

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: [Sustainable Development Goals](#), HC 337

Monday 25 April 2016

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Members present: Stephen Twigg (Chair); Fiona Bruce; Dr Lisa Cameron; Stephen Doughty; Pauline Latham; Jeremy Lefroy; Wendy Morton

Questions 194-250

Witnesses: ***Rt Hon Mr Oliver Letwin MP***, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Cabinet Office, gave evidence.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome everyone to this session on our inquiry into the implementation of the sustainable development goals. Minister, you are very welcome. Thank you for joining us here this afternoon. I am going to invite Jeremy Lefroy to kick off with the first question.

Q194 Jeremy Lefroy: Good morning, Minister. Given that the SDGs are universal goals and targets, could you explain to us in some detail how the Government are preparing to respond to the goals in the UK, so the implementation of the goals in the UK itself?

Mr Letwin: It may help if I begin by pointing out what I suspect the Committee already fully understands, but it will help to explain everything else I am going to say if I rehearse this. If you go through the targets that underlie the goals what you see is a mixture. Some of them are targets that the UK cannot help to advance by taking domestic action because we are already there. To give you an example, on 1.1, the very first one—to eradicate extreme poverty, defined as less than \$1.25 per day, by 2030—manifestly, we cannot do something domestically to advance that target being achieved globally because everyone in the UK, mercifully, is well above that level. In those cases what we have to do is to take all the actions that we are trying to take externally to help other countries achieve that universal goal.

There are other cases, however, in which, to one degree or another, the achievement of the target for the world as a whole can be advanced by us taking some action. Of course we start at a different level in different cases from other countries, more or less advanced than given other countries, but where we are not already contributing maximally we can take steps that will help to contribute. Evidently, even then we are only a small part of the world and the achievement of the target, which is a global concern, will

nevertheless require very considerable action in every case. As I went through them, I was very struck by the extent to which it is true in every single case that there will be a very large amount of action required in various parts of the world to which we can contribute through our international programmes. There are, as I say, quite a number in which we can contribute domestically as well.

Where we can contribute domestically obviously our aim and that of successive Governments between now and 2030 should be to do so. Having analysed the various targets and our programme, I am very convinced that we can make progress in relation to each of them where the UK can contribute domestically as a result of the actions we are intending to take because of our current Government's programme. I hope that will be true in succeeding Governments through to 2030.

It may help if I say right at the beginning that having listened to the conversation about these goals since the Prime Minister first took action to try to promote them internationally, and not least through the line of inquiry of the Committee when it interviewed Justine Greening not long ago, we have had various discussions internally, and have come to the conclusion that it would make sense for us to produce a report in due course outlining our approach, both internationally and domestically. That will help to identify more specifically what we are intending to do in both domains over the course of this Parliament to advance the achievement of the targets.

Thereafter we would want to report at appropriate intervals, either to the Committee or to Parliament as a whole, on how we were doing. I have been discussing with Justine how we can establish mechanisms that will enable us to track that within the Government. Obviously a large part of that will be the efforts that principally DFID and the Foreign Office are taking externally, but another part will be a wide range of Government Departments that are involved in the actions that are needed in order to advance on a domestic front. We will collate that and be ready to report on it at appropriate intervals.

Q195 Jeremy Lefroy: If I could just follow up, perhaps you could give an example of where we can take action domestically that will both help us achieve a sustainable development goal, or part of it, domestically but that would also have a strong impact internationally.

Mr Letwin: Yes, of course. I should say this is a slightly miniscule-print version of 169 targets. I have been through them, marking them "M" for where we have already done as a country what would be needed to contribute, and therefore cannot do further things, and "W" where there is work in progress. My eye alights on target 1.5 as a "W". That says, "By 2030 build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations, and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters." As some members of this Committee may be aware, I spend a good deal of my own time involved in trying to build the resilience of the UK to environmental and other disasters, scenarios and shocks. Of course it is the poor and the vulnerable who are most exposed to those. Just as internationally those countries that are least developed suffer the worst when there is a natural disaster, so within the UK if you are very well off you can sustain problems that are more difficult to sustain if you have less.

We are taking a whole series of steps ranging from, for example, the creation of the Flood Re arrangement to ensure that people are properly insured at affordable rates against flooding. We have a vast programme of investment in protection against the natural problems arising from flooding and through a series of steps to make sure that the nation is better co-ordinated to deal with issues of recovery from one kind of difficulty or another. Indeed, it is also through a series of steps to try to make sure that our public health system is the best able to cope with things like Ebola, where we experienced some very severe tests of our system that, on the whole, withstood that well, but it has alerted us to the need to do better yet to track diseases as they spread around the world. Of course that is a classic case where there was a huge amount of effort put in to trying to cure it in west Africa. I myself was involved in Sierra Leone, and obviously other countries were helping out in Guinea. We have a considerable track record of being able to deal with these things but it is very far from perfect and we need to continue our efforts in that respect. As I say that is just one; just on this first page, I see five of the targets that fall into that category and another 10 or so that do not. So it goes on, page after page.

Q196 Mrs Grant: In December you told the Environmental Audit Committee that in the UK we do not have very much difficulty in meeting the goals. Having seen the new indicators that are going forward for adoption at the UN, do you still believe this to be the case?

Mr Letwin: Yes. We have to distinguish between goals, targets and indicators. The indicators are the responsibility of the UN to collect globally and of UN regions to collect regionally. Clearly that will be a useful exercise in monitoring how the world is progressing. Our focus has to be on the targets, which are the means by which the international community has agreed that it will pursue the goals. We are certainly going to make very considerable progress domestically over the next few years in helping the world to achieve the targets and hence helping the world to achieve the goals. I do not see, for example, any contradictions at all between our current programme and our desire to these goals realised and these targets met across the world. I do still take that view.

As the targets have been developed, it has become clearer which areas we should focus on both internationally and domestically for the purpose of assisting the world to meet the goals.

Q197 Mrs Grant: In that respect, could you say something about goal 12, which is on sustainable consumption and production patterns?

Mr Letwin: That is an extremely interesting one, in the sense that, if we look at the targets that underlie that, some of them—12.1 is an interesting case with the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production patterns—specifically relate to the developed countries taking a lead in order to help the underdeveloped and less developed world make progress, which clearly we are doing through our aid programme and otherwise.

If you come to 12.2, that is a classic case of the other kind. It says that we must by 2030 achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources. Clearly that is a very significant part of the overall programme domestically that this Government are pursuing. For example, as we speak, Liz Truss is developing the 25-year natural

environment plan for the UK, which I hope will be a matter of considerable political consensus and therefore can be carried through over 25 years where manifestly there will be changes in Government. Of course I am not going to say that there will ever be a change in Government but I do recognise that there might be sometime in the future, and I hope that can become an absolutely cross-party consensus that we follow, as we are with the Climate Change Act, which is another case in point.

These long-term plans to improve the management of our natural resources, to reduce emissions, to ensure that we slow the water cycle, to encourage biodiversity and so forth have on the whole in our system been matters of consensus, and need to be, and need to be pursued very persistently. You cannot achieve results overnight but we can make very substantial progress domestically towards them. We would need to do so quite regardless of these goals, but by doing so we are making a contribution to the whole world achieving the goals.

Q198 Mrs Grant: Finally, very briefly, could you explain how the Government are going to ensure that no one is going to be left behind?

Mr Letwin: That is a challenge to do very briefly because it is quite a large and important subject, to put it mildly. It is probably the most important subject in many ways. Clearly by the standards of the world as a whole the people least fortunate in our country are relatively fortunate. We are dealing with a world in which there are hundreds of millions of people who are living in conditions that, thank goodness, nobody in Britain lives in.

Nevertheless, we are all extraordinarily conscious that probably the biggest problem we face as a country is that there are considerable numbers of people who are left behind in the sense that they are not in the mainstream. The Troubled Families programme and the whole of the rest of what we call the life chances agenda is about trying to lift people out of those conditions and that sort of life and into the mainstream, and to get people who, in the long term, have been unemployed or whose families have been workless into work. It is the great route out of poverty, and to bring people out of conditions of poor education, by providing proper education, proper training and access to further and higher education for people that have traditionally been—and when I say “traditionally”, I mean over some generations in some cases—excluded from those opportunities.

For families where people that have been trapped in cycles of dependency on drugs and alcohol, and being involved in crime and disorder, it is about bringing them into the mainstream and out of those conditions. Nothing could be more important, and I think we would all agree that is incredibly important quite regardless of these goals, but it does also contribute to the achievement of these goals.

I do not think there is any one part of the Government’s programme that is the thing that will do this but as a whole what we are trying to do is exactly that. I hope that again is something that will be sustained across many different Governments. There may be people with differing agendas and differing views about how best to achieve that as we move through time between now and 2030. I very much doubt that there will be a British Government that does not see that as at least one of its most important goals, if not, at any given time, the most important goal.

Q199 Chair: Let me just pursue that a bit further with you, because I absolutely agree with you that the “leave no one behind” agenda is crucial for the success of the sustainable development goals, and we know, and the OECD has reminded us, that income inequality in the UK has been well above the OECD average for at least 30 years, so under Governments of both main parties and the coalition Government. Can you tell us whether the sustainable development goals are going to make any difference to the Government’s strategy for tackling inequality in our own country?

Mr Letwin: It is not a case of the goals making a difference. It is a case of the Government’s agenda trying to make a difference to the achievement of the goals. You are right, of course, that relatively high levels of inequality compared with some other sophisticated, highly developed countries has been an issue for the British Governments for a long time. I am delighted that recently the Gini coefficient has been getting bit better; it is slow but it is happening. Our view is that by doing the various things that I was describing, in particular by improving access to high-quality education and training and moving people out of conditions in life that I was describing and into work, we can substantially further reduce inequality. The aspect of that that matters to me, and, Chair, probably to you too, is not pulling the top down but pulling the bottom up.

Q200 Chair: When the SDGs were being developed, obviously the UK and our Prime Minister played a very big role in the negotiations on the content of the sustainable development goals. Presumably the Government did some kind of impact assessment or initial mapping of how the domestic implementation of the SDGs would work for us. Can you explain a little bit about what sorts of assessments were done, which Departments were involved and the sorts of results that those assessments produced?

Mr Letwin: It is slightly the other way around. We established what is now our programme during the latter stages of the last Parliament when, like other parties, we were working on the manifesto. In the course of that it became clear that the crux of the domestic agenda, as far as we were concerned, was this question of life chances, and that has been playing itself out and is deeply and coherently related to doing what we can domestically to further the achievement of these goals. We identified at a very early stage that the efforts the Prime Minister was then making to promote these goals multilaterally were entirely consistent with what we would try, if we were elected as a Government, to pursue in Government domestically.

Of course also, even more so, it was dependent on the rich world helping the poor world to get richer and to do so in a way that is ecologically sustainable and consistent with the other things that the goals quite rightly identify, ranging from biodiversity to equality of various other kinds: trying to improve the condition of women and so on. Therefore, we saw this as quite naturally fitting both our international development agenda and our domestic agenda.

Since the discussions that I mentioned when I answered Mr Lefroy’s question, the Prime Minister has asked to be personally involved in the development of the report that I was referring to, which we will produce in due course to identify our approach in both domains. He is taking a personal interest in that; in my experience, that ensures, as many members of the Committee who have been Ministers will recognise, that there is quite a lot of interest around Whitehall from all the Departments.

Q201 Fiona Bruce: In December you said we have to do much more in this country than just achieve these goals, and that you were trying to do more than that. You said, “We are trying to make a contribution as a rich country, for example, to carbon reduction or indeed to marine ecology around the world through our overseas territories.” We wondered if you could explain in a little more detail the Government’s ambition for going beyond the goals and what that means for the Government’s policies in terms of setting the national SDG indicators.

Mr Letwin: I would separate the two. The indicators, as I was saying a little while ago, are not a matter for individual nations. Quite rightly the whole structure of this has been designed globally so that the goals are agreed globally, the targets are agreed globally and the indicators are being set and monitored globally and regionally. Of course, I am very happy to answer the first part of that. Let me give you the example of the biodiversity of the seas and the preservation of the integrity of the ecology of the oceans. Forgive me if there are members of the Committee who are bored by these issues, but for those of us who are concerned about global environmental issues as opposed to global prosperity only, there is probably nothing more important than the condition of the seas. It is true to say that the amount of attention that had been focused on carbon reduction and the prevention of some of the worst effects of greenhouse gas emissions were much further advanced globally than the protection of the seas until very recently. We began to be concerned that that agenda on the protection of the seas simply was not been taken forward globally with anything like sufficient pace. At more or less the same time, the Obama administration came to the same conclusion in the States. Between us—and it basically is the two of us at the moment, and I hope others will join—we have now taken monumental steps forward in protecting the seas.

The Conservative manifesto included a commitment to establishing a blue belt, which began with the British Indian Ocean territories but we have now moved on. I hope by the end of the year we will be able to designate the very large oceanic area around the Pitcairn Islands. We have made a decision to proceed also with 50% exclusion around Ascension Island, and we have developed a whole new portfolio of devices for monitoring. We are now moving on to discussion with a number of other overseas territories. By fluke of history our overseas territories have an enormous expanse of the oceans around them, so we have the opportunity, alongside the Americans who, as I say, are also doing the same thing, to make a fantastic difference for the whole world at relatively modest cost, and I hope, because of designing these things relatively sensitively, without compromising the ability of the locals to pursue their livelihoods. That is a very good example of how we can lead a debate, take action directly, join forces with other most relevant countries and change the prospects for the world as a whole.

Q202 Stephen Doughty: Minister, you also told the Environmental Audit Committee that the goals will be taken forward through departmental plans. Actually, when you look at departmental plans that were published in February the SDGs and the goals are not mentioned in any of them apart from DFID. Can you explain why that is?

Mr Letwin: Yes, and perhaps what I was saying at the beginning will help here. Our view, as I have been saying in response to various questions, is that the programme we are in any case undertaking, which is what is reflected in the departmental plans, will enable the UK to play its part in helping to achieve those targets where things we can do

can make a difference domestically. What I am intending is that the report we produce in due course will go through the departmental plans and the bits and parts of them that are relevant to domestic assistance with the achievement of targets. Everyone will therefore be able crosscheck one against the other.

Q203 Stephen Doughty: Do you not think it would have been better to have had some mention in the departmental plans? Obviously I appreciate what you are saying: that it is somehow implicit and it is all fine and all on track. However, if other Government Departments, which is where this is crucial for, particularly on domestic agendas, do not feel in some way that they are accountable for or responsible for the SDGs even to the level of putting a line in their reports, is that not a problem? Would it be easier just to put a reference in there, in the way that we do, for example, with the face of bills, responding to the European Convention on Human Rights and things like that? This is an important global agreement. Would it not be better to have it in the plans?

Mr Letwin: No, I do not think it is necessary to have it in the plans in the sense that we made a decision at the beginning of the Parliament to have a single departmental plan that governed what each Department was expected to do across the Parliament. That is what is expected to do. If by doing those things we are doing, as I think we will be able to demonstrate in the report I am talking about, what Britain can sensibly do in this period to advance domestically towards the world advancing towards the targets by 2030, Departments will be under a compulsion to do that through those single departmental plans, and that is the right process. What we do need to do is to make sure that we monitor carefully not just the achievement of the single departmental plans but the achievement of those parts of them that the report will show are needed in order to contribute to the goals, so that we are able, when reporting to the UN as a whole, to demonstrate that as a country, and we will do that.

Q204 Stephen Doughty: Are you absolutely confident that if, for example, we were to have a relevant permanent secretary or a DG in from a particular Department before us today and we asked them, “What are you doing on the SDGs?” they would be able to come up with a coherent response? Do you think there is clear knowledge and awareness at the senior and strategic level in all the relevant Government Departments?

Mr Letwin: What I am trying to say is that I do not think that they need to concern themselves with the question of whether what they are doing is achieving the SDGs. What they need to concern themselves with is the question of whether what they are doing is achieving the single departmental plans. We need to make sure that those parts of the single departmental plans that need to be achieved in order to contribute in the way we will demonstrate to the Committee and others in order to play our part domestically in achieving the targets are being achieved. We will be accountable to you and others for that.

Q205 Stephen Doughty: You will look out for them. They need not worry themselves.

Mr Letwin: They need to worry themselves about doing the things; we need to account to you for whether those things amount to achieving our part of the achievement of the targets.

Q206 Chair: There were lots of eyebrows raised during that; everyone's hands started to come up. Who is the "we" in that answer? Is it you and the Secretary of State for International Development?

Mr Letwin: This is an interesting question, of course, in the sense that she is primarily responsible in the UK Government for our contribution to achieving the global goals and the targets that underlie them. Obviously, much of the biggest part of that is the huge effort that we are making internationally to help other countries that have huge challenges before them to achieve what we all hope they will achieve.

Obviously, in order to get the domestic Departments to play their full part in doing the things that we can do domestically to achieve those, DFID needs the co-ordinating help of the centre of Government to make sure that people are doing those things. As a matter of fact, I shall anyway be sacked by the Prime Minister in the not too distant future if it turns out we have Departments that I find are not achieving those goals and I have not already alerted him to that. That is part of our task in the Cabinet Office anyway. This simply reinforces that. Therefore, Justine and I are clear that we have to work absolutely hand in glove on this.

Q207 Chair: Surely it is important, though, that the domestic Departments own the SDGs that are relevant to them. I asked previously about income inequality; surely it is important that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions understands that, as well as the manifesto and as well as the departmental plan, there is an international obligation under the sustainable development goals.

Mr Letwin: First of all, it is not just the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Our approach to lifting people out of the conditions of life I was describing involves DCLG, DfE very fundamentally, BIS, the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and DWP.

Q208 Chair: Surely it is important that all of those Secretaries of State know that this is a goal that we have signed up to.

Mr Letwin: They certainly know that it is a goal that we have signed up to, but what is important is that they collectively through our task forces and individually as departmental heads are pursuing the agenda that we are pursuing to try to address that issue and playing their part in that. As the whole of our agenda is trying to achieve the things that I believe are most necessary for us to achieve domestically in order to contribute to the achievement of the targets, if we can manage to hold them to that we will be achieving the other. As I say, it is up to the Cabinet Office then, working with Justine, to be accountable to you and making sure that you can see transparently how one is connected to the other.

Q209 Stephen Doughty: I wanted to press you on this, Minister. If you look at other important international treaties or standards that we have signed up to, for example human rights ordinances, the Paris climate change targets, anticorruption initiatives globally, financial regulations and so on and so forth, I would normally expect to see, and indeed have seen in departmental strategies and plans very clear reference to, their role and responsibility in meeting those. It does seem a little bit odd, given this is such an important agenda for the

Government, that this is not specifically referenced in individual departmental plans. Otherwise they might well trust on the centre to be looking over their shoulder all the time to make sure they are delivering it. It does seem a little bit odd compared to the precedent set with other international agreements.

Mr Letwin: No, that argument works exactly the other way around. One of the international agreements that matters most to me and to this Government is the Paris agreement on climate change. Clearly in order for the UK to be able to meet the domestic corollary of that, which is the fulfilment of our obligations under the Climate Change Act, the Treasury is very fundamental. Obviously DECC is important but equally Defra is, as are the Department for Transport and the Department for Business. Indeed I chair a clean growth committee of Secretaries of State devoted to developing our carbon 4 and carbon 5 plans and so forth.

That is a very deep and important part of government. You will not find, if you look at what the Treasury explicitly is setting out as its task in life, that it is trying to fulfil the Paris agreements. It is trying to do what its domestic agenda requires it to do, which the Chancellor is committed to. That is why he has sponsored, for example, the Levy Control Framework within which DECC seeks to fulfil one part of that agenda. That is the right way to work. We have an international obligation under Paris or here under these goals. We translate that into a set of cross-Government actions, which involve a whole series of Departments, and then the important thing is for the centre to monitor whether we are fulfilling those and to account to Parliament for whether collectively they end up achieving what we need to achieve.

Q210 Fiona Bruce: Do you not think it would be better to facilitate the holding of account of Departments if they actually clarified which SDGs they were seeking to address rather than leaving it to Committees like ours to waste time fishing about in departmental plans and trying to work out which SDGs that particular Department is seeking to achieve? Secondly, would it not also be better in terms of giving a comprehensive overview of how all the SDGs are being covered by our Government?

Mr Letwin: I agree with you about the second entirely. The report I am talking about precisely will aim to give a comprehensive overview of how the Government as a whole is seeking to do its part in the world in achieving these goals and targets. It is exactly what we will try to do. That means that you will not need to fish about, as you put it, and look for which things are being done by which Department, because we will set that out in this report. That is exactly what I am saying. I quite agree with you that you should not have the job of fishing around. We should present to you very clearly the structure now that we have all the targets in place, identify those where Britain's contribution is on the international side exclusively and be clear about what we are doing to play our part in realising those. We must identify those where the domestic agenda is also involved and make it clear which parts of which things that are being done by which Departments under our programme will contribute to the domestic fulfilment of those targets. You will see it all laid out in front of you.

Q211 Fiona Bruce: It almost seems slightly to be the wrong way round, as though instead of the Departments looking at the SDGs and saying, "What are we going to fulfil?"

their plans will be set and then later you will look at those plans and say, “Which of these fit into the SDGs?”

Mr Letwin: You need to recognise the Government’s programme was established as a result of a great deal of work at the end of the last Parliament when the targets did not exist. However, we are absolutely convinced that our activities on a domestic front will contribute to the achievement of the target. You will be able to judge this because we will lay it out, and then if you take a view that there is some area domestically in which we should be doing more than we are doing to help fulfil a target, you will say so. That is the right relationship between Government and Parliament.

Q212 Pauline Latham: You may feel that you have answered part of this question, but you said last year in relation to the SDGs that you were the person most likely to be sacked if it all went wrong. Since then it has all been transferred to DFID. Can you explain how and why this decision was made and who had the final sign-off on the decision? Do you believe that the Secretary of State for DFID has enough political clout within the Cabinet to be able to make sure that every Department is proactive in implementing those SDGs, and that there is a coherent cross-Government strategy?

Mr Letwin: You need to distinguish between the two sides. In relation to our international efforts, which is an enormous part of this and relates to many of these targets that do not have immediate implications for Britain because of the way they are constructed domestically but do have a huge impact on our international effort, the Secretary of State for International Development clearly always was responsible for that. Then we come to the question of the domestic contribution, and it remains the case that I am the Minister most likely to be sacked if we do not fulfil that. That is one very good reason why Justine and I need to work together on this and are working together on this.

Pauline Latham: If it has all been transferred to DFID—

Mr Letwin: When you say it has all been transferred to DFID—

Pauline Latham: The full burden of co-ordination and implementation of the SDGs both nationally and internationally has been transferred to DFID, has it not? They have responsibility for it; it is not you anymore.

Mr Letwin: Justine will be responsible for going to the UN and explaining our position and so on. She is absolutely responsible in that sense. As I have tried to explain to the Committee, we are going to try to work together to make sure that the domestic part of this agenda is fulfilled. We are going to do that by means of establishing within the Cabinet Office and DFID appropriate mechanisms to enable us to monitor it and then to pursue it. I do not want to overestimate the extent to which I or anyone else at the centre of Government can determine what goes on in Departments, but we will certainly be able to have a considerable influence on those. It is through the single departmental plans that we do that, and that is firmly a responsibility of the centre of Government.

Q213 Pauline Latham: Who actually signed off that decision? Who made that decision that most of it would now be DFID’s responsibility and not the Cabinet Office’s anymore?

Mr Letwin: I do want to correct this misapprehension. There was never a point at which somebody said that the Cabinet Office would be responsible for going to the UN and explaining how Britain was fulfilling its part of the goals. That would never have been a sensible thing to do because clearly it is the International Development Secretary who is going to do that. The Prime Minister is very clear that he wants Government to work together across Government on this, with all sorts of Departments. The way to make that happen domestically is to involve the Cabinet Office, and if and as necessary the Prime Minister himself, which he is more than willing to do, in making sure the Departments do live up to their single departmental plans. That in turn will mean, as we will show, us living up to our domestic part in fulfilling these targets. That is why I am working with Justine hand in glove on it. It is not that there is one person responsible for everything and then another person not responsible for anything. It is that we are working together to make sure that this happens.

Q214 Pauline Latham: Basically you are still in control of national and she is in charge of international, but when somebody has to go to the UN to explain what Britain is doing she will do it for both of you.

Mr Letwin: Correct.

Q215 Wendy Morton: I wanted to follow up, Minister, if I may, on this theme of the role of Departments. Civil society coalition Beyond2015 called on the Government to create an implementation task force chaired by the Prime Minister and co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office to ensure strong leadership and effective co-ordination on the SDG implementation. I wondered if you could explain what mechanism the Government has put in place to ensure we have this effective cross-Government implementation. As part of that, I would like to touch on a recent Westminster Hall debate at which Minister Swayne was present, and we spoke about specific cross-Government working and leaving no one behind involving DFID, DWP and the ONS. I wondered as well how you envisaged that that group would operate and whether you expect more groups to be created.

Mr Letwin: The structure that I have been trying to explain is that the domestic side of this agenda, which is central to our overall agenda, is embedded in the single departmental plans. The method by which we hold Departments to account for that is the construction of the single departmental plans, the monitoring according to the indicators that they put forward from those plans, and by continuous bilateral discussion between the Cabinet Office and individual Departments. Our belief is that by pursuing that agenda, we will be doing what we need to do to contribute domestically to those of the targets where domestic action can contribute to the achievement globally of the targets. I do not want to create some other process because that is the most powerful process that we have in Whitehall. It is through the single departmental plans that we can get some degree of purchase on what individual Departments are doing.

Most of those cases, though, as I have also explained, that are really important involve several different Departments. If you are trying to make sure that people are not left behind and you are trying to make sure that people have reduced inequalities, which are obviously very important parts of these goals and targets, one of the things you will have to do is to construct a system of training, to take just one example, which is really effective. We are doing that through the implementation task force on apprenticeship and

training, and that involves a whole series of Departments. The same is true when you turn to the Troubled Families programme through another task force and so forth.

There are a series of different cross-governmental groupings that are there to make sure that individual Departments can fulfil what is in their single departmental plans by bringing the Departments together where they cannot in fact act alone. There are other cases where a single Department can take action all by itself that is relevant, and then we do not need to have a taskforce. Underlying this, my point is that the centre of Government needs to be active in making sure that the Departments do fulfil their departmental plans with whatever mechanics are necessary to enable them to co-ordinate across Whitehall. That is the only way we can achieve the Government's agenda, and in achieving the Government's agenda we will also be doing domestically what we need to do to further the achievement of these targets.

Q216 Wendy Morton: To follow up on that, as we know not only are the SDGs universal but many of the individual ones, say women and girls, will cut across many different Departments even if you are just looking at one project. You have got your departmental plans but if there was something more specific, would someone from each of those Departments physically come together to discuss the implementation of that other plan and how it links in with the SDGs? I am concerned that each individual Department is working individually as a silo when all of this is—and I appreciate it is early days—linked together. How do we make sure that all bits of Government come together to implement the SDGs when they need to?

Mr Letwin: Each of the Departments, in achieving important parts of our programme, or if you like, because they amount to the same, important elements of these targets that Britain domestically can contribute to the achievement of as opposed to internationally, is not acting a silo. Let me take the case of modern slavery or FGM, which are classic cases where the lead has been taken by the Home Office but a considerable number of other Departments have had to play a very important role in that. Your next-door neighbour will fully recognise that the Minister of Justice is very fully involved in that. The way in which we have co-ordinated that work and ensured a range of other Departments are also involved in it is through the National Security Council.

We have a series of different mechanisms for bringing together Departments to achieve particular aspects of our overall strategy. In this report that I am talking about we will set out, first of all, which of the targets we think domestic action can contribute towards. Secondly, we will set out which Departments are involved in doing that. Third, we will set out how that relates to their departmental plans, and finally we will certainly sketch, if it is helpful to the Committee, how we are bringing those Departments together in particular cases.

Q217 Chair: All of that will be in the report that you referred in your first answer, which you said would be published in due course. Can you give a little bit more detail on that?

Mr Letwin: No, I cannot give you a date. I had hoped maybe I could but I cannot. I do not know how long it will take us to do, but we will certainly aim to do it during the

course of this year. It is not a never-never. As the targets have only recently been agreed it will take a little time and we need to do this properly.

Q218 Mrs Grant: Which Department will chair the group?

Mr Letwin: Sorry, which group?

Mrs Grant: The working group. The task force.

Mr Letwin: There is not going to be a specific task force or working group. We do not need that. The Cabinet Office in any case pursues Departments bilaterally and collectively in relation to their departmental plans. DFID and ourselves will work up this report, and obviously we will bilaterally discuss with each relevant Department all the relevant bits. There will be some of the domestic agenda that is handled through the various task forces and committees that we already have, but I want to be very clear with you that it is not that we are setting up some new committee structure just for the sake of it.

Q219 Mrs Grant: But will there will be a coming together of the Departments. Will there be inter-ministerial committees?

Mr Letwin: There will not be a group of Ministers sitting around trying to discuss this agenda as opposed to the overall programme.

Q220 Chair: But the report that we will have in due course will presumably go to a ministerial committee, such as a Cabinet Committee, for agreement.

Mr Letwin: Of course. It will have to be cleared around the Home Affairs Committee and probably also the Foreign Affairs Committee, because there will be a very large external component of it and a very large internal component of it. That is a clearance process. The development of the report is something that Justine and I will spearhead with the Prime Minister involved in it, but obviously in conjunction with a series of Departments and indeed with the chairs of the various committees and taskforces that are responsible for the various important elements.

I want to be absolutely clear, because we are not going to do it, that we are establishing some new committee structure. That is a way, in my experience, of not attending to the matter. We are going to try to make sure that we do actually do what is in our domestic agenda and we are going to illustrate to you why we think that is what will get us where we need to be in relation to contributing domestically to the achievement of these targets. If you wish to raise issues about that, you can raise issues about that, and if we were persuaded to change then we would change some element of our domestic agenda to achieve that.

Q221 Mrs Grant: It is existing structures.

Mr Letwin: Existing structures. Correct, exactly.

Q222 Wendy Morton: Very quickly, Minister, while we are talking about the SDGs I wanted to ask if you can clarify who will be responsible for monitoring the spending of the non-DFID ODA.

Mr Letwin: There are quite a lot of various elements of non-DFID ODA, and the accounting officers for those elements are the Permanent Secretaries of the Departments that do the spending. The National Security Council is in overall charge of the overall programme so far as ODA is concerned, and obviously there are various funds within that that the National Security Council pays particular attention to. If you are asking a question of accountability, the accountability is through the accounting officers and that is of each relevant Department.

Q223 Wendy Morton: Following on from that, I asked a PQ sometime ago around this topic and I was given to believe that all Departments and funds spending ODA would be invited to attend a working group. That was due to meet for the first time in the spring of this year. I wondered if you were in a position to update me as to whether that meeting had happened?

Mr Letwin: No, you would need to ask Justine about that. I do not know whether that has or has not happened.

Q224 Dr Cameron: Given the focus on the centre of Government requiring to be active and their requirement for there to be co-ordination, would it not be important given the recommendations from UNDP and Beyond2015 that the Government produce a national implementation plan for the SDGs. In January we were told there was no action plan and just the manifesto, but some of the evidence that we have heard suggests that the manifesto in itself does not cover all of the appropriate elements. The recommendation from a number of bodies is that we have this national implementation plan to co-ordinate and take things forward.

Mr Letwin: This is a misfortunate timing in the sense that you entered the room after I had set something out, but let me, for clarity, summarise it again. Following your discussions with the DFID Secretary and further reflection we have talked about internally, we have come to the conclusion that it is a good idea to set out in a report how we are going to achieve both our contribution to the very large international side of this and the domestic element. It would solve the problems that Ms Bruce has raised about otherwise you having to fish around and work out which bit of what is contributing. I hope that once we have laid all that out it will at least be very clear. I hope you will find it satisfactory, but at least you will know whether you do or not, and you will be able to interrogate us if you feel that it is not. We have listened to that.

Q225 Dr Cameron: There will be in essence a national implementation plan.

Mr Letwin: I believe, and so does Justine the more that we have talked about, that that will make it easier subsequently for her in particular, coming back to Ms Latham's point, to account to the UN for what we are up to.

Q226 Chair: Will you use that language because I do not think you did earlier—the “national implementation plan”. Would you see the report as being that?

Mr Letwin: The answer to that is I do not know.

Q227 Dr Cameron: Thank you for that. That is reassuring, particularly as I listened to a very animated response from Minister Swayne just the other week describing how many of the areas that we want to cover were in the manifesto. I had not thought that all of the areas were in the Conservative manifesto, so that is of some reassurance to me.

Mr Letwin: I believe that the programme of action that we have underway is what is necessary in order to do what we need to do to advance the cause of domestic contribution to these targets, but we need to lay that out so you can see it. As I say, you will then be in a position to judge whether you agree with me.

Q228 Dr Cameron: It seemed to have been an astounding fortune of foresight if it had all been in the manifesto.

Mr Letwin: Broadly it is. I do not think it is an accident because the person who was responsible for deciding our manifesto was also the person who is responsible globally for doing more than any other human being in the world in making these goals come about. This is not a total accident, to put it mildly.

Q229 Pauline Latham: Given the integrated nature of the SDGs, policy coherence is going to be vital to ensure that development gains supported by DFID are not undermined by conflicting departmental policies on, for example, international trade and taxation. As Minister for Government policy, how are you going to ensure that Departments do work together in a coherent way to be able to support the achievement of the SDGs globally?

Mr Letwin: I do not think that there is likely to be any conflict between DFID's agenda and the agenda of other Departments externally. If there were any such difficulties then obviously the DFID Secretary would have to bring those to light and we would have to consider them in the National Security Council, which is where we tried to bring together, actually for the first time ever, the international development scene, foreign affairs as a whole, defence and our external and global economic interests. That is why the Chancellor, I, the Business Secretary and the Energy Secretary are there alongside the International Development Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary. That is the forum in which any such issues would get ironed out.

Q230 Pauline Latham: You do not see that there is a problem with taxation, which is quite a topical issue at the moment, but also with international trade?

Mr Letwin: No, I do not believe there is anything that the UK Government are doing externally that would militate against the achievement of these targets globally externally. However, if things did arise we have a mechanism for discussing. That was the whole point. When I said "the first time ever", it was not in this Parliament but the beginning of the last Parliament in 2010, as a result of a great deal of thinking that we had done between 2005 and 2010. We established the National Security Council as a mechanism for bringing these things together, because we discerned that there had been, over many years under various successive administrations, a real problem of co-ordinating economic policy in its wider sense, including energy and trade and so on, with so called

foreign policy, defence policy and aid policy. These things all connect and that is what the National Security Council was established to look at, and it does.

Q231 Pauline Latham: Something like agriculture nationally would not have an adverse impact on what DFID were trying to do with agriculture internationally, for instance with sugar and sugar beet. Is there going to be a problem with sugar beet nationally here? Obviously they would like us to buy all the sugar beet here and there are a lot of jobs in this country in that. Would that not impact on sugar production in other countries? Are we likely to help fund that or are we going to steer clear of it because it might have a conflict?

Mr Letwin: I am not going to pose as an expert on sugar beet, but I am not aware at the moment of any serious conflict at all between the agenda that DFID is following and will intend to follow coherently with them trying to achieve these targets and domestic trade policies, agricultural policies or industrial policies. I am very sure of that because Justine is, as you will have observed, utterly focused on these things, as is right. If she does observe such a tension she will bring this very quickly to the National Security Council and they will have to discuss it and resolve it.

Q232 Mrs Grant: It is building on an issue that was raised by me and others before, and perhaps you can elaborate a little more, Minister. The OECD highlighted limitations for the UK's case-by-case approach to policy coherence across Government. Does the Government plan to introduce a more comprehensive approach to policy coherence for sustainable development in order to achieve the SDGs?

Mr Letwin: I think I have already answered that. No, we are not intending to produce some new mechanism. We believe we have some pretty comprehensive means of ensuring that our policies are coherent with one another. The fact that we have organised them in the single departmental plans and laid them out and are clear in what we are trying to achieve pretty much ensures that. There is a difference between policy coherence and getting things done. That is, to my mind, much the bigger challenge.

Our policies are extremely coherent. Making them happen in practice is a daily challenge, and I do not think there is any Government in the world, if it was being honest, that would not accept that daily challenge. It is there that you need to bring people together in various ways to make things happen. That is the whole point of establishing the various task forces that we have established and of moving from using enormous committees with just politicians on them, as used to be the way, to operating through task forces, which include both officials and agencies and Ministers, to get to work on trying to make something specific happen.

Q233 Mrs Grant: In that particular Department.

Mr Letwin: Not in that particular Department but in that particular project. We have one that deals with training, one that deals with early years and childcare, which is important also for the purposes we were describing, and one that deals with Troubled Families, which is also very important for this, and so on. Those are cross-departmental but they are not grand Cabinet Committees where people simply look at pieces of paper and have discussions. We use those Cabinet Committees rather sparingly now. We use them for clearance but the task forces are there to make things happen in a sensible way.

It is much better for that purpose to have officials present, the agencies present and be able to have outsiders in and have a sensible discussion.

Q234 Mrs Grant: The only thing that I would say to the Minister, if I may, is that I used to, as a junior Minister, attend many of those meetings, some of which you chaired. I always felt a pressure to be prepared.

Mr Letwin: If I may say so, you generally were prepared and that is a good thing.

Q235 Mrs Grant: I could report that my Department had got its finger out, and it is that useful reporting back and accountability whereby it is very embarrassing, particularly if you have certain chairs and you have not done it. I think that is useful.

Mr Letwin: You are right; that is a useful function. However, what the taskforce, in my experience over the last year, has done is to continue that, so that the representatives of various Departments that are involved in project X arrive, and certainly they do feel some accountability and the need to be, as you say, rightly prepared. We then move on beyond that, which is what the committee structures previously were not very good at doing, and have a practical discussion about a challenge or problem that has arisen rather than people just going away and trying to deal with it. We then work out between us, then and there, what sort of approach we ought collectively to adopt.

Q236 Mrs Grant: You do not think both are important.

Mr Letwin: Both are important, yes, but both can be achieved in the task force structure, and we have solid evidence that we are beginning to crack through those problems as a result. You will understand this and so will you, Chair; there is a difference between dignified discussion and practical discussion. We are moving more and more to practical discussion.

The one example of a cross-departmental committee in the old sense where we had already moved in that direction is the National Security Council. We have practical discussion: “What on earth do we do about this?” to which everybody can contribute. Certainly the Prime Minister, who chairs that, may well say to one Department, “Why on earth have you not done this?” People do have to feel prepared, but they are also contributing to the discussion, and that is because that committee, unlike many others, contains representatives of the agencies, the police, the army and all the military and so on. It is not just politicians talking to one another; it is people who are concerned collectively with making something happen.

Q237 Chair: If it works to do that with national security, might it not work for sustainable development to have a similar body?

Mr Letwin: That is an interesting question. I do not think so. We are better off trying to get the various actions that need to be taken, which are in themselves quite complicated, carried on through the task forces that we already have in the various areas. This is an immense terrain we are talking about here, and it is a very large part of our domestic programme that is involved here. If you tried to have a single group that dealt with all those things, it would not be effective.

Q238 Chair: Can I move this on, Minister, to the question of ongoing accountability, because obviously the goals are, as you rightly say, very wide-ranging. They have a 50-year horizon. When you gave the evidence, which we have quoted a lot today, to the Environmental Audit Committee on this question, you said, “It is quite inconceivable that there should be any single individual other than the Prime Minister or President of the country in question who can possibly take responsibility for all of these things to the electorate. It is not doable.” In the light of that observation, which I agree with, should the Prime Minister be in some way directly accountable to Parliament on the Government’s progress on the SDGs?

Mr Letwin: I think the Prime Minister feels pretty accountable to the whole world for that. He was very much involved in leading the world towards the adoption of these goals and targets. He feels personally bound up with them, and I think he will not only want, as he had already said internally, to play a very significant role in shaping and agreeing the report that I spoke of, but also thereafter in monitoring progress. I have absolutely no doubt that he will want to make further statements about this matter to international bodies and also to Parliament.

Q239 Chair: Would you consider, and I realise you may not be able to give a definitive answer today, an annual report to Parliament by the Prime Minister on progress on implementation of the SDGs?

Mr Letwin: Our feeling is that it is better that we should make reports as we go along at appropriate intervals and subject ourselves to scrutiny by this Committee and indeed by the EAC and other Parliamentary devices, rather than simply have a single annual ritual event. As we go along, we can see what looks like a sensible rhythm.

Q240 Chair: As I understand it, the UN itself will have a global monitoring process in July, so there is a case to consider the Prime Minister. Perhaps if it is not appropriate for the Prime Minister it could be you reporting to Parliament in advance of that, so that Parliament can hold to account the UK Government’s approach to that.

Mr Letwin: The Committee will take its own view on that, I have no doubt. Our view is that we should set out the approach in a report and that we should be willing to be proactive in reporting internationally to the UN on where we are getting to. There are going to be country reviews and obviously we welcome the opportunity as part of that process, and in accounting at appropriate intervals to you and to others in Parliament. I do not want to fix us to a formulaic process because it may well be that as we go along to much shorter intervals than that in some cases—longer in others—that there are major issues that have arisen and major steps that have been taken that we want to set out.

Q241 Chair: That brings me to something that I was going to ask you later but it makes sense to ask you now. In terms of the report, you have used the phrase, “The report will be published in due course, and then there will be further reports at appropriate intervals.” Is the suggestion that this might be more frequent than an annual report, less frequent than an annual report or would it depend on the progress of policy?

Mr Letwin: It should depend on reality rather than depending on calendar.

Q242 Dr Cameron: As you know, the Office for National Statistics is starting to work on the UK's national SDG indicators. What is the role of Government Departments in this process and how much influence will they have?

Mr Letwin: That is not quite correct. There is a good deal of misunderstanding about this, and it may be useful if I go into detail because I have spent some time with the statisticians on this. There are the goals, there are the targets and there are the indicators. The indicators that are being developed are global, and this was, as I understand it although I was not personally involved in it, intentional on the part of the global statisticians that were gathered thinking about it. They wanted, instead of having country-by-country indicators, to have global indicators, and they will then also report, as I understand it, on regions of the world and their performance in relation to those indicators.

Clearly, in order for the UN to be able to do that work, individual countries need to assemble data that can be fed in in a coherent fashion from across the world to the UN process. That is what our statisticians, the ONS, are now trying to enable our Departments to contribute to. Obviously that is quite an elaborate exercise in the sense that the method of collecting statistics in country A might be quite different from the method of collecting statistics in country B. You will be very aware with your academic background that if you have apples and oranges, you end up with a mess.

This is quite a significant global challenge for the statisticians' profession. I do not envy our ONS, who have been taking a leading part in that with all the other statisticians, but they are at work on that. It will have to be iterative in the sense that our statisticians will find out that the data sets available, or which can relatively straightforwardly be constructed in the UK, are thus and so. Somebody else's statisticians will find out something similar for those countries. The statisticians of the world will then gather to look at these and try to work out which ones are coherent with one another and which are not, and then go back to their Governments and readjust until they get a set that is useable collectively.

Incidentally the whole of this process, which I was blissfully unaware of until I went and asked the statisticians, "Exactly what are you doing?" is very useful. It will be the first time in global history that somebody has tried to get that degree of coherence in global statistics about these sorts of things. Obviously there are various organisations, including UNDP and OECD and so on, that do collect international statistics, but I do not think anyone has ever done it on this scale for this number of indicators across this many domains and tried to make it coherent for the world as a whole. That is a step forward.

Q243 Dr Cameron: Certainly, and we understand that Government Departments have been asked to feed into this process. Have the Cabinet Office been encouraging the Departments to do so and have they all done so now, or is that an ongoing process?

Mr Letwin: We are certainly encouraging departments to do so. I do not think they need much encouragement in the sense that when the national statistician gets hold of the statisticians in each of the Departments they tend to co-operate with the national statistician. They are part of the statistics profession of the Government. The difficulty is not in any sense Departments not being willing to co-operate; it is that clearly you start with a considerable acquis. There are various ways in which the UK collect statistics and

there are various ways in which they do not. There are various ways in which the French collect statistics or various ways they do not. If we come to Sierra Leone, to take an example of considerable distance, or indeed, while we are at it, Mexico, they will have very different methods of collecting and very different things that they can collect. Finding out from our Departments what data sets they have that will enable them to provide an input to these indicators is, if you like, the easy end of the spectrum. The difficult thing is hoovering that up from everywhere else and making it all come into one place in a coherent form.

Q244 Dr Cameron: Would someone have that responsibility to make sure it is commensurate and feed that back then to the different countries?

Mr Letwin: Yes, as I understand it, the group of international statisticians that met, as it happens under the chairmanship of our national statisticians, is the body that is responsible for doing that, and that is a very considerable task.

Q245 Dr Cameron: As you say, if countries are measuring things in different ways then it might not be comparable at all.

Mr Letwin: Correct, and some considerable give and take will be required all around the world. As you will be aware, every statistic that we will deal with involves all sorts of considerable challenges to collect it accurately. This is a particularly challenging one because it is not just one country with one country's inheritance; it is trying to amalgamate.

Q246 Dr Cameron: In terms of collecting data from Governments, is there any way of ensuring the validity of that data from an independent source, or are we taking that at face value?

Mr Letwin: I have no doubt that is one of the issues that the statisticians will wrestle with. We are in the lucky position that of all the countries in the world, our national statistics are one of the very most independent and best kept for a very long period. I do not know how to put this delicately, but clearly there are differences between different countries and the extent to which those statistics have in the past been reliable. One of the tasks that the statisticians are going to need to engage in is trying to understand the degrees of reliability that can be attributed. Maybe the Committee wants to interrogate the national statistician about this, who obviously knows 10 million times more than I do about it. He really is very interesting on the subject. I have scarcely ever had a more interesting conversation than the one I had with him about it.

Q247 Chair: We had an excellent an excellent session with him earlier on in our inquiry. You are absolutely right to describe some of the big challenges in terms of data in other countries, and our record in terms of national statistics is a very positive one. Nevertheless, for the indicators that have now been through the UN process, clearly for some of them the data in terms of the UK position is readily available, but there are gaps. Could you say a little bit about the gaps and the challenge that we face in addressing those gaps?

Mr Letwin: I cannot at the moment, but what I can say is that in the course of this discussion it became clear that there might be such gaps and where there are the national

statistician is going to be working with the departmental statisticians to work out how we deal with that and how we fill those gaps.

Q248 Chair: Have any additional resources been allocated to the ONS so that they can do this job fully?

Mr Letwin: As far as I know, he feels able to do it with his present resources, but I think probably it is more a question of the intellectual challenge than of the man power. To explain that, as I understand it, you cannot, however many people you involve in it and however many machines that you use, create a baseline if you have not got the back data. The challenge is to work out which set of back data you already have that could create a useable baseline and that can then give you measurements going forwards. That is a matter of the intellectual challenge; having a large number of people thinking about it is not what you need. What you need is a few very clever people getting it right. I am glad to say, as far as I can see, our statisticians are pretty good.

Q249 Chair: Going back to the question of the report that is due to be published, which is effectively our implementation plan even if that is not the language that is being used, are you looking at other countries and how they are developing implementation plans to see if there are any lessons that we can learn, particularly perhaps from some of the other European countries?

Mr Letwin: We certainly should look at what other people are doing; it is always helpful to do that. We have not done that yet.

Q250 Chair: You are a star witness; you finished early. That does not happen very often. Thank you very much indeed, Minister, for joining us today.

Mr Letwin: I look forward to appearing in future.

Chair: Will see certainly be inviting you again as this work progresses. As you will see from the line of questioning, we do have a number of concerns around the implementation that will be reflected in our report that will be published in due course. Thank you very much.

Mr Letwin: Thank you very much.