Part 1: Sustainable Development Goal 12

Sustainable consumption and production

Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) might be expected to be a significant part of the UK's national conversation. It has the world's fifth largest economy, relatively high levels of per capita income and wealth, a heavy reliance on international trade and a unique status as the founder of the industrial revolution – all of which have left a large mark on the planet. Yet the UK Government, the devolved administrations and business very rarely refer to SCP, nor have they engaged with the UN's 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production patterns.

There have, however, been large shifts in the past quarter century, particularly on greenhouse gas emissions, which have begun to move the UK towards more sustainable consumption and production patterns. This is despite economic and population growth which tend to drive up overall consumption. These changes now need to be sustained, accelerated and broadened to bring the UK's consumption of natural resources to sustainable levels by 2030.

### Performance rating

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<tr>
<th>Sustainable Development Goal Target</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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<tr>
<td>12.1 Implement the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns, all countries taking action, with developed countries taking the lead, taking into account the development and capabilities of developing countries</td>
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<td>12.2 By 2030, achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources</td>
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<td>12.3 By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses</td>
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<td>12.4 By 2020, achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle, in accordance with agreed international frameworks, and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil in order to minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment</td>
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<td>12.5 By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse</td>
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<td>12.6 Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle</td>
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<td>12.7 Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities</td>
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<td>12.8 By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature</td>
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<td>12.a Support developing countries to strengthen their scientific and technological capacity to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production</td>
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<td>12.b Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products</td>
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<td>12.c Rationalize inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption by removing market distortions, in accordance with national circumstances, including by restructuring taxation and phasing out those harmful subsidies, where they exist, to reflect their environmental impacts, taking fully into account the specific needs and conditions of developing countries and minimizing the possible adverse impacts on their development in a manner that protects the poor and the affected communities</td>
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Key Findings

1. UK demand for natural resources has fallen significantly. But given the state of the environment within the UK (particularly biodiversity loss) plus the global impacts of UK consumption, demand is not yet at sustainable levels.

2. The Government’s commitment to double resource productivity by 2050 is a step in the right direction, giving broad support to SCP, but it only implies modest declines in natural resource consumption.

3. Positives include large increases in recycling rates for municipal waste and big reductions in quantities of hazardous waste, releases of toxic metals and landfilling biodegradable municipal waste. These declines need to continue – in some cases they have paused.

4. Transitioning to SCP requires more action on public procurement and for companies to consistently report about their sustainability performance.

5. Growing consumer awareness of sustainability issues has not yet delivered the required changes in behaviour.

6. UK action on greenhouse gas emissions is an exemplar for SCP.

Performance and progress

The UK Government, devolved administrations and business rarely refer to SCP, nor have they engaged with the UN’s 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production patterns (Target 12.1). But while the UK largely ignores the term ‘SCP’, there are positive signs. There is growing awareness of the need for waste reduction (especially landfilled waste), efficient resource use, increased recycling and energy recovery and moving towards closed-loop production and a circular economy. Companies with international supply chains are increasingly concerned about the sustainability of key natural resources and labour conditions.

As a densely populated, highly industrialised and urbanised nation, the UK has long had to deal with pollution and over-exploitation of natural resources within its borders. Key legislation and policy areas have been agriculture and fisheries, energy and climate change, forestry, nature conservation, waste and pollution controls, regulation of the water and energy industries and land use planning.

There has been progress. Natural resource demand has been falling while the economy and population have grown. The UK’s material footprint – the total quantity of raw materials extracted globally to support UK consumption – fell from a peak of 890m tonnes in 2001 (15.1 tonnes per person) to 659m tonnes (10.3 tonnes pp) in 2013 – a 31% reduction in per capita consumption (Target 12.2). Within the UK, the annual total quantity of biomass extracted (mainly by farming, forestry and fisheries) has been stable while minerals extraction fell by 27% between 2005-2014. Water abstractions in England reduced by 28% from 2000–2016. Yet the UK still has serious problems of pollution and ongoing biodiversity loss.
Our emissions and global raw material demand does further environmental damage worldwide. The progress achieved has not reached the level of ambition needed to achieve SCP.

UK action on greenhouse gas emissions is an exemplar for national engagement with SCP and there are significant SCP-related commitments in other policy areas. The UK Government has an overarching ambition for the current generation “to be the first...to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.” This implies the sustainable management of natural resources. But it has not yet articulated how this “better state” will be measured nor the date for its achievement.

Government recently published two SCP-relevant strategies, A Green Future: Our 25-year plan to improve the environment and The Clean Growth Strategy. These include a commitment to double resource productivity by 2050, in line with existing trends. If GDP growth averages 2% a year then achieving this would imply an 8% reduction in total resource consumption from current levels. If annual GDP growth averages 1.5%, then by 2050 total resource consumption would be 21% lower than in 2018. The Government has not explained how reductions on this scale represent sustainable levels of natural resource consumption. Nor has it set out how this commitment will be met, and how progress will be measured.

These two documents set out, or restate, other SCP-related national targets. For food and drink consumed within the UK, there are voluntary industry-government agreements to reduce by 20%, between 2015 and 2025:

- The total quantity of resources required
- Per capita levels of food waste
- The greenhouse gas intensity of food and drink

While welcome, this falls short of Target 12.3 to halve per capita global retail and consumer food waste by 2030. The Government is ‘working towards’ no food waste going into landfill by 2030. Total UK food waste (post farm gate) is estimated to have fallen by 12% between 2007 and 2012; a more rapid decline is needed over the coming decade to achieve Target 12.3.

The Government now aims for the UK to produce zero avoidable waste of all kinds by 2050 and zero avoidable plastic waste in 2042. There is wide scope for debate around what constitutes ‘avoidable’, much of it economic. In the near term, there is an EU target for 50% of household waste to be recycled by 2020. Household recycling rates have remained at around 44% since 2012 after climbing during the 2000s. (Target 12.5).

Total tonnages of waste generated in the UK have been rising – by 4.6% between 2012-2014. Total wastes generated by households have been stable while waste from commerce and industry has fallen slightly. Rising waste from construction, demolition and mineral excavation lies behind the overall increase, although there are high recycling rates of around 90% for construction and demolition waste.

There are positives. UK annual hazardous waste arisings fell by 28% between 2004-2014 and emissions of toxic heavy metal have plummeted since 1990 (Target 12.4). The amount of biodegradable municipal waste (BMW) disposed in landfill (largely waste food, paper and cardboard which rot to produce methane) also fell by almost 80% between 1995-2015 but there was a small increase in landfilled BMW the following year.
Government’s commitment to producing a new Resources and Waste Strategy in 2018 is an important opportunity to go beyond broad ambitions and flesh out the policies required to respond to SDG12.

On company reporting (Target 12.6), regulatory requirements for major UK businesses to report regularly and in depth on their wider sustainability performance are weak. However, pressure is growing from investors and other stakeholders for better voluntary reporting.

Some policy and legislation in the UK and the devolved administrations aims to encourage public procurement of sustainable products and services (Target 12.7). With government spending accounting for some 40% of GDP, this matters for SCP. Yet here too, what is in place falls short of ensuring public procurement is a driving force for shifting to SCP.

As for ensuring citizens have the awareness required for sustainable lifestyles (Target 12.8), there are no government campaigns nor any focussed SCP content in national school curricula. There is a wide awareness of sustainability issues resulting mainly from school education, media coverage and campaigning by civil society groups, but this has not yet led to the required changes in consumption. There are also concerns about people, especially children, becoming increasingly disconnected from nature as they spend more and more time indoors looking at screens. An experience-based appreciation of nature can help underpin engagement with SCP.

**Synergies and coherence issues**

SDG12 has linkages to all the others, particularly SDGs 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14 and 15.

Government, business and society prioritise economic growth (SDG8), measured by GDP, and this (plus a growing UK population) implies ever-increasing production and consumption. Decoupling this from rising environmental damage is challenging. Production and consumption growth have contributed enormously to human wellbeing and progress – but not everywhere, in every way and for everyone (SDG 10). The UK’s obesity epidemic is an example of this; high levels of inequality in income, wealth, health and life chances are another.

**Local to international dimensions**

The UK relies on a global supply chain to meet its demand for goods and services. This has negative impacts internationally including carbon emissions from transportation, deforestation and mineral extraction, but it can also have positive impacts including technology transfer, capacity building and improved working conditions. Shifting business practices and growing consumer awareness are helping reduce the negative impacts of international supply chains. UK businesses operating at a global scale also have a significant role to play in supporting UK SMEs to switch to more sustainable practices as they engage them as suppliers, or consumers. However the need to reduce consumption levels overall requires more concerted effort from government, business and consumers alike.
Recommended actions

1. Stakeholders and the Government should work to establish what SCP means for the UK in the context of SDG12 and set out a position by the end of 2020

2. This position on SCP should state what is regarded as sustainable levels of consumption for critical natural resources such as freshwater, land, fisheries, timber and fibre in the UK and global contexts. The forthcoming Resources and Waste Strategy should be a step towards this. Within this, the Government should explain how it will achieve and measure progress on its goal to double resource productivity by 2050, with scope to raise ambitions in line with SDG12

3. To move towards SCP, stronger government support is required for a shift towards a circular economy which reduces waste generation and reuses, recycles and recovers. This requires further regulation on some issues (eg single use plastics), better measurement of material flows, more incentives, research and development and sustainable public procurement

4. All large companies should be required to report comprehensively on their sustainability impacts in line with the SDGs

5. Public awareness of the global impacts of consumption should be raised, with retailers and producers taking a lead. Connecting people, especially schoolchildren, to nature should underpin this

Case study

Climate Change Act 2008

SDG TARGETS: 12.2, 13.2

UK policy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is an example of broad, effective action to enable a shift to sustainable consumption and production. It aims to address the climate change challenge through deep reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The UK has a legislation-backed target (the Climate Change Act 2008) for an 80% emissions reduction between 1990 and 2050. Successive five-year carbon budgets set out the trajectory of decline. Reductions of this speed and scale are required if the UK is to contribute its fair share to reducing global climate change risks, in line with the Paris Agreement.

This legislation, and the associated policy and infrastructure investment, shape a very wide range of consumption and production activities and give some confidence to producers and consumers that there is a long-term commitment to action. It is often praised for the cross-party nature of the Act and the fact that it is not challenged by five-year electoral cycles. It encourages an increase of the efficiency with which energy and resources of all kinds are used.

The UK does not yet have all the policies and programmes in place required to achieve its emissions reduction target, but at least it has a robust mechanism to identify and monitor the shortfall (the Climate Change Committee).

www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/27/contents
Endnotes

1 ONS. (2016). UK environmental accounts: How much material is the UK consuming? [Released 29 Feb 2016]
2 Ibid.
5 HM Government. (2018). A green future: Our 25 year plan to improve the environment. (pp. 4-5)
6 Ibid.
8 WRAP. (2014). UK food waste – historical changes and how amounts might be influenced in the future.
11 Ibid.
14 Defra (2018), op.cit.