



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Kenneth Gibson MSP
Convener
Finance and Public Administration Committee

Mairi Gougeon MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

3 October 2024

Dear Kenneth and Mairi,

Rural Affairs and Islands (RAI) Committee consideration of the review of national outcomes.

The Committee welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the cross-committee consideration of the draft national outcomes and I am pleased to present our findings in the annexe to this letter.

As you know, rural issues relevant to this Committee's remit intersect with most of the national outcomes. Based on the evidence received, the Committee considered the extent to which the national outcomes are 'rural-proofed', and members feel further clarity is needed on how the specific challenges and opportunities facing Scotland's rural communities have been considered by the Scottish Government when conducting its review of the national outcomes.

I hope you will find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Finlay Carson MSP
Convener

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Email: rural.committee@parliament.scot. We welcome calls through Relay UK and in BSL through Contact Scotland BSL.

Annexe

RAI Committee approach to scrutiny

1. The Committee considered its approach to scrutiny of the proposed national outcomes at its meeting on 24 April 2024. At the time, the Committee agreed in principle to participate in a joint consultation organised by the FPA Committee and would confirm its approach in order to reflect the scope of evidence collected by the call for views.
2. In addition, three questions were posed regarding the functions of national outcomes in the Committee's call for views on its pre-budget scrutiny for 2025/26:
 - How last year's budget allocations contributed to meeting these national outcomes;
 - Whether next year's budget allocations need to change to address these national outcomes more effectively; and
 - If so, what ways they need to change.
3. The Committee received 14 responses to its call for views. [These are available on the Scottish Parliament website.](#)
4. The Committee also took evidence on the national outcomes from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands at its meeting on [11 September 2024](#). Questions around the draft national outcomes were also posed by the Convener on behalf of the Committee to the First Minister at Conveners Group on [18 September 2024](#).

Evidence considered

5. A number of themes relevant to the Committee's remit were drawn out of the analysis of written evidence conducted by the [Scottish Parliament Information Centre](#) (SPICe). In general, evidence focussed mainly on the proposed national outcomes for '**Communities - We live in communities that are connected, inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe**'.
6. The Committee notes the following issues were mentioned by respondents:
 - **Digital inclusion and connectivity** – stakeholders mentioned that ensuring all citizens can access digital and IT technology was important in addressing geographical inequalities and therefore should be a key focus of the national outcomes. The Committee discussed this issue with the Cabinet Secretary who acknowledged that “digital connectivity is such a basic thing” and that, “if we want to enable more people to live and work in rural Scotland and across our islands, we need to do what we can to improve digital connectivity”.
 - **Access to public services in rural and remote communities** – some respondents highlighted that the national outcomes should set out the ambition to deliver high quality public services across both rural and urban areas. In particular, stakeholders noted that better access to community

health services, dental services and reliable public transport would allow rural communities to address some of the geographical challenges they currently faced.

7. Furthermore, evidence received as part of the Committee's calls for views highlighted the negative impact of budgetary constraints placed on the rural affairs portfolio in delivering an array of the national outcomes, particularly in relation to the environment and climate action.
8. For example, NFUS said Scotland's agriculture sector plays a critical role in delivering the Scottish Government's national outcomes pertaining to communities, environment and economic sustainability and that, to be able to do this effectively, "Scottish agriculture needs to be funded adequately and fairly".

Rural affairs as a cross cutting issue

9. After considering the written evidence received in relation to the national outcomes, the Committee noted that there remains significant gaps in understanding about what they would mean for rural communities. It was noted that rural areas sometimes require bespoke policy solutions.
10. The Cabinet Secretary said that previously there have been challenges with developing indicators for national outcomes due to issues with collecting distinct rural data. She said improvements to data collection methods through the introduction of a rural data dashboard would start to address these problems and allow the Scottish Government to more clearly understand how it was delivering against its outcomes.
11. In response to questions regarding how the Scottish Government would 'rural-proof' national outcomes, the First Minister said that he was happy to consider what more could be done to ensure they serve the interests of all parts of Scotland.

Conclusions and recommendations

12. **Concerns were raised in the call for views that the Scottish Government appears not to have given sufficient priority to rural communities in the proposed national outcomes. The Committee recommends that greater consideration should be given to 'rural-proofing' the national outcomes.**
13. **The Committee understands the Scottish Government will bring forward national indicators to underpin its new national outcomes. The Committee recommends these national indicators include a suite of markers that clearly establish how success in delivering national outcomes in rural communities should be measured and evaluated.**