

# How a strengthened National Performance Framework can drive effective government in Scotland

by Dr Max French



Northumbria  
University  
NEWCASTLE



collective  
wellbeing  
**Carnegie**  
UK

## Acknowledgments

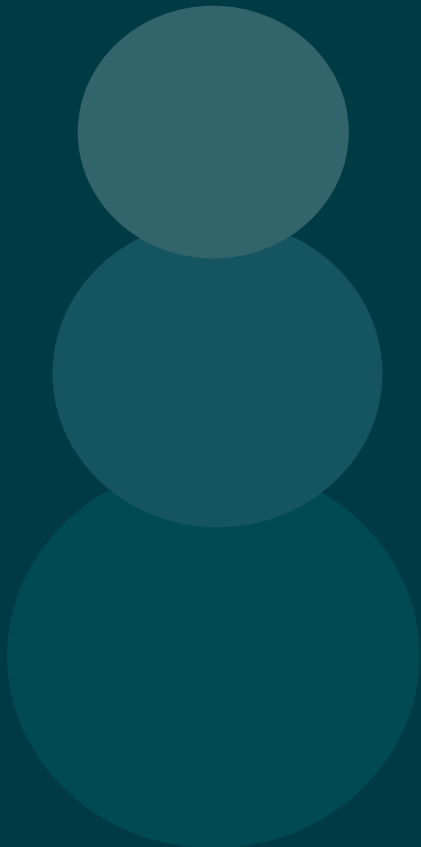
This report was written by Dr Max French, Northumbria University Newcastle and designed by Alison Manson, Carnegie UK.

The author would like to thank Stuart Mackinnon, Joanna McGilvray and Sarah Davidson from Carnegie UK for their advice and support in preparing this report

All photographs on [Unsplash](#) by: [Evan Wise](#), [Aarón Blanco Tejedor](#), [Markus Spiske](#) and [Melissa Askew](#)

August 2024

Please cite this publication as: French, M (2024) How a strengthened National Performance Framework can drive effective government in Scotland. Dunfermline: Carnegie UK



ISBN 978-1-7384384-3-3



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In one of his first major speeches as First Minister, John Swinney set out his administration's economic vision:

The goal is to help people live happier and healthier lives with higher living standards, to help businesses boost profitability and build a more resilient Scottish economy that **promotes the wellbeing of all of our citizens.**



<sup>1</sup> National Performance Framework: picture illustration – Scottish Government

The idea that a nation's collective wellbeing - now and in the future - should be its driving political concern is hardly new to Scotland. In 1791, the Scottish Enlightenment figure Sir John Sinclair undertook the Statistical Account of Scotland, the first nationwide survey with the purpose of "ascertaining the quantum of happiness enjoyed by its inhabitants, and the means of its future improvement." Prior to this, the national statistics (a term also coined by Sinclair) merely counted the stocks a government needed to feed its own population or wage war on others.

The modern torchbearer of Sinclair's idea is Scotland's National Performance Framework (NPF), which has since 2007 asserted the National Outcomes and Indicators which determine Scotland's collective wellbeing. The NPF is known internationally as a wellbeing framework: its purpose is not only to measure our collective wellbeing, but to frame political and administrative decision-making around it. The NPF's 11 National Outcomes and 81 National Indicators should, in theory, determine how Scotland's ~£60bn annual budget is spent, how senior leaders coordinate Scotland's 131 public bodies, how decisions made across Scotland's public life are scrutinised and how those responsible are held to account.

Our new research<sup>2</sup>, for the first time, systematically compares how well integrated into decision-making the wellbeing frameworks used in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland actually are. Despite being in operation for twice as long, Scotland does not come out of this comparison well. Wales' Well-being Goals and Indicators are now far better integrated into policymaking, strategic planning, and people management within the Welsh Government and public bodies. While Wales' wellbeing framework has shaped the national planning, transport, net zero, recycling and marine strategies, we could not locate a single national policy in Scotland that the NPF has significantly impacted. In fact, integration was in certain respects greater in Northern Ireland, despite the historic collapse of its power sharing government. Far from the "North Star" the Scottish Government claims the NPF to be, its use is largely relegated to lip service paid in strategies and corporate plans.

This matters. The failure to make good on the NPF means Scotland now cuts a diminished figure on an international stage of wellbeing-focussed governments it helped establish. It sits awkwardly alongside both the current [First](#) and [Deputy First Ministers'](#) declared commitments to wellbeing-oriented government and raises broader questions about the strategic and decision-making competency within the Scottish Government, a conclusion echoed by a [recent parliamentary inquiry](#).

So, what can be done? The Scottish Government's commitment to bring forward a Wellbeing and Sustainability (WSD) Bill provides a critical opportunity to embed the NPF in policy making and bolster a strategic, effective approach to government. Borrowing from Wales is the right approach, given the critical role the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act played in enabling that country to pull ahead. But the WSD bill must go further than emulation. With ambition and creativity, it can actually deliver on a 200+ year national commitment to put collective wellbeing at the heart of governance. Drawing from [our research](#), here are six elements the WSD bill could introduce which would, working in tandem, achieve this transformation.

2 French, M., & Wallace, J. (2024). Power, performance, and the governance of systemic goals: evidence from national wellbeing framework integration. SocArxiv. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/6xmdv>.

## 1. Complete the journey from a National Performance Framework to Scotland's Wellbeing Framework

The NPF is stuck part way through its transition from a technical performance framework to a broader vision for progress shared with Scotland's citizens and the organisations which serve them. The WSD Bill should complete this journey, establishing the NPF as a galvanising agenda and mutual obligation for all Scotland's public bodies and recipients of public funds.

This should begin with formally rebranding the NPF with its unofficial moniker, "Scotland's Wellbeing Framework", to better reflect its updated purpose ('to improve the wellbeing of people living in Scotland now and in the future'). The statutory basis afforded to the National Outcomes within the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 should then be extended to the whole revised NPF and, as in Wales, the Scottish Government made subject to the same accountability and delivery duties as other public bodies.

These changes would mandate the NPF's delivery from all tiers of government, public bodies, and social and commercial organisations. But if these groups are to feel like partners rather than subjects of the revised NPF, they will need to play an active and empowered role in its leadership. The Bill should therefore also establish a multi-stakeholder National Advisory Board, modelled closely on the 2011 [Wellbeing Roundtable](#) convened by Carnegie UK, which would hold a duty to scrutinise, report and advise on NPF implementation. This would improve buy-in from outside central government and inject energy and ambition into the WSD Act's roll out.

## 2. Make the NPF the lynchpin of a renewed Scottish Public Service Reform Programme

The WSD Bill is likely to follow Wales in introducing a set of expected "Ways of Working" against which public bodies will be scrutinised. Wales' five Ways of Working (Integration, Prevention, Long-term Thinking, Involvement, Collaboration) now play an important role in public scrutiny and accountability. But Scotland should not start from scratch. In fact, the country has a head start.

In 2011 the influential Christie Commission report into the future of public services already committed government and public bodies to four pillars of reform: Power, Prevention, Partnership and Performance. The WSD Bill should integrate these Christie Pillars - suitably revised through consultation - as a separate tier of the revised NPF and grant them statutory footing as expected Ways of Working. Public bodies would then be scrutinised for both their particular contribution to the National Outcomes and incorporation of the Christie-informed Ways of Working.

By doing this, the WSD Bill would establish a much-needed throughline in Scottish public service reform. In responding to new duties, public bodies and those carrying out publicly funded work would, in one fell swoop, implement Christie and pursue the National Outcomes. This would embolden a stuttering commitment to a distinctive Scottish approach to public service reform, and address related concerns expressed by the [Auditor General](#) among others that too little progress has been made in embedding Christie's recommendations.

### 3. Reframe accountability and scrutiny relationships around the revised NPF

Our research makes clear that the Scottish Government cannot continue to rely solely on its small central government team to integrate the NPF across Scotland's public administration system. The Welsh experience shows that an independent body, capable of championing the NPF and managing relationships with each body subject to WSD Bill provisions, is required to achieve the level of culture change needed. The clearest way is to follow Wales in creating a Scottish Future Generations Commissioner (FGC), with a suitably resourced Office. Existing scrutiny and inspection agencies, most obviously Audit Scotland, could also play an integral role.

An external body (FGC or equivalent) would perform a range of vital, currently absent, functions:

- By possessing powers of review and inspection, equivalent to 'Section 20' duties within the Welsh legislation, they could enact the 'hard powers' currently lacking in Scotland's accountability system.
- By playing the role of an independent champion, they could provide energy, legitimacy and credibility for the NPF as a galvanising collective endeavour.
- By holding relationships with all public bodies, they could take a 'helicopter view' of progress and identify and unblock issues preventing the implementation of the NPF.
- By acting as a single front door for guidance, training and support for implementing the NPF, they could help public bodies engage constructively with new legislative duties.

### 4. Introduce new duties for public bodies - in return for new powers.

Our research found Scottish public bodies commit little attention to the NPF despite their duty under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 to "have regard" for the National Outcomes. This duty should be extended and strengthened. Each public body should plan and account for their contribution to the National Outcomes and their application of the Christie-informed Ways of Working. The intention should be to normalise a model of outcome-oriented accountability which extends beyond short-term organisation-level targets and directives.

But without the right infrastructure in place, these duties will succeed only in creating a new tier of bureaucracy, further burdening public bodies at the very time they can least afford it. To avoid this, the WSD Bill must make two provisions. First, every public body must be able to access the necessary support, guidance and constructive challenge before they confront their statutory duties. This can be achieved, as in Wales, through a suitably resourced FGC or equivalent body.

Second, the WSD Bill should focus on enabling - not merely coercing - compliance with new duties. Facing diversionary performance targets, directives and duties, public bodies pursuing National Outcomes might feel they have their hands tied behind their back. The WSD Bill should task a new FGC or equivalent body to identify and remove these structural barriers on behalf of public bodies. This could be formalised in the Commissioner's review powers as a 'Right to Challenge' counteractive targets, procedures or directives preventing the pursuit of National Outcomes, or request a trial of exemption from these. In this way, local governments and public bodies might welcome the legislation as a route to empowerment and partnership, rather than as another obligation to central government.

### 5. Use the revised NPF as a tool for direct democracy.

Scottish Ministers hold a duty to consult on the set of National Outcomes every five years. The two reviews so far have been limited in scope and missed opportunities to meaningfully engage the Scottish public in setting future priorities for their country. To enhance its credibility and influence, the NPF should become an integral component of Scotland's democratic system.

The WSD Bill should extend the Ministerial duty to mandate a more ambitious National Conversation every parliamentary term, like those undertaken in [Wales](#) and [Germany](#), which involve the public in longer-term deliberative engagement. Scotland could leverage its expertise in developing National Citizen Assemblies, becoming the first nation to adopt an empowered, deliberative model in setting its National Outcomes.

The National Conversation should be overseen by the newly appointed National Advisory Board and supported by the FGC or equivalent body. That Board should oversee the National Conversation's design and delivery and deliberate over evidence gathered to set new National Outcomes, in line with the Wellbeing Roundtable approach used in Scotland in 2011.

### 6. Review the NPF's integration, not just its content

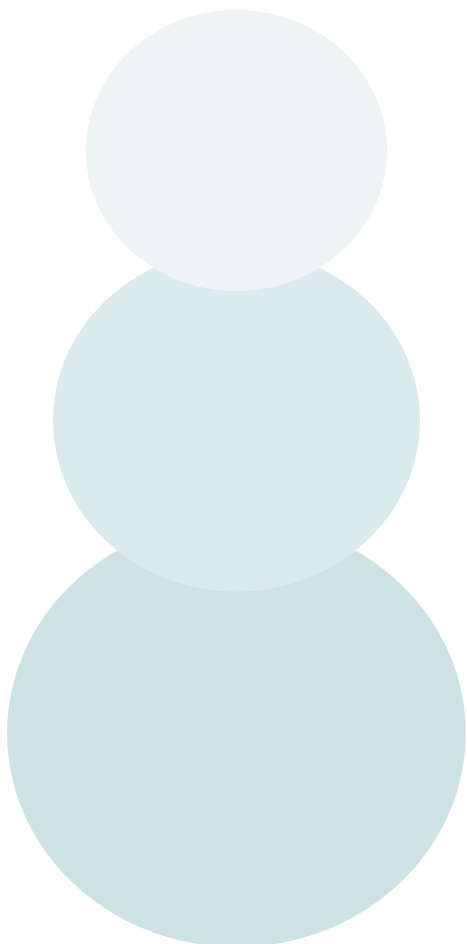
The Scottish Government has responded to the Finance and Public Administration Committee's recent review by [committing to publish an implementation plan](#). Our [research](#) shows that a "smart power" approach, which combines both soft and hard powers, is essential to effective integration. The WSD Bill should therefore require Scottish Ministers to consult on, develop and present before Parliament a revised implementation plan as part of its continuous improvement approach.

The National Advisory Board, again operating similarly to the 2011 Roundtable, should lead the consultation and development process of this document, supported by the Future Generations Commissioner or equivalent agency. That Board's report into the use and impact of the revised NPF in Scottish public life should form the basis for a revised implementation plan in the following parliamentary term.



## Summary

The NPF has recently been positioned as a means for governing a 'Wellbeing Economy'. But it can work far more generally as a tool for governing well. Given the right tools by the WSD Bill, the NPF could help align accountability, incentives and support around the long-term outcomes which matter most to the Scottish public. The key challenges facing this administration – from child poverty to net zero to the increasing demand on health and social care – all demand this mode of operation. John Swinney was Cabinet Secretary when the NPF was first introduced as a galvanising collective ambition in 2007. With the WSD Bill, he now has the opportunity to turn that ambition into action.





**Carnegie UK**  
Andrew Carnegie House  
Pittencrieff Street  
Dunfermline  
Fife, Scotland  
KY12 8AW

T +44 (0)1383 721445  
[www.carnegieuk.org](http://www.carnegieuk.org)



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