those operating online, expressed concerns about whether its provisions would inhibit media freedom.

Pluralism of
Opinions
Score: 7

Because of the requirement for broadcasters to be politically balanced, mainstream channels provide a plurality of views, despite the challenges from newcomers such as GB News. The regulator, OFCOM, does rule on complaints and, to give one example in relation to GB News, said “in light of the likely similarity of the views of the participants in this program on the major matter being discussed, the licensee should have taken additional steps

to ensure that due impartiality was preserved.” OFCOM has, however, acted decisively to remove the broadcasting licenses of channels such as CGTN (China) or Press TV (Iran) adjudged to have been too unbalanced.

The press is independent, but ownership has been concentrated in a relatively small number of groups, to some extent constraining its plurality (and skewing coverage toward center-right audiences). However, the power of News International – led by Rupert Murdoch – has manifestly waned and the profitability of the press has declined as citizens look to online sources.

Civil Society

Free Civil
Society
Score: 7

In most respects, UK civil society enjoys similar freedoms to its continental European neighbors, with few restrictions on membership in civil society organizations or their ability to function. The main exceptions are groups deemed to foster political extremism or terrorist-related activities. While the UK has an unwritten constitution, the 1998 Human Rights Act conferred rights equivalent to those set out in the European Convention on Human Rights. However, the government and some sections of the Conservative Party periodically criticize the Convention and the Strasbourg Court, with ongoing demands for the UK to withdraw from the court. These demands have resurfaced in connection with the government’s efforts to curb irregular migration by sending migrants to Rwanda, a policy that has yet to result in any migrants being sent.

The government has also been inclined to limit certain rights of assembly, usually citing security or public order concerns. Successive versions of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, since 2015, impose various restrictions, such as on the right of entry into the UK and powers of investigation. The right to demonstrate was tested after the October 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas on Israel. Despite calls from some leading politicians to ban demonstrations, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, citing the Public Order Act, rejected these calls but worked with organizers to agree on conditions provided in the Act.

The UK has an exceptionally high number of CCTV cameras, estimated to be the third highest density after China and the United States, and is more receptive to facial recognition technology than the EU. There appear to be no plans for legislation equivalent to the EU’s 2023 Artificial Intelligence Act. However, the adoption of facial recognition by a property developer elicited a backlash, and the Information Commissioner’s Office provides regulatory protections.

For the most part, citizens are unaffected by these provisions and are not inhibited from demonstrations or other forms of assembly. In fact, there has been criticism of lax policing of protests against climate change by groups like Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion. Authorities are sometimes accused of harsher treatment of certain groups, such as the tough policing by the London Metropolitan Police Service of a vigil for Sarah Everard, a woman murdered by a serving police officer. This incident prompted the Met to commission a review into its “culture and standards of behavior” (Casey 2023). Regarding CCTV, public concerns are mitigated by evidence that cameras help in the fight against crime.

Effective Civil
Society
Organizations
(Capital and
Labor)
Score: 5

Falling trade union membership and its concentration in areas of public services are key characteristics of labor-related CSOs, while employer representation is split between different organizations. Neither side has a formal role in the policy formulation process, so their capacity to participate in the creation of policy is through pressure politics, as indicated in the question description. Institutions of corporatism had been introduced in the 1960s but were largely abandoned during Margaret Thatcher’s time as prime minister (from 1979) and were not revived by her successors. From 1999, devolved Scottish and Welsh governments signaled a greater willingness to consult or work closely with unions, professional groups, and third sector representatives (Greer and Jarman 2008).

Although unions and employer organizations have some capacity for generating policy papers and ideas, their influence is not great, nor do they attract active support from a significant share of the population. However, in financial services, bodies such as UK Finance can exert considerable influence on changes in financial regulation and related aspects of policy formulation, based on having relevant expertise.

Beyond the term “social partners” (a phrase not commonly used in UK politics) implied in the expression “major CSOs,” there exists a diverse array of other organizations – think tanks, lobby groups, and NGOs focused on specific policy areas. These organizations have substantial capacities for influencing UK government policy formulation, though there is less think tank capacity around devolved governments. Their influence varies depending on the government in power.

For example, newer organizations like the Resolution Foundation have been able to connect with the current government, while the Institute of Economic Affairs was closely aligned with the short-lived Liz Truss government in 2022. Previously, the Institute for Public Policy Research contributed to New

Effective Civil
Society
Organizations
(Social Welfare)
Score: 6

Labour’s policy development. The Tony Blair Institute is another well-resourced entity that generates policy ideas likely to influence the government following the general election expected within the next year.

The UK has an abundance of NGOs and other entities that contribute to routine policy development, particularly in social welfare. These organizations engage in various activities such as responding to government consultations, participating in government working groups, and influencing through publications, events, and informal contacts with decision-makers. Their strategy and influence depend on the alignment of their positions with those of the UK government, ranging from visible pressure politics on contentious issues to informal discussions on shared agendas. Many of these bodies have charitable status, which confers fiscal advantages.

Examples of entities with capacities relevant to social welfare, all aiming to influence government, include:

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Employing 150 staff, this foundation focuses on a range of social welfare topics such as poverty, social security, housing, and issues around race and ethnicity. Funded by shares donated by Quaker businessman and social reformer Joseph Rowntree, the foundation aims to influence public debate by engaging with and applying pressure on those in power through the quality of their arguments and ideas, and by building powerful coalitions and movements for change, centering on the voices of those who benefit least from the status quo.

The National Centre for Social Research: Conducts surveys and works with governments, NGOs, charities, and other organizations to drive understanding and help them make sound decisions that shape society.

Social Market Foundation: A nonpartisan think tank conducting research on various aspects of public policy, including economics and market regulation, work, skills and education, and public sector reform.

The Centre for Social Justice: Founded by former Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith, this organization seeks to influence government policies and laws to address the root causes of poverty, which include family breakdown, educational failure, worklessness, addiction, problem debt and housing, criminal justice, and modern slavery. The CSJ published the interim report of a commission on social justice, which opens with the line: “The country is deeply divided. There are those who are getting by and there are those who are not.”

Effective Civil
Society
Organizations
(Environment)
Score: 6

The UK has an abundance of NGOs and other entities that contribute to policy development in environmental matters. The term “major CSOs” does not fully capture how these capacities are exercised in the UK. These organizations often have charitable status and access to government through various channels. Examples of prominent entities include (though this list is not exhaustive):

The Green Alliance: This organization covers a range of environmental research and acts as the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Environment. It embraces technical research as well as the study of political leadership.

E3G: Highly ranked in the University of Pennsylvania ratings of think tanks, E3G is judged to be foremost in the UK and second in Europe. Its focus is on climate change, and it claims to “work closely with like-minded partners in government, politics, civil society, science, the media, public interest foundations, and elsewhere.”

University Research Groups: These include the Grantham Institute at LSE, the Georgina Mace Centre for the Living Planet at Imperial College London, and the Conservation Research Institute at the University of Cambridge.

While many relevant groups support the UK government’s “net zero” commitments, significant doubts remain about how well the broad strategy translates into concrete measures (Sasse et al. 2022).

III. Horizontal Accountability

Independent Supervisory Bodies

Effective Public
Auditing
Score: 10

The National Audit Office (NAO) is independent of both the government and the civil service, and it is overseen by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the House of Commons. The NAO examines government departments, executive agencies, and arm’s-length bodies, focusing on assessing the value for money of public spending. It also provides guides on good practice and distills lessons learned on cross-cutting issues important to the government. The NAO is led by the Comptroller and Auditor General, an officer of the House of Commons with statutory authority. By working closely with the PAC, which had 41 active inquiries at the end of 2023, the NAO can both select its investigations and influence public debate. However, the NAO

clarifies that its purpose is to investigate whether public money has been well used, not to question government policy objectives.

The NAO conducts over 400 financial audits annually, including audits of all government departments, executive agencies, arm's-length bodies, companies audited under statute or on a voluntary basis, and some charities. Additionally, the NAO publishes around 60 value-for-money reports each year, making recommendations for more efficient and effective spending. It also issues lessons learned reports and good practice guides. The NAO has some international activities, serving as the external auditor for certain international organizations and providing technical assistance to audit institutions in countries receiving UK aid.

NAO reports, often discussed in the PAC, receive extensive media coverage and frequently highlight issues for public authorities. For example, a 2021 report on COVID-19 criticized the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other goods and services through emergency direct awards instead of established procurement procedures. In the same year, the NAO found that the government was too slow in disbursing compensation to victims of the Windrush scandal. In 2023, the NAO drew attention to delays in auditing local authorities in England, several of which subsequently admitted to insolvency risks.

Each devolved parliament and government has its own audit office, conducting equivalent research and audit functions. These offices are essential for scrutinizing devolved public services. However, issues such as COVID-19 policy, where both UK and devolved governments funded initiatives, highlight the limitations of these offices in auditing the full range of activities in each country.

Effective Data
Protection
Score: 9

After Brexit, the UK maintained the same data protection policies it had as an EU member, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The relevant legislation is the Data Protection Act, which has been periodically revised since its enactment in 1998.

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is tasked with upholding information rights. Its main office is in England, with separate offices in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. The ICO is an executive non-departmental public body with operational independence. The Commissioner oversees various data-related legislation, including the Data Protection Act, the Freedom of Information Act, and privacy and electronic communications regulations. Formally, the Commissioner is a crown appointment based on a recommendation from the ministry and is subject to scrutiny by the

corresponding parliamentary committee. The ICO's decisions and interventions are often reported in the media.

After a long period of development and much debate, the Online Safety Act was passed in late October 2023. Its purpose is to place obligations on social media companies to protect users' safety, with an emphasis on shielding children from harmful content. OFCOM, the regulator of broadcasters, telecommunications companies, and postal services, is charged with enforcing the Act..

Rule of Law

Effective Judicial
Oversight
Score: 9

The UK has a manifestly independent judiciary that has, on occasion, halted government plans. One notable instance occurred in 2019 when the judiciary overturned an attempt by the Johnson government to prorogue Parliament. Although the government may complain about certain judgments, it always respects them. However, a Supreme Court ruling in November 2023 against a plan to send illegal immigrants to Rwanda has prompted an interesting response: a bill currently making its way through Parliament, perceived as an attempt to circumvent the decision. This bill has elicited substantial opposition from many quarters, including factions within the governing Conservative Party. The UK Supreme Court also plays a role in constitutional matters, including disputes between the UK and devolved parliaments.

The judicial appointments system, reflecting the UK's lack of a written constitution, has a degree of informality and has undergone substantial changes in recent years. The Constitutional Reform Act of 2005 divided the powers of the Lord Chancellor and established the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, replacing the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords. The 12 judges of the Supreme Court are appointed by the crown based on the recommendation of the prime minister, who is advised by the Lord Chancellor in cooperation with a selection commission. It would be surprising if the prime minister ignored the advice of the Lord Chancellor and the selection commission, or if the king ignored the prime minister's recommendations.

While there is no empirical basis to assess the actual independence of judicial appointments, there is every reason to believe that the process ensures judicial independence. Indeed, a public outcry would be expected if judicial independence were seen to be seriously threatened.

Universal Civil
Rights
Score: 7

The UK does not have a written constitution that defines civil rights. However, the Human Rights Act of 1998 and adherence to the European Convention on Human Rights provide a framework for protecting these rights. Despite regular criticisms and occasional talk of leaving the Convention, the UK respects the role of the Strasbourg Court in upholding human rights. GCHQ, part of the UK's security apparatus, has significant capabilities in tracking and evaluating national and international electronic communications, sometimes attracting media criticism. Public opposition to these activities has been relatively mild, with most criticism coming from libertarian pressure groups. More sustained opposition comes from communication firms uncomfortable with government attempts to access private data.

A series of anti-terrorism acts has equipped the UK government with tools to combat terrorism, some of which impose restrictions on the civil liberties of a small minority of the population. While courts and public pressure have occasionally stopped practices like the indefinite detention of non-nationals, the state has often reintroduced similar measures under different names, such as replacing "control orders" with "terrorism prevention and investigation measures." These actions occur under intense media scrutiny.

There is also a movement in the UK to advance the human rights-based approach language promoted by the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly evident in recent Scottish government initiatives.

Effective
Corruption
Prevention
Score: 8

The United Kingdom is relatively free of explicit corruption, such as bribery or fraud, and there is little evidence that such corruption influences decision-making at the national level. Anti-corruption regulations were consolidated in the 2004 Corruption Bill, and the UK consistently scores well on most international comparisons of corruption.

Occasional episodes of limited and small-scale corruption do arise at the local level, usually related to property development. Parliamentarians are subject to strict rules regarding declarations of payments. Those found in breach, even on a minor scale, are subject to punishment by their peers based on investigations by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. A common penalty is suspension from the House of Commons. If the suspension exceeds 10 days, it can trigger a recall petition from voters. If more than 10% of the constituency electorate signs the petition, the member of Parliament must resign.

Although cases of corruption are infrequent, the fact that some (often obscure) politicians fail to adhere to the rules highlights a gap between politicians' behavior and public expectations, a lingering effect of the 2009 expenses scandal. A more subtle form of corruption occurs when politicians leave office

and subsequently lobby for specific interests, exploiting their connections. For example, former Prime Minister David Cameron was implicated in the lobbying scandal involving Greensill, a financial services company that collapsed with huge debts in 2021. Allegations resurfaced when Cameron was appointed foreign secretary in November 2023.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, contracts awarded to firms associated with Conservative parliamentarians led to an inquiry by the National Audit Office. The inquiry criticized the suspension of normal procurement rules, which resulted in highly profitable contracts, such as those involving Conservative member of the Lords, Baroness Mone. These actions have been widely condemned in the media and public debate. The most plausible explanation is that the government, in its desperation to secure necessary supplies, failed to exercise due diligence, rather than deliberate corruption. The public inquiry into the handling of the pandemic, conducted by Baroness Hallett, has shed some light on these matters, but her final report is not expected until 2025 or later.

Legislature

Sufficient
Legislative
Resources
Score: 6

The House of Commons Library is a resource available to any member of Parliament (MP), providing research and briefings. Its stated role is to “provide a range of research and information services for MPs and MPs’ staff. Our work helps MPs scrutinize legislation, prepare for debates, develop policies, and support their constituents. We are a team of researchers, statisticians, librarians, indexers, communications, and customer service professionals, working together to provide an impartial and trusted service.”

All-party parliamentary groups are informal, cross-party bodies formed on an ad hoc basis to focus on specific subjects. They have no official status and often involve individuals and organizations from outside Parliament.

Parliamentary committees in both the Commons and the Lords can call witnesses for inquiries and routinely produce reports examining aspects of government policy. Clerks, paid by the legislature, play a pivotal role in producing these reports, although the committee “owns” the final document.

Each MP in the Westminster Parliament can employ up to four full-time staff members, paid for by Parliament and regulated by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. MPs decide how to allocate this staff resource, which can include research. Additionally, it is common for MPs to

have interns and additional staff paid from other sources. Parties typically provide a constituency agent to support MPs with local casework.

Through these various channels, MPs have access to resources, although on a smaller scale than in some other legislatures. While the Scottish and Welsh parliaments were established with a commitment to improve on Westminster scrutiny, they face similar limitations in research and staff capacity.

Effective
Legislative
Oversight
Score: 9

The House of Commons has a permanent Select Committee for every government department, complemented by cross-cutting committees such as the Public Accounts Committee and the Environmental Audit Committee, which can scrutinize any government department. The Liaison Committee, composed of the chairs of all other committees, notably questions the Prime Minister about policy, usually three times a year.

Committee chairs are elected by MPs, with some positions reserved for opposition MPs. These chairs can select topics for inquiries and call for evidence from the government, requiring witnesses, including ministers, to appear before them. However, the government may sometimes resist or delay in responding. The government is required to respond in writing to any inquiry. Special advisers are often appointed to assist committee members in formulating questions for witnesses and interpreting evidence.

Committees are known for their robust questioning of ministers and sometimes produce highly critical reports of the government. They also question business leaders, public servants, and other witnesses, such as senior representatives from the Bank of England. Additionally, committees hold hearings for candidates for public appointments, such as the Treasury Committee's examination of candidates for the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England, though they do not have veto power.

The devolved legislatures have equivalent roles and powers concerning devolved government ministers but do not have the authority to compel UK government ministers to engage.

Effective
Legislative
Investigations
Score: 8

Opposition parties can initiate investigations, but the usual channel is through select committee inquiries. These committees typically have a government majority, but they value their independence. If the government tries to block an inquiry or influence it by whipping members, it would likely face a backlash. In some recent high-profile cases, particularly concerning privileges, committees have conducted inquiries against the government's wishes and published reports critical of the individuals investigated.

Two notable examples are the inquiry into Owen Paterson, a former minister, who was found to have taken money from private companies (not against the rules) and lobbied ministers on their behalf (which is against the rules). When then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson tried to persuade Parliament not to enforce the committee’s proposed sanctions, Parliament overruled his request. Subsequently, Johnson himself was investigated for misleading Parliament and was found to have done so. In this case, Parliament voted overwhelmingly to approve the sanctions.

Investigations requiring more resources or independence from political parties are typically conducted through independent statutory inquiries, such as the UK COVID-19 inquiry.

Legislative
Capacity for
Guiding Policy
Score: 8

Because the House of Commons selects committees that match departments and adapt if the government reconfigures ministries, there is a clear correspondence in monitoring. A majority of members usually belong to the governing party (or, in the exceptional case of the 2010 – 2015 coalition government), but chairs of several committees are from opposition parties. By convention, the opposition usually chairs the powerful public accounts committee.

In addition to monitoring, public bill committees play an important role in passing legislation through Parliament. These committees handle the “committee stage” of bills, where detailed scrutiny occurs, and amendments are proposed. A separate committee stage takes place in the House of Lords. However, once the bill returns to the House of Commons, the amendments made in the Lords can still be overturned.

In deliberate contrast to Westminster, committees in the Scottish and Welsh parliaments combine the functions of select committees and legislative scrutiny. They consider bill principles and draft legislation before the plenary debate.

Governing with Foresight

I. Coordination

Quality of Horizontal Coordination

Effective
Coordination
Mechanisms of
the GO/PMO
Score: 7

Although the prime minister holds a very powerful position in the UK system, the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) is relatively limited in its scope. In practice, the Cabinet Office fulfills this central role, coordinating effectively with teams for each line ministry. Additionally, the Treasury extends its remit beyond budgeting, providing a secondary coordination mechanism. However, the effectiveness of this coordination is sometimes called into question. The public inquiry into the governance of the pandemic, although not yet complete, is revealing significant incoherence at the heart of government. UK policy studies often describe this issue with phrases such as “incoherent state” (Richards et al. 2022) to indicate the lack of coordinated action within the government and across the public sector (summarized in Cairney and Kippin 2024). While the prime minister has considerable power to set specific priorities, this power does not extend to overall policy coordination.

Effective
Coordination
Mechanisms
within the
Ministerial
Bureaucracy
Score: 7

Although the prime minister holds considerable power, it is somewhat paradoxical that their private office is usually relatively small and often reshaped when a new prime minister takes over. For instance, Boris Johnson’s tenure saw multiple “resets” of his office. Instead, the Cabinet Office is the principal body responsible for policy coordination, with its head, the cabinet secretary, attending cabinet meetings. Traditionally, the cabinet secretary was also the head of the civil service, though this role was separated during the 2010s before being re-consolidated. HM Treasury also plays a more extensive coordinating role than many other finance ministries. The UK government faces a recurring dilemma: whether to “mainstream” an issue across all

departments or to set up specific units to coordinate activities, such as for health inequalities or climate change. It has typically opted to establish units or departments to signal the importance of cross-cutting issues, rather than creating an overarching structure to support routine cross-departmental cooperation.

Complementary
Informal
Coordination
Score: 8

Flexibility and informal meetings are key features of the UK government system, allowing it to respond uniquely to different situations. This approach is highly valued and is an essential component of prime ministerial government in the UK. Formally, civil servants take notes on informal meetings between ministers. The ongoing inquiry into the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has documented coordination issues, highlighting the proliferation of WhatsApp groups and raising questions about how they were monitored and recorded.

Cabinet committees provide opportunities for seeking agreement among relevant ministries and feed into the full cabinet or 10 Downing Street. A distinctive feature of the UK system is that cabinet committees can be radically reconfigured by the prime minister and can change rapidly in response to events and the prime minister's preferences. For example, during the pandemic, four new committees were established, taking the number under the Johnson administration to 20. Liz Truss, during her brief tenure, reduced the number to six, and under Sunak, it has increased to 11.

The government can also establish interministerial groups, which, according to the Institute for Government, "cannot take binding decisions but can support policy development and decision-making where collective cabinet agreement is not required." Although not binding on the cabinet, these groups are approved by the prime minister and can be used to shape policy.

Informal coordination also arises from regular monthly meetings of the Civil Service Board (CSB), chaired by the Chief Operating Officer of the Civil Service and comprising selected permanent secretaries (the top civil servant in a ministry). A complementary Civil Service Shadow Board (CSSB), consisting of members from grades below the Senior Civil Service, provides different perspectives on the issues discussed at the CSB. The CSSB reviews papers going to the CSB in advance of each monthly meeting, and its representatives attend the CSB meetings to contribute their views in person.

The UK usually has single-party government, so informal meetings of party groups are not a significant factor. However, factions within the ruling party can meet and attempt to exert influence at full party meetings.

Whether these processes support or undermine formal coordination is context-specific, making a single answer to this question challenging. The UK COVID-19 inquiry has also resurfaced criticisms from devolved governments regarding what they perceive as an excessive reliance on informal mechanisms at the expense of proper use of formal mechanisms for intergovernmental relations, such as the Joint Ministerial Committee (Henderson 2023).

Quality of Vertical Coordination

Effectively
Setting and
Monitoring
National
(Minimum)
Standards
Score: 6

There are two distinct forms of delegation in the UK: from central government to the devolved governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales according to constitutional provisions, and within the four nations to local governments. Central government is also responsible for England in several policy areas, such as education, as well as certain UK-wide functions like defense and foreign policy.

In England, but not in the other three nations, the relatively recent creation of metro mayors has emerged, mainly (but not exclusively) covering larger conurbations. These mayors have powers over selected policies, such as policing and transport. However, since they rely on large fiscal transfers from central government and have limited taxing powers, their budgets depend heavily on central government, which retains a degree of control over service delivery. Local authorities allocate a significant portion of their budgets to statutory services, particularly social care and education, and are subject to oversight by relevant ministries from central or devolved governments.

Given this complex patchwork, it is difficult to generalize about the central government’s role in meeting national standards, especially when the situation is further complicated by central government having responsibility for England and Wales in some areas, but not Scotland. Central government can intervene to put local authority councils in “special measures” in England if deemed necessary by a minister. This intervention can involve demanding plans for change or, in more extreme cases, appointing commissioners. In the past year, several prominent councils have declared or come close to bankruptcy, often due to ill-judged non-statutory policies, including property or other business schemes. Cuts in transfers from central government, particularly during the austerity period of the previous decade, have also strained local governments, sometimes leading to a retreat to providing only statutory minimum services.

For the devolved governments, especially regarding their major responsibilities like health, central government does not impose or control

standards, leaving this to the voters. Compared to the UK, the Welsh and Scottish governments tend to cooperate more with local authorities to ensure relative uniformity in services such as school provision. Scotland also has a separate and distinctive education system. Where policy outcomes differ, central government has no effective role, although in the special case of Northern Ireland, when the executive is suspended due to political disagreements, the UK government rules directly and can, de facto, assure standards.

Effective
Multilevel
Cooperation
Score: 5

The highest-level mechanism for coordination in the UK is the Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC), chaired by the prime minister and attended by the leaders of the devolved administrations. An explainer from the Institute for Government (2017) sets out the tasks of the JMC, based on a Memorandum of Understanding. It “should provide central coordination of the overall relationship between the UK and the devolved nations, and: consider non-devolved matters which affect devolved responsibilities (and vice versa); consider devolved matters if it is beneficial to discuss their respective treatment in the different parts of the UK; keep the arrangements for liaison between the governments under review; and consider disputes between the governments.”

The explainer documents the limitations of the JMC and its subcommittees for specific policy areas, noting its purely consultative role and the perception from the devolved administrations (DAs) that the agenda is set by the central government. As noted (see G1.3), the UK government seems to prefer informal mechanisms over the formal use of intergovernmental relations mechanisms like the JMC (Henderson 2023). The JMC machinery exists to discuss arising matters (e.g., disputes), not routine coordination. The UK government respects the right of devolved governments to set their own public service priorities, such as health services and schools, and often leads “four nations” approaches to emergencies like COVID-19 and common concerns such as tobacco controls, which involve both UK-reserved and devolved elements (Cairney 2024).

Within the UK government, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (which has had several name changes over the years) has the most direct coordinating role with subnational governments. Most of the department’s work focuses on England, but it also has some UK-wide responsibilities.

II. Consensus-Building

Recourse to Scientific Knowledge

Harnessing Scientific Knowledge Effectively
Score: 9

The UK government has multiple channels for harnessing scientific knowledge. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) was convened on numerous occasions in different configurations to guide the government response. SAGE membership primarily includes biomedical experts, but other means exist for gathering broader interdisciplinary knowledge. Ministers often claimed to be “following the science,” although evidence submitted to an inquiry chaired by Baroness Hallett shows that the specific science being followed was sometimes unclear. There are calls to reform UK science advice to provide more independent challenges to the government, referencing principles of science advice such as transparency, which may be challenging to implement within the UK government system (Michie et al. 2022; Cairney and Toth 2023).

Most government departments have a chief scientific adviser who collaborates with the government chief scientific adviser (GCSA). The GCSA provides scientific advice to the prime minister and cabinet members, advises on policy aspects related to science and technology, and ensures the quality and use of scientific evidence and advice in government. The GCSA can draw on the network of departmental scientific advisers and has extensive connections with the broader scientific community.

Involvement of Civil Society in Policy Development

Effective Involvement of Civil Society Organizations (Capital and Labor)
Score: 4

The notion of “social partners” as actors in governance is not well entrenched in the UK, in contrast to several continental European countries. Unions exercised substantial power in the third quarter of the 20th century, and institutions of corporatism were established. However, after Margaret Thatcher came to power, a succession of legislative acts curbed union power, and the decline of heavily unionized sectors such as mining and steel-making led to a sharp decrease in union influence. While certain individual unions and employer organizations maintain influence in specific areas, neither the Trade Union Congress (TUC) nor the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) routinely shape public policies. In fact, the CBI has faced scandals in the past two years that have undermined its authority, leading to the resignation of

some major companies. Other employer organizations may have gained influence from the CBI’s disarray, but none have emerged as powerful alternative voices of business. The devolved Scottish and Welsh governments have shown more commitment to the idea of social partnership as part of more consensual “policy styles,” but they do not oversee many of the policy sectors traditionally associated with tripartism (Cairney 2019).

The past two years have seen a resurgence of tensions in industrial relations, particularly in the health and transport sectors. Although the UK government funds nearly all of the National Health Service and provides large subsidies for transport, it has largely stood back in resolving disputes. In health, the government’s rationale is that pay review bodies should set pay, while in the railways, it has sought to portray disputes as being between private owners and the unions.

One noteworthy exception to the limited involvement of social partners is the Low Pay Commission, which recommends annual changes in the minimum wage.

Effective
Involvement of
Civil Society
Organizations
(Social Welfare)
Score: 4

As explained in the answers to the questions “Effective Civil Society Organizations” and “Effective Involvement of Civil Society,” if major CSOs are understood to be social partners in a corporatist sense, then their involvement in social welfare policy is limited. However, the UK has a wealth of NGOs, think tanks, and research institutes focused on various aspects of social welfare, making them valuable contributors to policymaking. Bodies like the Migration Advisory Council, mentioned in the answer to “Sustainable Inclusion of Migrants,” also play a role. While formal consultation procedures exist, they do not capture the full range of input from these sources. Informal contacts between civil servants or ministers and social welfare experts, public events, and occasional commissions – such as those by the Centre for Social Justice, as mentioned in indicator “Effective Civil Society Organizations” – are all avenues for influence. Additionally, All-Party Parliamentary Groups facilitate interactions between the government and other organizations, further enriching the policymaking processions.

Effective
Involvement of
Civil Society
Organizations
(Environment)
Score: 5

The answer to this question is essentially the same as for G4.2. Numerous NGOs, think tanks, and research institutes specializing in environmental analysis and policy contribute to policymaking, both through formal consultations and, often more effectively, through informal means. Formal consultations include those conducted by arm’s-length bodies such as the Climate Change Committee, which issues calls for evidence and collaborates closely with researchers and advocacy bodies to conduct policy-relevant research.

In summary, while major CSOs understood as social partners do not play a prominent role in shaping environmental policy, other organizations significantly influence this area.

Openness of Government

Open
Government
Score: 9

The United Kingdom, once cautious about open government, has become strongly committed to it since publishing an open government white paper in 1993. As a founding member of the Open Government Partnership since 2011, the UK has become a major global advocate for citizens' free access to government data. Parliament, the government, and the civil service publish all but certain sensitive documents in a timely manner on their websites. A dedicated data portal (data.gov.uk) serves as the entry point for a wide range of documents and datasets published by the UK government and other public bodies.

The UK government has a long history of publishing official statistics, governed by the Statistics and Registration Service Act since 2007. This act created the UK Statistics Authority – a non-ministerial department – with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as an executive agency within the department. The act also established the Office for Statistics Regulation, which sets the Code of Practice for Official Statistics and oversees the accreditation of “National Statistics.” This role includes writing occasional letters to UK and devolved governments regarding their communication of data.

The UK government publishes a vast array of transparency data, such as senior public servants' salaries, workforce data, special adviser pay, and details of ministerial and senior officials' meetings. Over 9,000 items categorized as “transparency data” and more than 10,000 FOI requests are available on the government website (gov.uk). Committee and working group meetings are streamed via various online platforms, including YouTube and Facebook Live.

In the latest (2022) Open Data Barometer, the United Kingdom, alongside Canada, ranked first out of 30 governments, despite a slight decline in its score since the first edition. In contrast, the OECD's 2019 OURdata index saw the UK lose its “open data champion” status, an outcome explained by the OECD as mainly due to “reduced efforts toward user engagement across the whole policy process, and change of policy priorities from open data to analytical capacity within the public sector.”

A biannual Open Government Action Plan sets goals and standards for open government in the UK, negotiated in cooperation with the UK Open Government Network (OGN), a coalition of active citizens and civil society organizations. The latest plan for 2024–2025 was published in December 2023 and reaffirms the UK’s commitment, emphasizing that “preserving and nurturing the dynamic between citizens and the state is vital.”

III. Sensemaking

Preparedness

Capacity for Strategic Foresight and Anticipatory Innovation
Score: 8

Foresight in the UK is led by the Government Office for Science (GOS), which has been running a foresight program for the past twenty years, publishing over 30 reports on diverse topics. The government’s chief scientific adviser (GCSA) decides on topics based on various criteria, including identifying a clear customer within the government, ensuring there is added value from GOS leading the work, requiring long-term thinking, and informing government preparedness for potential changes. New projects must also be timely, filling key evidence gaps or informing upcoming government strategies, and should have the potential to inform significant, identifiable policy outcomes.

The GOS also maintains a blog that provides a platform for policymakers, stakeholders, and academics to connect with findings from its Futures, Foresight, and Horizon Scanning program. Additionally, NESTA, an innovation-focused agency, has an in-house strategic foresight function called the Discovery Hub. This hub supports teams across NESTA in using futures tools and methods to explore emerging trends and technologies that will impact their work.

Following a review led by Nobel Prize-winning scientist Paul Nurse, the government adopted recommendations to provide a more strategic approach to departmental research and development programs, engage in more sophisticated dialogue with academia, and make available documents outlining the most important research questions facing each department. The GCSA and the Government Office for Science serve as a bridge between private foresight and the government, with AI highlighted by Prime Minister Sunak as a crucial area for the UK to advance. Generally speaking, the challenge is not the lack of foresight activity but connecting that activity to routine government decision-making.

Effective
Regulatory
Impact
Assessment
Score: 7

Analytical Competence

In line with the government’s Better Regulation Framework, updated in September 2023, Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs) typically accompany all UK government regulatory interventions that affect the private sector, civil society organizations, and public services. The objective of RIAs is to assess the benefits and burdens of planned measures. Provisions exist to account for the impacts of UK-wide legislation on devolved administrations. There is also an obligation to produce a post-implementation review to verify the accuracy of RIA estimates, fulfillment of predictions, and achievement of intended policy outcomes. A standard template and additional guidance are available for completing RIAs. RIAs are independently scrutinized by the Regulatory Policy Committee (RPC), and each department has a better regulation unit.

In 2018, the threshold for conducting a full RIA was raised from effects exceeding £1 million to £5 million. Consequently, the number of RIAs carried out fell from a peak of 664 in 2011 to an average of 175 annually in the three years preceding the pandemic. The RPC report for 2022–2023 notes that it “reviewed 109 submissions from 23 different departments, agencies, and public bodies. This remains in line with the typical number of cases submitted to the RPC for scrutiny over the past five years.” Historically, the largest number of RIAs were for the departments responsible for business, transport, and the environment. The use of RIAs was particularly inconsistent during the politically charged Brexit process, with the government resisting pressure to release all relevant documentation in a timely manner.

Academic research has questioned the value of these assessments, as their results are not systematically integrated into the decision-making process. However, RIAs are certainly applied. Both the RPC and a House of Lords inquiry published in October 2022 criticized the variable quality of RIAs and delays in producing them. The Lords’ report bluntly stated: “unfortunately, this improvement has not survived the dual challenges of Brexit and the pandemic, during which time the speed of legislating meant that corners were cut. We had hoped that the return to more normal working would provide an opportunity not just to reinstate the previous IA system but to improve it: this has not happened.” The RPC found “an alarming increase in the number of impact assessments (IAs) that have been red-rated as ‘not fit for purpose’” and noted “a significant increase in the number of IAs submitted late to the RPC – in some cases when the legislation was already before Parliament. This

undermines the purpose of the Better Regulation Framework in allowing us to inform parliamentarians of the robustness of the evidence supporting regulatory proposals.”

In summary, despite a sound system for assessing the impact of regulatory proposals, implementation difficulties have detracted from its effectiveness. The title of the Lords’ report is telling: “Losing Impact: Why the Government’s Impact Assessment System Is Failing Parliament and the Public.”

Effective Sustainability Checks
Score: 5

In the United Kingdom, the RIA process aims to support sustainable policymaking. These assessments consider a wide range of indicators, including social, environmental, and ecological factors, though economic indicators are often prioritized. The RIAs analyze the impact of regulation over various time periods – short, medium, and long term – and attempt to account for external shocks and irregular developments. A sustainable development impact test is required for all relevant policy proposals. The devolved governments in Scotland and Wales have shown innovation in this area. The Scottish Government’s National Performance Framework and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 are notable examples of their efforts to integrate sustainability into policy planning and assessment (de Vito 2024).

Effective Ex Post Evaluation
Score: 8

Evidence-based decision-making is deeply rooted in the United Kingdom’s governance traditions, and ex post evaluations are as vital to public policymaking as impact and sustainability checks. The OECD ranks the United Kingdom second among its 40 members for its approach.

Specialist analytical functions were recently consolidated into the Analysis Function, a cross-government network of around 16,000 people involved in generating and disseminating analysis across government and beyond. Its aim is to improve the analytical capability of the Civil Service and support informed decision-making throughout the government.

Analytical approaches to evaluation are detailed in the Magenta Book and the Green Book, with support from the Cross-Government Evaluation Group coordinated by HM Treasury. Additionally, the Aqua Book provides guidance on good practices for working with analysis and analytical models. The Behavioral Insights Team (formerly within the Cabinet Office but now an independent consultancy) and the What Works Network (coordinated by the Cabinet Office) promote the increased use of evaluation methods, especially randomized controlled trials.

The Regulatory Policy Committee (RPC) serves as the independent regulatory scrutiny body for the UK government. Committee members are appointed through open competition and have backgrounds in the private and voluntary sectors, business, the legal profession, and academia. The committee assesses the quality of evidence and analysis used to inform government regulatory proposals, providing independent advice and scrutiny to ensure ministerial policy decisions are based on accurate evidence and help produce better regulation. The RPC evaluates the quality of the government's RIAs and examines all published ex post evaluations. If the RPC submits a recommendation to the government, it is expected to be implemented into law. Businesses can directly address the RPC if they disagree with or feel disadvantaged by a specific governmental regulatory assessment. Despite the technical proficiency of these evaluation mechanisms, political reality often tempers their effectiveness. Policy success and failure are frequently contested through a partisan lens, and the incumbent government may not always seek routine assessments of its record.

Sustainable Policymaking

I. Economic Sustainability

Circular Economy

Circular
Economy Policy
Efforts and
Commitment
Score: 8

In July 2020, the UK government and the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales issued a joint statement affirming their commitment to the principles of the EU Circular Economy Package. The statement emphasized that leaving the EU had not diminished the UK's environmental ambitions, and that there was no intention to weaken current environmental protections after the end of the Transition Period. It explained that the measures proposed in the Circular Economy Package would be transposed into UK law, citing specific initiatives such as Scotland's "Making Things Last" strategy and Wales's target of zero waste by 2050.

The UK's approach to the circular economy is covered in various specific strategies. In England, the "Environmental Improvement Plan 2023," published on February 7, 2023, updates the 2018 25-year environment plan. The plan acknowledges that the pandemic had slowed progress towards environmental goals but outlines revised plans for moving towards a truly circular and sustainable economy.

There have been several actions taken or planned to implement these policies. For example, England banned single-use plastic plates, bowls, trays, containers, cutlery, and balloon sticks starting on October 1, 2023. A deposit return scheme for single-use drinks containers is scheduled to be introduced by 2025. This scheme was initially planned for Scotland in the summer of 2023 but was postponed due to objections from some companies and disagreements between Edinburgh and Westminster over including glass containers. Additionally, the implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility, a scheme to shift the costs of managing packaging waste to producers, has been delayed by 12 months. An October 2023 report by Zero Waste Scotland cites examples of businesses adapting well but also notes that "businesses still face

significant challenges and cannot drive the transition to a circular economy alone.”

Overall, commitments to a circular economy are firm, and there are sector-specific strategies to achieve the goal, but implementation challenges are proving tricky.

Viable Critical Infrastructure

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to a Resilient
Critical
Infrastructure
Score: 6

The National Protective Security Authority (NPSA), an arm of the security services restructured in 2023, is responsible for “building resilience to national security threats,” according to its mission statement. A key focus is on forestalling threats to critical infrastructure, though its mandate extends beyond this. Complementing the NPSA is the National Cyber Security Centre, which provides support for the digital economy. The UK ranks a close second behind the United States in the Global Cybersecurity Index for the strength of its cyber protections.

Despite the valuable support provided by these agencies, the UK has long faced shortcomings in the quality and capacity of its infrastructure. The protracted development of the HS2 train line northward from London exemplifies these issues, as does the ongoing debate about expanding airport runway capacity in the London area. In October 2023, a decision was announced to halt HS2 construction beyond Birmingham, following a previous decision to cut a planned route connecting to the main east coastline. The prime minister attributed these cuts to escalating costs, described as out of control, but persistent issues with the land use planning system, which empowers NIMBY (not in my backyard) objectors, also inhibit infrastructure development.

To address these challenges, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority was created in 2016. It aims to work with government and industry to deliver projects and improve performance over time. Reporting to the Cabinet Office and the Treasury, it monitors the pipeline of projects and published a strategic plan in 2021 for the decade up to 2030.

Incentives for privatized utilities have also been problematic, particularly in the water industry (in England and Wales), which has faced regular criticism for inadequate investment to prevent sewage spills. Despite issuing fines, the government has struggled to change this pattern.

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to Achieving a
Decarbonized
Energy System
by 2050
Score: 8

Decarbonized Energy System

The UK government has a strong, legally entrenched commitment to achieving net zero emissions, based on the 2008 Climate Change Act, which established “carbon budgets” for five-year intervals. During Boris Johnson’s tenure, a ten-point plan issued in late 2020 outlined a roadmap for a wide-ranging transition towards net zero, including ending the sales of petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2030. As the host of the 2021 COP26 in Glasgow, the UK was keen to demonstrate leadership in relevant policies.

Recently, some policy adjustments have been made to mitigate the pace of change for certain sources of carbon emissions. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak emphasized that these changes affect the pace of transition in specific sectors without compromising the overall target. In a speech in September 2023, Sunak announced a delay in the target for electric vehicles (EVs) to 2035, citing the slow rollout of charging infrastructure and associated costs. He noted that 80% of new vehicles were still expected to be electric by 2030.

Additionally, the government announced a slower phase-out of gas boilers in favor of heat pumps to ease the burden on households and businesses. However, some policy changes, such as accelerating industrial decarbonization, are expected to offset these less immediate targets. The government also controversially approved a new coalmine in Cumbria, arguing that its output, needed for manufacturing processes, would otherwise be imported at a higher carbon cost. New licenses for oil and gas exploration in UK territorial waters were also issued, motivated by the need for secure gas sources during the transition.

These policy changes faced sharp criticism both domestically and internationally. The independent Climate Change Committee (CCC), established by the 2008 Act to advise the UK and devolved governments on emissions targets and report to Parliament on progress, argued that the changes would make it harder to achieve net zero by 2050. The CCC warned that the uncertainty and potential perception of a weakened government commitment could be damaging. In its June 2023 annual progress report to Parliament, the committee identified risks to meeting the UK’s emissions targets, policy gaps, and significant delivery risks. Internationally, the German-based Climate Change Performance Index, which had previously ranked the UK highly, downgraded the UK by nine places to 20th in its 2024 assessment.

One implication of the revised approach is a potential loss of international credibility. Nevertheless, the UK is on track to achieve a 50% reduction in carbon emissions since 1990, the greatest decline among G20 countries. The

share of renewables in electricity generation has been increasing rapidly, with offshore wind as the largest component, accounting for a record of just under 50% of electricity generation in the first quarter of 2023. Despite the political challenges, the UK’s commitment to net zero remains firm.

Adaptive Labor Markets

Policies
Targeting an
Adaptive Labor
Market
Score: 7

Although the UK is known for having a flexible labor market, high employment rates, and low unemployment rates, a new challenge since the pandemic has been the rise in economic inactivity, reversing the trend of the previous decade. The most recent estimates from the Office for National Statistics show the inactivity rate is around 21%, with a markedly higher rate of 27% for the 50-64-year-old cohort. One of the main causes of the recent increase is a significant rise in long-term sickness, up by 474,000 since 2020.

The long-standing problem in the UK labor market is skills shortages. Despite numerous initiatives over the decades, UK employers continue to face skills gaps. The explanations are complex, but a report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) finds that public funding for skills has fallen by 31% since its peak 30 years ago. The IFS also highlights the lack of coherent and consistent policies on skills, noting that “few areas of public policy have experienced as much turbulence and churn over the past two decades. Any future reforms must be weighed against the risk of adding to the policy instability and inconsistency which have plagued the sector.”

Following EU enlargement in 2004, the number of mobile workers from Poland, Lithuania, and other Central and Eastern European countries greatly exceeded projections. This flow reversed somewhat due to Brexit and the pandemic, although immigration from Commonwealth countries and, more recently, from Hong Kong and Ukraine has led to a higher net migration rate. The overall impact on the labor market has been mixed, as inward migration was often driven by humanitarian needs rather than economic factors.

A furlough scheme implemented early in the pandemic succeeded in stabilizing employment, which soon bounced back. However, vacancies reached record highs, exceeding unemployment rates from mid-2022 before falling somewhat in 2023.

The national minimum wage, now called the “living wage,” has been rising faster than average earnings or inflation since its introduction by the New Labour government in 1999. It is credited with reducing in-work poverty for the lowest-paid workers, although challenges remain, particularly in areas with

high housing and transport costs. The most recent rise, announced in November 2023 for 2024, ensures that those on the living wage will again see relative gains compared to average earnings. An analysis of 20 years of the minimum wage by the Low Pay Commission, the statutory body responsible for recommending the minimum wage to the government, mentions several positive outcomes and states that it has not “found any strong evidence of negative effects.”

Policies
Targeting an
Inclusive Labor
Market
Score: 7

Following a review by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, published in 2021, the government launched its “Inclusive Britain” strategy, which outlines three priorities:

“To ensure that prejudice and discrimination have no place in our society,” with the added emphasis, “No exceptions. No excuses.”

To encourage equality of opportunity and ensure aspiration from all groups.

“Actively foster a sense of inclusion and belonging to the UK and our country’s rich and complex history.”

This rhetoric indicates the UK’s commitment to promoting the inclusion of marginalized groups and ethnic minorities. Policy initiatives across several governments have contributed to a social climate where discrimination, whether in the workplace or elsewhere, is increasingly seen as unacceptable. Most employers now adopt and regularly update diversity and inclusion strategies. There are also equivalent statements on fostering gender equality. However, ethnicity and gender pay gaps persist. Additionally, since the pandemic, the proportion of NEETs (people aged 15-24 neither in education nor employment or training) has edged upward.

A promise to “level up” disadvantaged parts of the United Kingdom was a cornerstone of the Conservative manifesto in 2019. A white paper in 2022 noted that while “talent is spread equally across our country, opportunity is not.” This was followed by an act of Parliament at the end of 2023. Proposals include actions and funding to boost skills, a reduction in the taper rate for Universal Credit from 63% to 55% (improving the incentive to work more, though it remains steep), and a “Lifetime Skills Guarantee” for England, given devolved competences. The act also proposes extending city deals to devolve power and provide substantial funding for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, although it is unclear how much of this funding is “new” money.

Critics, such as the Institute for Government, fear that the leveling-up agenda is too broad and lacks prioritization, while the National Audit Office doubts that projects will be completed on time.

Policies
Targeting Labor
Market Risks
Score: 7

The shift to Universal Credit (UC) as a single mechanism integrating previously fragmented benefits marked a significant change in the UK’s approach to social welfare. This transition provoked considerable controversy and encountered several initial difficulties. The transition to UC as the main benefit is now nearly complete, although some individuals can still claim Job Seeker’s Allowance or Employment Support Allowance, depending largely on their contribution record. UC includes benefits for the low-paid, those not in employment, and has additional provisions for disabled people and the self-employed. The Scottish government now has increased responsibility for social security concerning disability and has committed to providing more assistance in claiming benefits.

Since the start of the New Labour government in 1997, the UK has adopted an active labor market policy where the employment agency, now called Job Centre Plus (JCP), works with claimants to help them find jobs. JCP offers various forms of support for accessing jobs and requires claimants to attend meetings and agree to a program with a designated work coach. Benefits can be withdrawn if claimants do not adhere to the terms. The JCP provides support tailored to different categories of claimants and has transitioned to online job advertising through the “Find a Job” system. There is no direct union involvement in this process.

From September 2020 to March 2022, the pandemic-related Kickstart scheme provided employment subsidies to create new jobs for 16 to 24-year-olds on Universal Credit who were at risk of long-term unemployment. The scheme subsidized jobs for six months for up to 25 hours per week. An evaluation of the scheme found that it broadly achieved its aims but faced initial problems and was least successful in supporting the least qualified participants and certain ethnic groups.

Sustainable Taxation

Policies
Targeting
Adequate Tax
Revenue
Score: 7

Taxes in the UK have been increasing, with the tax take as a proportion of GDP reaching a recent high in 2023. However, it remains relatively low compared to other European countries. In 2022, the Institute for Fiscal Studies described the UK’s tax burden as “at its highest sustained level since the 1950s,” in the context of a recent failed attempt by the Truss government to introduce major tax cuts (Adam et al. 2022). The UK tax system balances income and expenditure taxes and includes a variety of specific taxes within a complex tax code. Tax decisions are primarily made during the chancellor of the exchequer’s twice-yearly “fiscal events.” The most recent event, in

November 2023, included headline announcements on cutting payroll taxes (national insurance) and increasing investment allowances for companies. However, the failure to uprate tax bands effectively resulted in “stealth” taxes, pushing more people into paying income tax or into higher tax rate bands.

Overall, tax collection functions adequately, although His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) faced sharp criticism in December 2023 from the chair of the House of Commons Treasury Committee for reducing telephone support. Additionally, a January 2023 report by the public accounts committee criticized HMRC for poor service to taxpayers and an increase in uncollected tax. Staff cuts at HMRC have contributed to these issues.

There are some variations in taxation among the UK’s nations. The Scotland Acts of 2012 and 2016 granted the Scottish government new taxation and borrowing powers, which it has used sparingly until recently. Proposals for 2024 include a new tax rate for moderately affluent citizens that is more onerous than in the rest of the UK. The National Assembly of Wales has far less fiscal discretion, while the ongoing suspension of the Northern Ireland Executive inhibits changes, resulting in de facto direct rule from London.

Policies
Targeting Tax
Equity
Score: 7

Income tax is the largest component of UK tax revenue, accounting for just under a quarter in the tax year 2022/23, followed by national insurance (a payroll tax) at close to 18%, and VAT at 16%. Corporation and capital taxes raise a further 13%, with a variety of other taxes, levies, and duties making up the balance. The income tax system is progressive, with bands of 20%, 40%, and 45%, providing reasonable vertical equity. However, this exists in a context where the UK Gini coefficient was around 0.25 in 1980 and 0.4 in 2018 (Institute for Fiscal Studies 2022). An anomaly in the system arises from the “personal allowance” – the amount any income taxpayer can earn before entering the lower rate band. Once taxable income (including from savings and investments) reaches £100,000, the personal allowance is reduced by £1 for every additional £2 of income, creating a de facto 60% tax band for those earning between £100,000 and £125,000.

Recent decisions have maintained various thresholds in cash terms, rather than adjusting for inflation, effectively bringing more taxpayers into the income tax net and pushing more into higher bands – a phenomenon known as “fiscal drag.” An attempt by the short-lived Truss administration to abolish the 45% rate for higher earners drew widespread criticism and was quickly abandoned. In his November 2023 autumn statement, the Chancellor of the Exchequer highlighted a reduction in national insurance, but the fiscal drag effect meant the median taxpayer still paid more.

Evidence summarized in a House of Commons briefing shows that the top percentile contributes 29% of income tax revenue, with a further 31% from those in the 90-99 percentiles. The briefing also reveals that VAT and other indirect taxes disproportionately affect the poorest households as a proportion of disposable income. While this is clearly regressive, the relatively low share of indirect taxes in total tax revenue mitigates the horizontal inequity.

With a high proportion of income tax and national insurance assessed through the PAYE system, where payments are made directly from employers, horizontal equity is largely maintained. However, tax avoidance remains a constant battle between high earners and tax authorities. Over the years, some of the more egregious loopholes have been closed, but the very wealthy often still find ways to limit their tax bills, sometimes by directing income to tax havens. One such avoidance option is through “non-domiciled” status, where people with substantial earnings outside the UK can avoid tax by registering in a lower tax jurisdiction. Although there are relatively few non-doms, they can benefit significantly, albeit with a charge from the UK tax authorities. The issue gained prominence when Rishi Sunak’s wife was found to have non-dom status, prompting her to change her status in response to public criticism. Whether to abolish non-dom status is currently a dividing line between the two main political parties.

Policies Aimed at
Minimizing
Compliance
Costs
Score: 7

Although the UK tax system is complex, the arrangements for collecting the three largest revenue-generating taxes – income tax, national insurance, and VAT – are relatively straightforward. The PAYE system efficiently captures the majority of individual taxpayers, and VAT is well-established.

For those required to submit full returns due to additional earnings, His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is increasingly pushing for online submissions, which most taxpayers now use. While HMRC provides extensive downloadable guidance, it has faced criticism for insufficient support for individuals with queries not directly covered by the guidance or those in unusual circumstances.

Unsurprisingly, wealthier taxpayers are more likely to employ tax accountants, accepting the trade-off of paying for services to avoid handling their own returns and to take advantage of avoidance opportunities.

Policies Aimed at
Internalizing
Negative and
Positive
Externalities
Score: 7

Fuel, tobacco, and alcohol duties, which together account for around 5% of total tax revenue, aim to internalize negative externalities. The fuel tax escalator (later renamed “stabilizer”), introduced in 1993, was intended to rise faster than inflation to deter fuel use. However, successive chancellors have often chosen not to apply it during periods of rising oil prices or wider cost-of-

living pressures. Fuel duties were cut as a temporary measure in the 2022 budget and maintained for another year in the 2023 budget.

For businesses, various tax incentives stimulate investment and research, internalizing positive externalities. These incentives were reinforced in the November 2023 fall statement.

Sustainable Budgeting

Sustainable
Budgeting
Policies
Score: 6

Fiscal rules have been in place for 25 years, and the fiscal framework includes the well-regarded Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), which functions as an independent fiscal council. Following the suspension of fiscal rules during the global financial crisis, there have been frequent revisions. Since 2011, these rules have been embodied in the Charter for Fiscal Responsibility, which has changed eight times since its introduction, according to the Institute for Government.

Currently, a primary fiscal rule mandates that net public debt must fall by the fifth year of the rolling forecast. A complementary rule aims to reduce the annual fiscal deficit within the same timeframe. These rules rely on two forecasts: the government's projections for public finances and the OBR's economic forecasts. Because these forecasts look five years ahead, they do not significantly bind the government in the short term. In the 2023 Autumn Statement, the Chancellor of the Exchequer stated that the government was on track to meet the fiscal rules with greater headroom compared to spring 2023.

The frequent changes to fiscal rules indicate that they are not strongly binding, as the Treasury can modify them. According to legislation, changes must be explained, presented to the House of Commons, and approved (though not as new law) before implementation. Between 2011 and 2019, before the pandemic, the debt ratio rose from 70.8% of GDP to 84.8% and is now around 100%, not projected to fall below three figures for another two years. Additionally, there is a target to contain welfare expenditure within a predetermined cap set by the Treasury.

While UK public finances are sustainable, higher interest rates to control inflation are increasing debt servicing costs, crowding out other public expenditures. The existing budgetary institutions support sustainability, aided by system transparency. However, there is no explicit provision for reducing debt during prosperous times, no formal prioritization of investment (except through tax allowances), or forward-looking plans beyond the five-year rules.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are not easily identifiable in the system.

Sustainability-oriented Research and Innovation

Research and
Innovation Policy
Score: 9

Innovation is at the heart of the Sunak government's policy approach, building on a strategy launched in July 2021. This strategy aims to boost productivity growth, which has stagnated over the past decade, and to create a cohesive system where businesses, government, R&D organizations, finance providers, and other stakeholders collaborate to achieve innovation goals. Recently, the government published a white paper titled "A pro-innovation approach to AI regulation," with Rishi Sunak aiming to position the UK as a global leader in AI regulation.

Recent government initiatives include extending tax credits for R&D and business investment, establishing regional technology and innovation centers, investing in digital infrastructure and new university research facilities, and setting up Innovate UK to promote economic growth through science and technology. Innovate UK supports business-led innovation across all sectors, technologies, and UK regions, focusing on developing and commercializing new products, processes, and services. Innovation is also supported by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), which now focuses on three innovation missions: promoting a fairer start, a healthy life, and a sustainable future.

The United Kingdom's tradition of being an active player in research and innovation dates back to the Industrial Revolution. Its leading universities have long linked cutting-edge academic research with industries such as biotechnology and information and communications technology (ICT). Areas like the Cambridge-Oxford corridor north of London are recognized as innovation hubs, with recent successes including the rapid development of the AstraZeneca COVID vaccine.

Despite these strengths, overall R&D spending has been weaker, averaging around 1.75% of GDP in the years before the pandemic, falling short of the EU norm (no data yet for 2021 because of a revised measurement methodology). Additionally, converting innovation into sustainable, large-scale profitable production has been challenging. However, it's important to note that manufacturing constitutes a smaller share of UK GDP than in most OECD countries, and other indicators, such as ICT spending – crucial for service industries – must be considered to understand innovation trends in the UK.

The revamped UK innovation strategy is comprehensive in its aims and scope, but its likelihood of success remains to be seen.

Stable Global Financial System

Global Financial
Policies
Score: 8

The City of London is one of the world's main financial hubs and a significant sector of the UK economy. Consequently, the government has a strong interest in global financial stability to safeguard financial and business services. As a result, UK governments have traditionally tried to protect the interests of the City of London against more intrusive regulations, whether national, European, or global. Prior to Brexit, the United Kingdom had substantial influence on EU financial reforms, both through government action and initiatives from the City of London. The expectation is that UK financial regulation will remain closely aligned with European Union and international standards.

At the international level, successive UK governments have played a prominent role in improving the international regulatory framework through bodies such as the Financial Stability Board (chaired by Mark Carney, then governor of the Bank of England from 2011-2018), the Bank for International Settlements, and the IMF, where the UK has a higher voting weight than warranted by the size of its economy.

One issue over which the United Kingdom is susceptible to accusations of double standards is the inflow of capital from questionable sources. While money laundering standards are applied with some rigor, there is a perception that the City of London is too lax on the super-rich and too slow to clamp down on "dirty money." This has led to the pejorative term "London Laundromat," used in a 2022 Financial Times video. Sanctions against Russian oligarchs and efforts to clamp down on political donations from dubious sources are steps to address these issues, although many tax havens are still associated with the city.

II. Social Sustainability

Sustainable Education System

Policies
Targeting Quality
Education
Score: 8

Education is a devolved competence in the United Kingdom, meaning it is the responsibility of the individual nations – England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This decentralization long predates the recent devolution of power that established the devolved national administrations. For example, Scotland has always had its own school curriculum, exam system, and undergraduate university degree structure, which differ significantly from those in England. Additionally, Scotland and Wales have a higher proportion of comprehensive (nonselective) schools. Consequently, it makes little sense to talk in terms of UK education policy and performance. The Department for Education (DfE) in the UK government oversees education in England, which encompasses 84% of the UK population. In Scotland, Education Scotland, a delegated agency of the Scottish government, is responsible for delivering education. Northern Ireland has a similar agency, though local authorities play a primary role in implementation.

Although there is private provision (confusingly known as public schools), it covers only 7% of pupils. The education system in England underwent numerous reforms in the 2010s, resulting in improvements in PISA scores. In contrast, Scotland’s education system, traditionally a source of pride compared to England, has seen a decline, leading to political criticism of the Scottish National Party government.

In England, there is a statutory limit on class sizes of 30, and the latest data (for 2023) show actual class sizes have been stable at 26.7, with a slight increase in total enrollment in the last year. Nearly a quarter of pupils were eligible for free school meals, a means-tested benefit. The latest report on education in England from the Institute for Fiscal Studies observes that spending has “fallen as a share of national income, from about 5.6% of national income in 2010–11 down to about 4.4% in 2022–23. This is about the same share of national income as in the early 2000s, mid-1980s, and late 1960s. There has been no long-run increase in the share of national income devoted to public spending on education, despite large rises in education

participation over the long run.” The start of the 2023–24 school year highlighted under-investment in schools, particularly with the failure to address buildings using reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC). This led to closures and the use of temporary facilities, raising concerns about the impact on pupils’ prospects.

Significant changes have been made to boost early years education in England, with a commitment that from September 2025, families will be entitled to funding for 30 hours per week for children aged nine months or older. Devolved governments maintain similar or higher commitments. However, further education has seen mixed results. Funding was cut during the 2010s, but increased spending became a priority for the Sunak government, partly in response to concerns that too many students were pursuing university courses with limited labor market relevance and a high dropout rate. The renewed rise in NEETs (people aged 15–24 neither in education nor employment or training) is also worrying.

Shortcomings in adult education are being addressed, with varying approaches among the UK nations. A warning was issued by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, about a persistent decline in adult education. In response to the independent Augar review conducted in 2018, England introduced the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, aiming to create “a single funding system to help people pay for college or university courses, and train, retrain, and upskill flexibly over their working lives.” It is due to become operational in 2025. Scotland launched an Adult Learning Strategy for 2022–27 to ensure accessible lifelong learning opportunities. Wales passed the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act, establishing the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, a new Welsh government-sponsored body due to become operational in April 2024 that has a mandate to integrate tertiary education and lifelong learning functions.

A December 2023 policy paper for England, “Sustainability and Climate Change: A Strategy for the Education and Children’s Services Systems,” focuses on maintaining education standards and resilience while respecting sustainability objectives. It aims to provide students with “opportunities to develop a broad knowledge and understanding of the importance of nature, sustainability, and the causes and impact of climate change, and to translate this knowledge into positive action and solutions.”

UK universities continue to be highly regarded, with prestigious institutions like Cambridge, Oxford, and Imperial College London featuring in top global rankings. However, there are concerns about the financial stability of less well-regarded universities, partly because tuition fees have been capped for a

Policies
Targeting
Equitable Access
to Education
Score: 6

decade, resulting in real-term cuts. University tuition remains free in Scotland, though not for students from other parts of the UK. UK universities can charge higher fees to foreign students, incentivizing them to prefer international over domestic students.

All education providers across the UK are subject to inspections and a regulatory framework designed to assure quality. In England, OFSTED is responsible for inspecting schools; in Wales, it is Estyn; in Scotland, Education Scotland; and in Northern Ireland, the Education and Training Inspectorate. These inspections evaluate school quality and can impose stringent recommendations and gradings, aiming to provide parents with informed choices about where to send their children. However, following the suicide of a headteacher who received an “inadequate” rating – and a coroner’s verdict blaming the inspection outcome – OFSTED announced in December 2023 that it was suspending inspections to rethink its approach.

Despite these inspection regimes, geographical differences in school quality persist, often affecting local house prices. High-quality schools can be found in both affluent and deprived areas. Enhancing educational opportunities is part of the government’s “leveling-up” agenda, although equal access does not necessarily lead to equal outcomes. School exam crises in 2020 highlighted systemic inequalities in educational outcomes. The UK and devolved governments, in coordination with qualifications agencies, approved the use of an algorithm to modify teacher-assessed grades, which initially resulted in downgrading scores in deprived areas. Attempts to avoid similar public outcry in 2021 were successful, but the underlying inequalities remain (Kippin and Cairney 2023).

Entry to the best universities is competitive, and there has long been a bias favoring privately educated pupils at institutions like Cambridge and Oxford, as well as top universities in Scotland. Private pupils often benefit from greater familiarity with entry requirements, the quality of their schools, and family connections. However, in recent years, Oxbridge has made significant efforts to attract students from poorer backgrounds, reducing the proportion of private entrants, although they remain overrepresented. High fees and the terms of student loans are also mentioned as potential deterrents to university applicants from poorer backgrounds, although the steady increase in enrollments suggests otherwise.

Support for “second-chance” educational opportunities has faced funding cuts since 2010 and erratic policy changes, as highlighted in an FE Week article celebrating the 60th anniversary of the National Extension College, a key provider. While new initiatives in further education (see “Policies Targeting

Quality Education”) may improve the situation, the offer has clearly been inadequate, and the recent rise in NEETs is a disappointment.

Sustainable Institutions Supporting Basic Human Needs

Policies
Targeting Equal
Access to
Essential Services
and Basic Income
Support
Score: 6

There is a safety net available to all citizens in the UK, although the specifics vary among the four nations. Organizations like Citizens Advice provide guidance to those in need on what they can claim. The main benefit is Universal Credit (UC), which is replacing several other benefits, including housing benefit and child benefit, although the transition from legacy benefits is still incomplete. UC provides a monthly payment (which can be twice a month in Scotland and Northern Ireland) from which recipients are responsible for paying for services and rent, if applicable. There is an option for rent to be paid directly to a landlord if the recipient has debt problems or struggles to manage household finances. UC is available to low earners, including the self-employed. Irregular migrants, however, are not eligible for UC, although they receive accommodation and subsistence payments.

Gas prices are subject to a cap, which was raised to a high level in 2022. The surge in energy prices that year led the government to introduce temporary financial support paid automatically to most households, with additional targeted payments for those on benefits, who are entitled to up to three payments in 2023-24. In 2023, media investigations exposed the practice by some energy suppliers of forced entry into properties by bailiffs to install pre-payment meters for consumers in arrears. These meters result in higher charges for already deprived households. After a public outcry, the regulator (OFGEM) requested companies to suspend the practice; they complied, but it has not been banned.

There has been discussion about introducing a basic income available to everyone, despite concerns over the high potential cost. In July 2022, the Welsh government launched an experimental scheme offering about 500 18-year-olds £19,200 a year before tax, with no strings attached. A similar scheme was launched in England in 2023 on a much smaller scale, with 30 participants receiving £1,600 a month for two years to study the impact of the money on their lives. The Scottish government also experimented with limited UBI schemes starting in 2017.

Policies
Targeting Quality
of Essential
Services and
Basic Income
Support
Score: 6

While provisions for basic services are available to all and generally sufficient to meet basic human needs, the shortage of social housing – part of a broader housing deficit – is particularly striking. Shelter, an NGO advocating for more and better housing, estimates that more than one million households in England are on waiting lists for social housing. This lack of supply forces many into substandard rented housing. An investigation by ITV, one of the main terrestrial TV channels, exposed the desperate conditions some households have to endure. In Scotland, the waiting list is estimated at 110,000 households, with 37% waiting for over three years, according to a Household Survey published in April 2023.

Every home and business in the UK has the legal right to request a decent, affordable broadband connection, an obligation enforced by the regulator OFCOM. A 2021 inquiry into BT for unreasonable charges was suspended when the company provided assurances, reaffirming this principle. In some rural areas, service is poorer due to geography rather than deprivation.

Strict conditions apply to the withdrawal of energy and water services, requiring a court order and only after attempts have been made to agree on a payment plan. Most suppliers are part of the Energy UK Vulnerability Commitment, which precludes disconnection for households with children under 16 during the winter and all year for households with certain other vulnerabilities.

The nine largest providers of personal bank accounts are legally required to offer basic bank accounts that are fee-free for standard operations. Basic bank account customers can use the same services (e.g., ATM and Post Office counter access) as the financial institution’s other PCA customers.

While rail and bus services are heavily subsidized, the beneficiaries tend to be better off, and ticket costs deter the worst off. A polemical 2021 posting by Greenpeace is critical of the inequalities resulting from transport policies, particularly affecting the poor, the disabled, and ethnic minorities, and highlights the implications of car dependence for sustainability.

Sustainable Health System

Policies
Targeting Health
System
Resilience
Score: 6

Health is a competence of the devolved administrations in the UK, for whom it represents the largest spending area. Public health agencies operate in all four nations of the UK. According to a study by the Tony Blair Institute, the UK “has become one of the unhealthiest populations in the OECD,” an outcome the study attributes primarily to “the country’s failure to manage demand,” that

is, to prevent rather than treat ill-health. A striking statistic from the report indicates that in the fiscal year 2021-22, £3.3 billion was spent on public health grants, barely 1.5% of the £229 billion total health expenditure. Obesity, smoking, and mental health are cited as underlying causes, and the aftermath of the pandemic has aggravated an already poor record. Mental health has been highlighted as needing greater public support, despite promises to spend more on it in the Mental Health Recovery Action Plan announced for England in 2021. Dentistry is also problematic, with the availability of NHS surgeries collapsing and many patients struggling to obtain, let alone pay for, private care.

In Scotland, a discussion paper launched in January 2023 acknowledged that too little was being invested in health protection. The paper identifies two overarching challenges: low and falling life expectancy and widening health inequalities. There has also been regular media coverage of the very high rate of drug abuse deaths in Scotland.

The main instrument for preventive medicine in England is the NHS Health Check, introduced in 2009, aimed at assessing six major risk factors that drive early death, disability, and health inequality: alcohol intake, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, obesity, lack of physical activity, and smoking. Checks are supposed to be done every five years. A review in 2021 claimed the check had largely achieved its aims, although it reached only two in five eligible people. Other evidence notes geographical disparities in the take-up and quality of follow-up.

At its best, the NHS offers high-quality treatment free at the point of delivery, but its use of IT is frequently criticized. Media stories often highlight the lack of interoperability of IT systems, even within the same hospital, and the burden on medical staff in reconciling these systems. Rapid changes in the use of digitized services occurred during the pandemic, but there is a need to build on these improvements.

There is a vicious circle in healthcare: primary healthcare struggles to cope as appointments with physicians become harder to obtain, leading patients to go to emergency rooms, thereby increasing hospital waiting times. Failings in social care provision make it harder to move patients out of the hospital. These and other difficulties have been examined by organizations like the King's Fund, the Commission on Health and Prosperity launched by the Institute for Public Policy Research, and a commission under the auspices of The Times newspaper. While there are some advances, such as an increase in cancer screening, the health system is notoriously slow to adapt, even when the directions for change are evident and well-documented.

Policies
Targeting High-
Quality
Healthcare
Score: 6

The National Health Service (NHS) holds iconic status within the UK and is widely considered politically untouchable. However, criticism of its functioning is growing. Since the pandemic, resources for healthcare have steadily increased, making it less convincing to argue that the service is underfunded. Health is a competence delegated to the devolved administrations, but the model of free care at the point of delivery is common to all. Differences in effectiveness are sometimes highlighted in political debates, with Conservative politicians pointing to shortcomings in Wales, where the Labour Party has long been in power.

In addition to alarming headlines about the large increase in waiting lists for treatment since the pandemic, the UK has a poor record in dealing with cancer and cardiovascular disease.

The Kings Fund, a leading health think tank, summarizes the explanations in a report: “The UK lags behind other countries in its capital investment and has substantially fewer key physical resources than many of its peers, including CT and MRI scanners and hospital beds. The UK has strikingly low levels of key clinical staff, including doctors and nurses, and is heavily reliant on foreign-trained staff.”

Policies
Targeting
Equitable Access
To Healthcare
Score: 6

The National Health Service (NHS) is held in high esteem by the British public, who strongly support its long-established principle of “free at the point of care.” While this provides equitable access in theory, there are significant inequalities in demand and provision. Health is a devolved competence, with block grants from the central government determining the overall resources available to the respective administrations, from which they allocate health spending.

Health provision across the UK is under considerable strain. In England, for example, the waiting list for treatment soared from around 2.5 million in 2012 to a record 7.8 million in autumn 2023, with no sign of improvement. Emergency department waiting times have also increased significantly, with the proportion of patients exceeding the four-hour target peaking at 50% at the end of 2022, before slightly improving in 2023. The proportion of cancer patients starting treatment within 62 days has declined sharply, from meeting the 85% target in 2018 to around 60% in the last year. Devolved governments have also seen record levels of waiting lists.

Reducing these waiting times was one of the five pledges made by Rishi Sunak when he became prime minister, but the combination of the pandemic’s legacy (with many treatments postponed) and strike action by nurses and

doctors in 2023 has aggravated the problem. Initiatives to address these issues, such as increasing training places for doctors and nurses, will take time to show results. In the meantime, inequality persists as patients with the financial means opt for private treatment.

Gender Equality

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to Achieving
Gender Equality
Score: 8

Gender equality and non-discrimination on other “protected characteristics” are provided for in the 2010 Equality Act. The legal framework, including the “public sector equality duty,” is robust in countering discrimination and contributing to changing social attitudes. However, the UK is often seen as taking a minimalist approach to “gender mainstreaming” compared to countries like Sweden (with some scope for additional action in devolved governments, as noted by Cairney et al. 2022).

High-profile incidents often highlight broad anti-discriminatory trends. For example, sports commentators mocking a female referee’s assistant have faced rapid dismissal. Cases involving trans-identified individuals have sparked public discourse on the extent of anti-discrimination measures. Recent egregious incidents of gender discrimination and misogyny in the Metropolitan Police and the South Wales Fire Service have been widely condemned, highlighting persistent issues (e.g., the Casey review 2023 describes “overt acts of homophobia, misogyny, and racism by serving officers and staff in the Met”).

The Westminster government has a minister responsible for women and equalities, currently Kemi Badenoch, who has held the post since 2022 and has also been the Secretary of State for Business and Trade since 2023. There are equivalent ministers in the devolved administrations. Badenoch oversees the Government Equalities Office (GEO), which leads policy on women, sexual orientation, and transgender equality, and works with the Cabinet Office and the Equality Hub. The Equality Hub is responsible for the gender pay gap service and related guidance for employers and has been working with employers and professional bodies to identify good practices for supporting women experiencing menopause in the workplace. In 2019, the GEO published “Gender Equality at Every Stage: A Roadmap for Change,” outlining goals and actions to advance gender equality.

Ministries and public bodies regularly update equality and diversity strategies, as do companies and other entities outside the public sector. In 2017, the government introduced legislation requiring organizations with 250 or more employees to report annually on their gender pay gap. The Office for National

Statistics revealed in April 2023 that the pay gap had narrowed to 7.7%, declining by a quarter over the last decade. However, the gap is more pronounced among high earners, and the proportion of women in their 40s and 50s in senior roles is lower. Scotland has made more progress in reducing the pay gap compared to England.

Tangible progress on gender equality has been made, and policy is supportive, with the World Economic Forum index placing the UK toward the top of its league table (though still behind the Nordic countries and the Netherlands). However, research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies suggests that the pandemic and associated policy responses negatively affected gender equality in the workplace. The representation of women in top management and on boards also remains low.

Strong Families

Family Policies
Score: 6

Over the last 20 years, policy initiatives aimed at improving work-life balance and increasing women's participation in the labor market have included expanding childcare facilities, extending maternity leave, and introducing paternity leave. Statutory maternity leave in the UK is 52 weeks – double the WHO standard – divided into two six-month segments labeled “ordinary” and “additional.” Pay entitlements are more complicated, with some costs met by employers, lasting up to 39 weeks. In the first six weeks, the amount payable is 90% of the recipient's average weekly earnings (before tax), then drops to £172.48 or 90% of the recipient's average weekly earnings (whichever is lower) for the next 33 weeks. Statutory paternity leave is two weeks, with the option to share maternity leave, extending paternity leave using some of the mother's entitlement. Fathers also have the right to take unpaid time off work to accompany mothers to antenatal appointments.

High childcare costs, mainly due to private provision, and the overstretched budgets of local authorities responsible for social care are two evident problems in UK family policy. Recent reforms could transform childcare provisions, but comparisons with Sweden suggest that the UK's plans lack a supportive wider architecture (Cohen et al. 2021). Previously, workers earning around average wages had little left after paying for childcare, but for single earners, Universal Credit offers additional support. However, there is an acknowledged problem of “tapering” – the progressive withdrawal of benefits as more is earned – creating a high marginal disincentive to work more.

Cuts in welfare spending, driven by central government policies to reduce public expenditure, have negatively affected core family policy measures,

especially for single mothers who rely disproportionately on social benefits, and larger families. There is a disability allowance for children, and carers for disabled children can claim an allowance under Universal Credit. Employees have the right to take time off work to help someone who depends on them in an unexpected event, but whether this time is remunerated is at the discretion of employers.

A rebranded “troubled families” program, introduced during the coalition government (in office from 2010), was subsequently renamed “supporting families.” It targets families facing “multiple and often overlapping vulnerabilities, such as financial or housing insecurity, poor mental or physical health, domestic abuse, children at risk of harm, poor educational attainment, or substance misuse.” From March 2023, the program will support an additional 100,000 families, having already supported 650,000. However, it has faced criticism for stigmatizing families and being used to explain the London riots of 2011, with dedicated funding offset by cuts to local authority budgets (Crossley 2015).

Sustainable Pension System

Policies Aimed at
Old-Age Poverty
Prevention
Score: 7

The United Kingdom has a three-pillar pension system, with the second pillar (employer-based pensions) being the mainstay. Private pension funds were adversely affected by the financial crisis as investment yields fell, leading some to require capital injections from employers. However, this has not significantly affected the incomes of those already retired. New entrants into second-pillar pension schemes are often offered less attractive terms than their predecessors. Successive pensions acts since 2016 have increased the state pension age to 66 for both men and women as of April 2021. Previously, the age was 60 for women and 65 for men, and the rapid increase for women led to complaints about inequities for those on certain age-cohort boundaries. The age will rise again in 2026 to 67.

The “new state pension,” introduced in 2016, offers a higher rate than the “basic pension” for men born after April 6, 1951, and women born after April 6, 1953, with different requirements for national insurance contributions. For the basic pension, eligibility was based on one year of contributions for those born between 1945 and 1951, but 11 years for men and 10 for women if born earlier. Those on the basic pension are eligible for the “additional state pension” and certain other financial supports.

Compared to many other countries, the UK state pension system is fiscally sustainable and guarantees a minimum income for pensioners through a “triple

lock,” which raises the basic state pension by the highest of inflation, average wages, or 2% per annum. Successive governments have pledged to maintain this policy, despite criticism about the growing burden on younger generations. However, faced with an exceptional increase in average earnings in 2021 due to a statistical quirk, the government suspended the triple lock for one year, resulting in a lower nominal increase of 3.1%. This decision provoked an outcry, especially from government supporters who saw it as breaking a manifesto commitment.

The UK used to have a relatively high degree of poverty among the elderly compared to other European countries. Older people without earnings-related pensions still face a higher risk of poverty. This situation has improved as pension provision has expanded, more pensioners own mortgage-free properties, and specific additional payments, such as winter heating allowances, have been introduced.

Despite overall improvements, there are inequalities among groups of pensioners. Lifelong housewives, for example, fare worse than those who can add occupational or private pensions to their state pension income. Inadequacies in publicly funded care home provision for the elderly can also cause difficulties due to the high cost of private care homes, sometimes obliging families to draw down assets. Most pensioners, however, are on reasonably comfortable incomes. Recent debates have focused on cutting some fringe benefits for better-off pensioners, such as free bus travel, due to concerns about the burden on younger generations.

Policies
 Targeting
 Intergenerational
 Equity
 Score: 7

There is no obligatory retirement age in the UK, and the public pension system offers incentives to remain in employment by providing higher pensions for those who defer retirement. According to the Mercer index, the UK ranks just below the Nordic countries and is among the better-performing systems globally.

The state pension is pay-as-you-go and is not directly linked to the level of national insurance payments made by individuals, though it does reflect years of contributions. The relatively low level of the state pension means the burden on the working-age population is contained, although there are complementary benefits for poorer pensioners. For the majority of retirees, occupational pensions are a more substantial source of income. Despite the increasing number of pension-age individuals and the rising pension age, the pension burden is higher than in the 2000s but remains well below the OECD average.

Provisions already in place should ensure that the pension system remains adequately funded and intergenerationally fair. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, some pensioners “are close to or above the relative poverty line, even if they have no other income,” and it asserts that “the state pension is not in need of wholesale change.” The key debate in the UK is about the “triple lock,” credited with raising the relative value of the state pension. However, it could increase the burden on younger generations in the long term and is likely to be a policy question in the next general election.

Wealth distribution, especially mortgage-free property, presents a challenge for younger generations, as does the likelihood of increased health and social care spending for the elderly.

Sustainable Inclusion of Migrants

Integration Policy
Score: 7

Despite being relatively open to migrants for many decades, the scale of net inward migration has become a more salient policy issue since the run-up to the Brexit referendum. Mobile workers from Central and Eastern European countries after EU accession were not constrained, and the UK had also welcomed substantial numbers from other EU countries. However, tensions have arisen in areas where migrants are relatively concentrated, particularly around access to public services such as education, scarce social housing, and primary healthcare. A policy associated particularly with Theresa May, initially as Home Secretary and later as Prime Minister, aimed to create a more “hostile environment” for immigrants. This policy became toxic during the Windrush scandal, which concerned immigrants from the 1950s and 1960s who had never had their status regularized and were suddenly confronted with expulsion.

Nevertheless, a distinction must be drawn between authorized migrants and the more recent phenomenon of irregular migration, mainly involving individuals crossing the Channel in small boats. This issue has become politically sensitive. Irregular migrants are not entitled to work and face severe problems in finding sufficient accommodation, including the use of army camps and a notorious barge moored in a south coast harbor. Approximately 45% of these migrants are housed in temporary accommodation and receive subsistence support.

The Home Office has a poor record in processing asylum applications, despite claims of increasing its capability. In September 2023, the backlog amounted to 125,000, down by 7% from the previous quarter but still higher than the same time in 2022. In 2018, the figure was just 22,000. The proportion of

applications decided within six months is well below pre-pandemic rates, though it is slowly improving as more staff are assigned to the task. A government policy to send irregular migrants to Rwanda has faced repeated legal challenges and was rejected by the Supreme Court. A fresh attempt by the government to legislate around the Supreme Court decision is making its way through Parliament, but expectations are low regarding its effectiveness in deterring irregular migration.

Regular migrants are another story entirely. Despite the above-mentioned local frictions, the UK has generally been able to absorb and integrate migrants into the labor force without undue stress. The recent rise in net immigration, partly due to migration from Ukraine and Hong Kong, has prompted a tightening of policy.

This policy revision has fairly wide support, but the Migration Advisory Council (MAC), an independent body advising the government on migration issues, has raised several concerns in its latest annual report. It highlighted “the exploitation of migrants and the abuse of the immigration system,” specifically citing care workers allowed into the UK under the Shortage Occupation List (SOL). This arrangement allows the government to designate sectors in dire need of recruitment, and the MAC noted that many people receive care that would not be possible without this visa route.

In response, the government is ending an arrangement under which SOL workers could be paid below the going rate, though still subject to minimum wage standards. The MAC also pointed out that lower levels of exploitation in Scotland can be explained by better pay and professionalization of the workforce compared to England.

Student visas also pose challenges because they allow recipients to work, often in minimum-wage jobs, while studying. There is evidence that a sizable number of students remain in the UK after graduation but do not work in jobs commensurate with their qualifications. The number of student visas issued jumped by 54% between 2019 and 2022, with significant increases in people arriving from India, Nigeria, and Pakistan. A quarter of these visas are for dependent family members, a substantial increase that the new government policy proposes to curb. There are concerns that the sheer number of visas will further strain public services.

In relation to housing and public services, the difficulties that arise are as much due to poor provision as new demand from migrants. Migrants from the EU tend to have higher employment rates and, consequently, contribute to tax revenue. For the majority of economic migrants, language is not a significant

barrier because English is often a reason for choosing the UK, though it can be a greater challenge for dependent family members.

Effective Capacity-Building for Global Poverty Reduction

Management of
Development
Cooperation by
Partner Country
Score: 8

The International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015 updated previous legislation and established an obligation to allocate 0.7% of GDP to official development assistance, a target set by the United Nations. Despite regular objections from populist politicians who argue that the government should focus on domestic priorities, the United Kingdom was one of the few OECD countries to meet this target pre-pandemic. Failure to meet the target requires the responsible minister to explain to Parliament why it “has not been met in the report year and, if relevant, refer to the effect of one or more of the following: economic circumstances and, in particular, any substantial change in gross national income; fiscal circumstances and, in particular, the likely impact of meeting the target on taxation, public spending and public borrowing; circumstances arising outside the United Kingdom.” The 2015 Act also obliges the government to evaluate the effectiveness of its support.

From 2013 to 2020, the target was met consistently. However, in November 2020, the government announced a reduction to 0.5% of GDP from 2021, citing the fiscal demands of the pandemic. This decision, which broke a manifesto commitment, was intended as a temporary measure, but subsequent announcements suggest it will not be restored until late in the current decade. The then-Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, explained that the reduction reflected “people’s priorities” during an unprecedented economic emergency. The decision provoked criticism from all living former prime ministers, many Conservative MPs, and representatives of numerous NGOs, who were concerned about the disruption of key programs. Earlier in 2020, the Department for International Development had been merged into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to create the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Concerns summarized in a House of Lords briefing suggest that the loss of a separate voice in government dilutes the aid effort and shifts the focus away from poverty alleviation to fostering foreign and trade policy objectives. Additionally, there have been objections to some of the aid budget being used by other departments, especially the Home Office, to help meet the costs of dealing with refugees within the UK, and a reduced willingness to work with multilateral agencies.

In May 2022, a new International Development Strategy was adopted, focusing on four pillars: delivering honest and reliable investment, providing

women and girls with the freedom they need to succeed, offering principled humanitarian assistance, and supporting progress on climate change, nature, and global health. An update in August 2023 aimed “to modernize our development partnerships and to deliver a global campaign to progress 7 initiatives critical to our partners and the achievement of the globally agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).” A white paper published in November 2023 further affirmed the UK’s commitment to the SDGs and signaled more efforts to work with global partners.

Despite the cut, the United Kingdom remains a major aid contributor, comfortably above the OECD average. Assuming the commitments in the white paper are implemented, the UK’s role in reducing global poverty is likely to be enhanced.

III. Environmental Sustainability

Effective Climate Action

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to Achieving
Climate
Neutrality by
2050
Score: 7

The 2008 Climate Change Act set binding targets for achieving net zero emissions by 2050. Recent government decisions, such as delaying targets for electric vehicles and heat pumps, have been rationalized as efforts to mitigate the impact on households while maintaining the overall strategy. Despite these rationalizations, green interests have criticized the changes.

The Climate Change Committee (CCC) is responsible for advising the UK and devolved governments on emissions targets and reporting to Parliament on progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preparing for and adapting to the impacts of climate change. The CCC comments on all aspects of the net zero strategy and monitors progress in cutting emissions and adapting to climate change. The committee has already begun analytical work on the methodology it will propose for the seventh cycle of carbon budgets, covering the period from 2038 to 2043. These quinquennial budgets were mandated by the 2008 Act.

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to Minimizing
Environmental
Health Risks
Score: 7

Effective Environmental Health Protection

Environmental health is a competence of the devolved administrations, with support from UK-wide agencies. For example, the Animal and Plant Health Agency focuses on “identifying and controlling endemic and exotic diseases and pests in animals, plants, and bees, and the surveillance of new and emerging pests and diseases.” Additionally, there is a marine protection agency contributing to these efforts.

In England, the Environment Agency, established in 1996, is the primary body responsible for environmental health. Its duties include reducing industrial emissions, creating cleaner rivers and bathing waters, and mitigating the impacts of climate change. The Environment Agency’s EA2025 plan, produced in 2020, outlines three main priorities: “a nation resilient to climate change; healthy air, land and water; and green growth and a sustainable future.” In Scotland, similar responsibilities are handled by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency; in Wales, by Natural Resources Wales; and in Northern Ireland, by the Environment Protection Agency. These agencies are all executive bodies. In England, additional environmental actions are often spearheaded by mayors, such as the ultra-low emission zone extended to all of London in August 2023. Local authorities also take initiatives, including the adoption of low-traffic neighborhoods, though these sometimes face local opposition.

Despite the clear mandates of these agencies and their principled approaches (as detailed in the citation for England), there are frequent criticisms of insufficient enforcement, particularly regarding sewage discharges by water companies. These issues are partly due to legacy infrastructure not designed to separate rainwater from sewage, as well as inadequate investment by utilities. In the last two years, the number of sewage discharge incidents has increased, leading to public outcry. A BBC report noted a daily average of 825 sewage releases in 2022, with water companies in England discharging sewage for a total of 1.75 million hours.

The Environment Agency and OFWAT, the regulator of water companies, have been accused of neglecting their regulatory duties. The 2021 Environment Act led to the creation of a new Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) at the end of 2021, which published stricter enforcement policies in June 2022. In response to public complaints, the OEP “identified possible failures to comply with environmental law by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the Environment Agency, and OFWAT in relation to the regulation of combined sewer overflows” in September 2023, although these agencies dispute the findings.

While the OEP is still in its early stages, it is expected to enhance the quality of environmental health protection. However, some of its initial findings highlight implementation challenges in achieving the ambitious objectives and targets central to government policy.

Effective Ecosystem and Biodiversity Preservation

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to Preserving
Ecosystems and
Protecting
Biodiversity
Score: 9

A biodiversity action plan was published in 1993 in response to the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity agreed upon in Rio de Janeiro. This plan focused on domestic actions but also included a section on the UK's overseas responsibilities. Biodiversity management has since become a devolved competence, with central government responsible for England. Natural England, created by an act of Parliament in 2006 and employing 2,000 staff, is a non-departmental executive agency with the remit "to help conserve, enhance, and manage the natural environment for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development." A 25-year environment plan was produced in 2018, followed by the 2021 Environment Act, which imposes a duty on all public authorities to tailor policies to conserve and enhance biodiversity. The 2021 Act was strongly praised by Tony Juniper, Chair of Natural England, who stated, "In years to come, we might well look back on November 2021 as a turning point in our relationship with nature."

Equivalent bodies exist for Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, with coordination and work on UK-wide challenges assured by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). The JNCC serves as the statutory adviser to the government and devolved administrations on UK and international nature conservation. Its work aims to maintain and enrich biological diversity, conserve geological features, and sustain natural systems. In May 2023, the JNCC launched a strategy document titled "Together for Nature - 2023 – 2030," outlining plans for a science-based approach to biodiversity and "to integrate the value of nature into decision-making by mainstreaming nature recovery into social and economic policy areas."

Following the 25-year environment plan, a list of targets was published in February 2023 under the heading "thriving plants and wildlife." These targets include reversing the loss of marine biodiversity and, where practicable, restoring it; protecting more sites; fostering the sustainability of key species; and ensuring seafloor habitats are productive and extensive enough to support healthy, sustainable ecosystems. On land, targets include boosting protected sites, recovering threatened, iconic, or economically important species of

animals, plants, and fungi, and preventing human-induced extinction or loss of known threatened species where possible. Additionally, there are goals to increase woodland and create or restore 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside the protected site network. Central government and devolved administrations provide guidance on biodiversity duties and required actions.

An example of local action translating these goals into practice is the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, a prosperous area of West London. Despite its dense population, the borough aims to protect biodiversity and support the movement of species as part of a Nature Recovery Network. It plans to enhance the management of sites important for nature conservation and make “biodiversity net gain” an integral part of its planning process.

Effective Contributions to Global Environmental Protection

Policy Efforts
and Commitment
to a Global
Environmental
Policy
Score: 9

Since the 1990s, the United Kingdom has been a leading advocate for global environmental sustainability. The UK ratified the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, reaffirming its commitment at the Marrakech COP22 summit in November 2016. Successive governments have consistently pursued goals related to environmental protection and reducing carbon emissions.

In November 2021, the UK hosted the COP26 climate negotiations in Glasgow, positioning itself as a leading voice on the global stage. The UK highlighted its ambitious actions aimed at achieving “net zero” emissions ahead of many other nations. However, the difficult negotiations with the 196 participating nations led to mixed results, with agreements in some areas but insufficient progress to meet the goals set in the Paris Climate Accord. Moreover, decisions in 2023 to delay some interim net zero targets due to concerns about consumer cost burdens may have undermined the UK’s moral stance.

The international aid budget includes funding for “clean energy” projects, and the UK supported the implementation of the “loss and damage fund” agreed upon at COP 28 in Dubai, pledging £60 million. Other aid commitments include £316 million for innovative projects worldwide to accelerate the global transition to renewables and £40 million for 64 clean energy projects across Africa, South Asia, and the Indo-Pacific, focusing on local solutions for critical technologies like energy storage, smart grids, and next-generation solar.

The UK has also recently published a National Data Strategy with an objective to support data foundations and improve the quality and availability of data internationally.

In November 2023, the UK hosted the Global Food Security Summit in partnership with the United Arab Emirates and Somalia. It also published a white paper titled “International Development in a Contested World: Ending Extreme Poverty and Tackling Climate Change,” signaling a new approach. This ambitious strategy highlights how UK efforts will contribute to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a significant focus on global environmental protection. The strategy states that “the goal of UK international development is to end extreme poverty and tackle climate change and biodiversity loss.”

While broadly welcoming the new approach, Professor Melissa Leach, Director of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, urged the government to stick to its long-term commitments and restore the UK’s funding of 0.7% of GDP by proposing a timeline and criteria for doing so. She also praises “the emphasis on harnessing the diversity of science, technology and innovation and on new ways of mobilizing development finance.”

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