

Reforming the National Performance Framework – principles for success

Overview

At Carnegie UK, we know that effective public administration requires proficiency in multiple “ways of working”.

In April 2026, we convened a small group of stakeholders representing a variety of expertise to explore how a specific set of codified ways of working could be used to ensure that the reformed National Performance Framework (NPF) – Scotland's Wellbeing Framework - has its intended impact. This was planned to inform a response to specific questions included in the Scottish Government's NPF Engagement Document of 16th February 2026.

The group included practitioners who have worked with the NPF in Scotland in different capacities over several years, alongside individuals who have studied the impact of wellbeing frameworks and other wellbeing governance models in Scotland and across the world.

The workshop reached a clear and unanimous conclusion: if the Scottish Government is to realise its ambitions and make progress towards realising the long-term, population-wide outcomes set out in the NPF, it must make significant efforts to lead changes in culture and practice. This should include a focus on embedding and implementing specific ways of working in its own operations and across Scottish public services. This is where progress has previously stalled.

Various iterations of the NPF have been in operation since 2007. The 2026 reforms offer the Scottish Government an opportunity to reflect on why previous efforts to embed ways of working have not achieved the necessary consistency and scale, and to apply these lessons in setting a course for the future.

"Ways of working" - purpose and scope

When thinking about how to ensure impact, the starting point for the Scottish Government must be a commitment to acting in ways that will help realise the NPF vision: improving the wellbeing of people living in Scotland now and in the future.

Codified “ways of working” are best understood as defining how to act, identified for their relevance to achieving the national outcomes. It may be helpful to think of (and indeed rename) these as “principles”; rules or beliefs that influence day-to-day behaviours and decision-making. Such principles must be matched by accountability mechanisms that clarify the expectations of those working in government and across Scottish public services and accompanied by appropriate support to help people embody them in practice.

To achieve impact at scale, the ways of working should have a unifying role across public services. They should apply to the Scottish Government and its public bodies, to Scottish Local Government, and to third sector organisations and private companies delivering services commissioned or procured by the public sector.

There is inevitably some overlap between the ways of working and conditions for success discussed in this paper, and those set out in the Scottish Government's Public Service Reform strategy. It is important to understand that the PSR strategy articulates how public services in Scotland should operate in future to realise the vision and national outcomes in the NPF; while ways of working and enabling conditions should be consistent across the two, it is the wellbeing framework and not the PSR strategy which must set the over-arching ambition.

Themes to guide selection

Ultimately, the Scottish Government must choose which specific ways of working it believes will have the greatest impact and prioritise embedding these in practice in the months and years ahead.

However, drawing on the group's extensive knowledge about the implementation of Wellbeing Frameworks in Scotland and elsewhere, the following themes offer a guide to useful areas of focus:

- **Holistic and integrated:** understanding that multiple contributions are required because wellbeing solutions don't exist within policy, organisational or sectoral silos. These contributions all need to be recognised and marshalled through effective collaboration across and between bodies, including the management of competing priorities, co-benefits and trade-offs.
- **Long-termism:** being able to articulate the needs of people and planet now and in the future, and to develop policy proposals which engage constructively with the balance between these sometimes-competing aims.
- **People and involvement:** recognising the importance of people and communities having meaningful influence over the design and delivery of policies and services.
- **Place:** understanding how outcomes materialise in specific places and for different population groups. Using this insight and understanding of local needs, assets and identities to shape policy and identify appropriate interventions.
- **Prevention:** knowing what to do now to prevent problems (and associated human and fiscal costs) occurring or getting worse in the future.

Creating the conditions for success

Irrespective of which ways of working the Scottish Government chooses to prioritise, to be effective they must be part of the overall architecture of the NPF and above all must be:

- **meaningful:** people should be able to understand how to apply them to their work.
- **relevant:** there should be a clear articulation of how working in these ways relates to the pursuit of the vision and national outcomes.

- **visible:** it should be possible to see whether an individual or body is working in the specified ways.

In addition, the ways of working should:

Focus leadership

- a priority for committed, consistent leaders (who are ultimately responsible for setting culture, incentivising innovation, and shaping organisational development) but also seen as a priority for middle managers.
- enabled by renewed investment in collective leadership programmes that support action learning and cross-sectoral working, particularly at the community planning level.

Inform organisational development and operations

- embedded in organisational development strategies, rather than layered onto existing practices and procedures.
- used as a framework for addressing the structural barriers and disincentives that prevent public servants from working differently, encouraging and rewarding creativity, innovation and strategic risk-taking.
- supported by operational enablers such as Spending Reviews and budgeting processes; policy appraisal tools; individual performance objectives, and the use of data and evidence in decision making.

Be reflected in accountability:

- integrated as part of audit practices; ensuring that audit is seen to support rather than hinder innovation and long-term, preventative approaches.
- linked to appropriate accountability and scrutiny processes (see further below).

Accountability mechanisms

Genuine ownership and buy-in from politicians and senior leaders will be critical to success. However, evidence from the application and impact of the 2011 Christie Principles in Scotland and the statutory “five ways of working” in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 suggests that progress towards the NPF vision will be hindered without effective accountability mechanisms.

Clear expectations about roles and responsibilities will be especially important in the absence - for now - of effective legislation that places statutory duties on public bodies to deliver on the National Outcomes and to adopt specific ways of working.

In a context of limited resources and financial constraints, there is an opportunity for streamlining and simplifying the current landscape, in turn reducing costs. The implementation of the reformed NPF is an opportune moment to revisit and rationalise the multitude of existing accountability and reporting frameworks, clarify the overarching role of the wellbeing framework, and encourage collective action and ownership.

The role of the Scottish Parliament and its committees in holding government to account for the National Outcomes could be strengthened. The Seven (aka Nolan) Principles of Public Life offer an example of a model where all public office holders are held to account for conforming to an agreed set of principles; this

model could potentially be adopted in relation to the ways of working, embedded and recognised as common expectations across the public sector.

The Scottish Parliament has an important role to play in scrutinising how the Scottish Government and its bodies apply the ways of working, particularly in relation to programmes of public service reform. We hope that this will be reflected in the work of Committees in the new Parliament.

What next?

It will be important that the Scottish Government does not allow perfection to stand in the way of progress. Once defined, we would advise officials to focus on implementing the ways of working that feel most urgent in the current context.

Early priorities for the start of a new Government and Parliament might usefully be:

- Including the ways of working as a core component of the finalised Scottish wellbeing framework.
- Positioning the launch of the revised framework as a fresh start, with all the opportunities for a step-change that flow from that framing.
- Setting out a five-year plan for investment in the ways of working as enablers of progress.
- Encouraging and embracing structured scrutiny of the ways of working, including within the remit of the Public Finance and Administration Committee.

Implementation must not be regarded as a “once and done” activity, but an ongoing and embodied commitment to acting in ways that institutionalise progress towards the wellbeing vision for Scotland. This is not only a job for the Scottish Government, and we encourage them to maintain an ongoing and open dialogue with everyone who has a role to play in bringing this vision to life.

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