Dear Ms Creagh,

Firstly, I would like to offer my congratulations on your re-election as Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Prior to the dissolution of the 2015 Parliament, the Environmental Audit Committee published a report on Sustainable Development Goals in the UK.\(^1\) Four of the reports' 11 recommendations were on measuring, monitoring and reporting the SDGs, and two of these were directed specifically towards the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Following the reappointment of the Committee I wish to offer ONS's response.

Recommendation 3:

“Progress on developing measurement frameworks for the Goals is too slow. We recognise the progress of the Office of National Statistics to date and commend its efforts to engage with stakeholders and draw on non-official data sources as a way to fill the “data gap”. However, it is now almost two years since the Government adopted the Goals. During that time we have seen delays from both the Government and the ONS. Delays to the ONS’s work means delays to the UK’s achievement of the Goals. We are concerned about the amount of time it is taking to develop the national indicators given the ONS “contributed directly” to the development of the global indicators between March 2015 and March 2016. It should be a priority for the ONS to establish an early baseline from which we can judge the Government’s future performance against the roadmap it sets out. Perfection should not be the enemy of the good, so we recommend that the ONS focus its efforts on ensuring it meets its autumn 2017 deadline to report on the Goals to the United Nations. The ONS requires secure and sustained funding to carry out its job in relation to the Goals, and the Government should set out how much funding the ONS will receive at the start of every Parliament. (Paragraph 40)”

At Spending Review 2015, budgets to 2020 were agreed and ONS was specifically provided with funding for the development, monitoring and reporting of indicators for the SDGs on behalf of the UK.

We welcome the Committee’s recognition of the work ONS has undertaken to date. ONS are committed to meeting our autumn 2017 deadline to begin reporting data for the UK against

\(^1\) 9th Report – Sustainable Development Goals in the UK
global sustainable development indicators to the United Nations. I am pleased to say that our first report will be published on 9 November 2017.

Recommendation 5:

“A key part of increasing awareness of the Goals will be using data to “paint a picture” about the UK’s progress against the Goals. The ONS has indicated a willingness to provide a narrative on the data it collects. The ONS could be much more ambitious, especially in working with business. We recommend that it should hold an open competition seeking ideas for how the results could be branded and communicated and look for partnerships with organisations who have expertise in communications and marketing, as well as working with stakeholders, effectively to communicate its findings in an accessible way and promote them to the widest possible audience.
(Paragraph 42)"

As we start to report UK data against the global sustainable development indicators, we will also be using the data we have collected so far to provide a narrative on the UK position. ONS plan to publish narrative pieces during October and November, in the run up to our first UK report and have more planned over the winter. Our vision is that this will be the start of a series of Sustainable Development Goals publications. We are actively looking to collaborate and partner with a range of government departments, business and organisations in order to ‘paint a picture’ about the UK’s progress against the Goals to the widest possible audience.

Our consultation², seeking views on ONS’ approach to measuring and reporting UK progress against the global indicators, opened on 29 June 2017 and ran for 12 weeks, closing on 21 September 2017. The results of this consultation and our ongoing engagement with stakeholders will inform our approach to reporting and measurement. We will be publishing a formal response to our consultation in December 2017.

If you would find it helpful, I will send the Committee a copy of our first report in November and our formal consultation response in December.

Yours sincerely,

Iain Bell
Deputy National Statistician, Population and Public Policy, Office for National Statistics

² ONS approach to measuring and reporting SDGs in the UK