

National Performance Framework: Ambitions into Action

Note of engagement event with Scottish Government officials

Tuesday 3 May 2022 at the Scottish Parliament

Part 1: grouped discussion

Overall, Scottish Government officials saw the NPF as a useful expression of shared language and values. It is better used to shape and frame longer-term strategies and specific processes, rather than in responding to events that arise on a day-to-day basis.

It was accepted that there was less clarity as to how it is used by the Parliament and outside world for scrutiny, with questions around how leaders are held accountable for delivery of the NPF outcomes.

Committee Members were told that the NPF is used within the Scottish Government. It is used for staff induction and is very much a starting point for staff joining the organisation. One new member of staff said that she was not familiar with NPF prior to joining but is now and finds it very useful and “consciously” draws on it. It is deemed important for the culture of the organisation and is a common ‘language’ for staff, with one official noting that the “central purpose and values of NPF are something that unites civil service” and that “the benefit is that the NPF is visible, it’s something that has been signed up to by everyone”.

However, it was recognised that the language is sometimes seen to be intangible for people outwith the organisation.

Participants noted that it was easier to use the NPF to frame the development of longer-term strategies, such as the National Strategy for Economic Transformation, where you can “see the NPF coming through in this plan and delivery”. However, officials are “not reaching to the NPF every time a significant issue to deal with arises”, such as responding to the situation in Ukraine. The NPF contributes to achieving a balance between long-term endeavours and unique projects; it’s useful for thinking beyond the immediate parameters of what officials are doing.

It was acknowledged that the specific indicator measures and targets are not used as extensively as the higher-level purpose and values. Focus is on whether progress is being made against the outcomes. However, national indicators have a role in improving transparency. One participant mentioned that the NPF should be reviewed in cycles, noting it “allows us to check if what we’re doing is actually achieving the impact we are seeking”.

When asked whether short term pressures, such as a strong political or media focus on issues such as numbers of hospitals beds or police officers for example, hampered the ability to deliver national outcomes, officials said that their advice to Ministers would always be informed by the political context within which decisions were taken, but that the NPF played a really useful role in being able to provide balanced advice.

It was recognised that leaders across public services are “not really held accountable for delivery of the NPF”, with one participant suggesting that there may be benefit in the Committee examining in more detail how leaders within the Scottish Government are held to account for delivery of the NPF.

Overall, the NPF supports collaboration within the civil service as outcomes are shared. It also helps to frame discussions within teams. Acting as one unit to deliver the national outcomes encourages staff to “get behind the NPF”.

There was a discussion of how the NPF is used for allocating finance through the SG budgeting process. There was an acknowledgement that the NPF is not really used for allocating spending so is not part of the Budget decision-making process within Government.

However, it was recognised that the NPF “flushes out” trade-offs and helps with prioritisation and action on delivering an outcome in one area can also help to achieve an outcome in another.

Officials advised that the NPF does not tend to inhibit risk-taking or innovation. In fact, focusing on outcomes “leaves room for innovation and the ability to try out different things”.

Part 2: joint discussion

Participants recognised that they need to think more about how they can “drill down” to delivering the outcomes, with one noting that “the NPF is high level, we need to identify how to get to lower levels and how this is put into the day-to-day practices”, and then identify good practice examples. It was noted that officials need a “good ‘line of sight’ from the high level through to the day to day”; with one criticism being that it “just seems too far away sometimes”.

However, it was again noted that the central purpose and values at the heart of the NPF “is something that unites civil servants right across government”. The high-level aspirations of the NPF are “valid and worthy”, e.g. ‘flourishing’, ‘kindness’ and ‘wellbeing’, providing “a language that we can all get behind”. Despite being challenged that the values can be a little vague, the Scottish Government has found, in research, that staff do want to retain those values.

‘The Promise’ care review report was cited as an example where the values “run right through it”. A wellbeing economy monitor is currently being developed, in recognition that GDP alone is not enough of an indicator; and this will be published in the coming months.

The recent 'Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Action Plan' was mentioned as an example of collaborative working more widely. This approach to collaboration and learning from lived experience is traceable all the way back to the 2015 Fairer and Healthier Scotland conversations involving around 16,000 people attending engagement events across Scotland, which informed the 2016 Fairer Scotland Action Plan. That plan contained pledges from groups across Scotland and the action to introduce Child Poverty legislation. That legislation in turn led to the development of "Every Child, Every Chance" and more recently "Best Start, Bright Futures".

While there are examples of excellent partnerships across government, local government, and the voluntary and business sectors, it was recognised that more could be done to encourage the business and private sector to contribute to delivery of the NPF. It was suggested that the Committee may have a role in looking at how to encourage greater involvement with these sectors. It was noted that some businesses were "on board" and bring a different approach, with one participant indicating that "there is a developing narrative that this is something for them and in the interests of all of Scotland". The difficulties in framing commercial contracts that reward those who contribute to the NPF was touched on, e.g. in previous tendering exercises, issues such as health and wellbeing of staff, promotion of tourism had been flagged and addressed by those tendering but had not necessarily been included in the original spec/advert.

Participants felt that the concept of the wellbeing economy is not necessarily widely understood by the commercial sector or some businesses. However, through the Business Purpose Commission, the Scottish Government is looking at how Scotland can become known at home and globally for nurturing purposeful businesses which make a positive impact on economic prosperity, social wellbeing and environmental sustainability. It is also working on establishing a Centre for Workplace Transformation to support experimentation in ways of working post-pandemic, including on issues such as hybrid working post-pandemic is an example of where businesses and the third sector etc will need to come together to take this forward.

When asked whether budgetary constraints impact on the NPF, participants noted that there was some impact but "sometimes more money is not the best thing". Financial constraints can focus and optimise delivery where you can "get more bang for your buck".

It was again recognised that the NPF is a long-term approach which contrasts with "short-termism" discussion in the media. The NPF was not necessarily seen as a topic that generates attention. Some felt that perhaps it was not so important that the public knows about the NPF itself, so long as the outcomes and indicators remain relevant and "mirrors the things that Scotland cares about". The cost of living was cited as an example of an indicator that is reported on in the media and of huge relevance to people across Scotland. It was also noted that the Scottish Government is reporting weekly on delivery and so performance can be tracked and evidenced.

Participants referred to good awareness amongst the Scottish Youth Parliament regarding the NPF and that the young people are the pulling force in the direction of wellbeing economy, away from GDP as a definition of a successful country.

On the issue of preventative spend, participants indicated that the NPF allowed this type of longer-term thinking around outcomes.

Again, the question was raised as to how committees and parliamentarians are using the NPF and how they can be encouraged to examine the outcomes in a meaningful way.