

Finance and Public Administration Committee

National Performance Framework: Ambitions into Action

Note of key issues discussed at the Glasgow engagement event on 10 May 2022

Background

Four¹ Members of the Scottish Parliament's Finance and Public Administration Committee met informally with representatives of the local authority, other public bodies, business organisations and the voluntary sector, in Glasgow on 10 May. Members heard about the experiences of participants on how the NPF influences their day-to-day roles and the approaches of their organisations. A parallel event was held involving the other three² Members of the Committee in Dundee on the same day, and a similar engagement session with Scottish Government officials took place on 3 May.

At all three events, participants were asked the same questions, which are listed below, along with the key points of discussion at the Glasgow event. Separate notes of the issues raised at the other two engagement sessions are also available on the [Committee's inquiry page](#).

Discussion

Q1. What role does the NPF and national outcomes play in your decision-making?

This varied by type of organisation. Broadly speaking there is an awareness of the NPF and its outcomes among voluntary sector bodies, however, for some it felt quite 'remote'. For local authorities and public bodies, the NPF tends to be used implicitly to inform their work, but it is not explicit in decision-making, with one participant noting that "it's not the obvious, immediate thing we think about when we make decisions". It was noted that the NPF takes up time and capacity, which can be problematic. There is less awareness and use of the NPF in the private sector. To the question, if the NPF didn't exist, would organisations be doing anything differently?", participants from audit/scrutiny bodies responded: "probably not".

Local government representatives referred to the Council's new strategic plan being tied in with the NPF at a high-level to enable flexibility in delivery. However, it is the UN Sustainable Development Goals that they feel are most helpful, with one

¹ Daniel Johnson MSP (Deputy Convener), Ross Greer MSP, Douglas Lumsden MSP, and John Mason MSP

² Kenneth Gibson MSP (Convener), Liz Smith MSP, and Michelle Thomson MSP.

commenting that they “provide coherence and underpin the NPF ... and a clearer benchmark, nationally and internationally”. Some felt that the NPF is “not digestible enough at the moment to be for all of Scotland”. The level of detail in the NPF is seen as restrictive and could be simpler in only setting out a direction of travel. It was noted that the NPF national outcomes were more of an expression of corporate values than a set of measures.

Some voluntary sector representatives spoke of the NPF representing a ‘macro-economic measurement’, which is not always aligned to the aims of those working ‘on the ground’. They felt that the NPF is “a good start”, but that it needs to move away from the metrics and reflect a more grounded ‘lived experience’ e.g. “has a person’s life improved rather than the reporting of lots of numbers?”

Participants from audit/scrutiny bodies highlighted their view that the NPF is not visible or easily understandable to the outside world.

Q2. To what extent are you supported to deliver on the national outcomes?

Local authorities feel that they are responsible for roughly 70% of the national outcomes, yet they do not receive proportional funding to support this work. It was also noted that the funding structure does not support early intervention due to time lags in seeing the outcomes, and that “insecure funding” leads to poorer outcomes. It was noted that, sometimes an organisation can only leverage funding if it demonstrates that it meets NPF outcomes. Some organisations have developed their own Key Performance Indicators to measure performance and success, while others are working to different indicators, e.g. GIRFEC³ and SHANARRI⁴, which feel “more relevant”. There was a discussion amongst local authority and public sector representatives highlighting lots of really good work being undertaken, and positive outcomes in society, but these do not require to be recorded or reported on anywhere.

Questions were also asked in relation to how the NPF links with other government strategies and frameworks, and whether more discussion around the NPF might make it feel more relevant.

The need to move away from silo-working towards greater collaboration across departments and agencies, as advocated by the Christie Commission, was highlighted. There was a feeling that the NPF does nothing to help different elements of Government, public bodies and the third sector to work together, which might not be helped by some of the national indicators in the NPF working against others.

A discussion was held on ‘outcomes vs outputs’ and whether there was a conflict or misunderstanding around what should be delivered and recorded, and how to evidence the outcomes with more qualitative data. There was an acknowledgement that those who provide the funding drive measuring and reporting.

³ Scottish Government initiative ‘Getting It Right for Every Child’.

⁴ These are wellbeing indicators for children: Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included.

Q3. To what extent are you held to account for delivering national outcomes?

There was a variety of experiences amongst participants in relation to accountability. While many felt that they are held to account and scrutinised, that was not specifically due, or in relation, to the NPF. The local authority is not explicitly reporting on the NPF directly to the Scottish Government however, each department has their own reporting process aligned to the UN Sustainable Goals. The NHS does however report on the NPF as part of the NHS annual performance review and other reports submitted to the Scottish Government.

Participants suggested that there is no obvious link between the NPF and funding allocations to the third sector and public bodies. It was not clear to participants how the NPF is used in policy development and decision making around budgets: “it sits there but doesn’t drive the structures required to deliver it or the decision-making process” commented an attendee from audit/scrutiny bodies.

A discussion was held amongst representatives from the local authority and public bodies about the need to balance accountability with allowing organisations to “get on with it” once funding is provided.

It was argued that the Scottish Government should provide more data and relevant research, case-studies, or examples of best practice. This was particularly so for local authorities who do not have the resources to commission research or explore different approaches. An example was given of a body that had tendered for work with the Scottish Government and had been unsuccessful. In feedback, they were told that the bid had not made adequate reference to the NPF.

Q4. What does good practice look like?

Participants suggested that good practice requires collaboration between sectors and agencies (breaking down silo-working) and having a clear goal or common understanding that everyone signs up to and parity of esteem.

Those from the voluntary sector noted that good practice affords the ability to plan and act for the long-term and uses lived experience, while also balancing metrics with qualitative measures

Learning can be taken from the Commissioner for Future Generations in Wales, as well as from practices during the pandemic, where the focus was on speedy and effective delivery.

Flexibility in structures and procedures is needed, and the NPF should be a practical document rather than aspirational. Expectations of the Scottish Government should be clearly communicated. It should take account of local issues and needs, as well as reflect UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Q5. Can you give an example where there has been effective collaborative working across different public/private/third sector organisations? What was it that made it work well?

Examples included:

- The response to the pandemic: there was better use of data across services and fewer restrictions in terms of GDPR, which enabled effective collaboration. Bureaucracy was temporarily reduced, working practices changed, and there was more flexibility and good communication and engagement by government.
- Net zero: there is a shared sense of importance of net zero and climate change, across sectors
- Safety in the health and social care sector: an example of working in partnership.
- Ending homelessness together strategy: an example of collaborative working between public and voluntary sector.
- NHS working with universities to support innovation.
- Children's houses: an example of local authorities working with local housing associations and private housing developers
- Child poverty: involving the private sector.

General points raised during this discussion included that collaboration works better when all bodies concentrate on what they have in common and when there is a short-term deadline. Having a specific goal, such as achieving net zero, is also helpful. Some businesses have signed up to the NPF when they are made aware of the benefits, for example, on net zero, and should be given more opportunity to contribute. Participants suggested that organisations receiving public funds should be accountable for delivering the NPF.

Q6. What culture, training, systems, or processes would you like to see changed for the next revised NPF?

One suggestion was that NPF website should include a mechanism for sharing best practice (such as a 'hub'), including details of policies that have been effective.

Some felt that the revised NPF should encourage collaboration across organisations, and include more specific outcomes, how they relate to policy, and how they can be delivered across activities. GDPR compliance was cited as a barrier to sharing data and collaboration between organisations. A culture shift between different levels of Government: UK-Scottish-Local in relation to sharing of data may be needed.

One attendee noted that shared accountability for the NPF should come with better collaboration across government, along the lines envisaged by the Christie Commission. However, another participant disagreed with this statement, arguing that, "if everyone is accountable, no-one is accountable" and that clear roles and accountability for leaders was needed.

It was noted that outcomes are only meaningful if people understand them, so efforts should be made to make the NPF more accessible and raise its profile amongst the public. Attendees suggested that the NPF should also set out what people should expect in their day-to-day lives if the NPF outcomes are delivered: “people should be able to see themselves in the NPF”. There should be clearer delineation of who is accountable for which outcomes and indicators in the NPF.

One participant would like to see more emphasis placed on preventative measures in the NPF, taking a longer-term view outwith political or electoral cycles. Linked to this, one participant argued that the NPF could usefully set out outcome targets for the short-term as well as the medium to longer term. Other participants said that the NPF should provide for more autonomy for local delivery. Finally, it was argued that the NPF would benefit from being simplified, starting with an overall, understandable goal for government (“for example, a more equal society”) and working back from that.

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