



From monitoring to meaning: the next phase of Ireland's wellbeing framework

Carnegie UK's reflections on five years of Ireland's wellbeing framework.



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Introduction

Ireland's current [wellbeing framework](#) was developed in response to a growing recognition that economic growth alone does not provide a sufficient account of how people are living or whether progress is being sustained. Arising from the 2020 Programme for Government, it was designed to provide a broader account of Ireland's progress across economic, social and environmental dimensions, with particular emphasis on equality and sustainability over time.

Since 2021, the framework has evolved from an initial statement of intent into a more established cross-government approach. Supported by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) Well-being Information Hub, it has begun to shape annual analysis, budget documentation and wider policy discussion.

However, after five years, it is right to ask if the wellbeing framework has moved far enough beyond simply reporting and measuring into meaningfully shaping public spending, departmental priorities and accountability across the whole of government activity. There is also an opportunity now to consider if a stronger statutory basis for the wellbeing framework, or clearer institutional ownership, could help to achieve this policy aspiration and mitigate the risk of it remaining simply an accompanying narrative to existing government activity, rather than a mechanism that changes how government works and drives population level policy outcomes.

The current phase of review and development of Ireland's wellbeing framework is therefore significant. It is an opportunity not only to assess how far the framework has influenced policy and budget processes to date, but also to decide how deeply it should be embedded in the systems that shape legislation, spending, delivery and accountability.

This paper offers Carnegie UK's reflections and insight from similar efforts to develop, adopt and embed wellbeing frameworks in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to help inform that next phase.



What is a wellbeing framework?

A wellbeing framework is a structured approach that can be used by governments to define, measure and improve how well people are living. They look beyond just economic indicators alone, such as GDP, towards a broader understanding of progress that includes social, environmental and democratic outcomes. At its core, a wellbeing framework sets out a shared vision of what it means to live well, identifying the key areas of life that matter to people and communities, and providing a way to track whether conditions are improving over time.

Wellbeing frameworks then bring together a set of outcomes, indicators and governance processes to guide and inform decision making. They typically organise wellbeing into multiple domains - such as health, work, environment and relationships - and use data and evidence to monitor progress across each area.

Crucially, wellbeing frameworks are not just measurement tools but are intended to shape the culture and design of how government is delivered and how policy is made. A wellbeing framework is designed to help governments prioritise resources, assess trade-offs and align budgets and activity around shared goals and outcomes.

Today, more than 20 democracies with advanced economies use wellbeing frameworks and indexes to help guide and inform government decision making, including the Netherlands, Japan, Sweden, Australia, Canada, Portugal, Scotland, and Wales. As the United Nations Independent High Level Expert Advisory Group on Beyond GDP recently noted, "at the heart of the framework lies the well-being of people and planet under one organizing principle: that progress means equitable, inclusive, and sustainable well-being".

How do they help decision making?

Wellbeing frameworks provide a shared way of understanding and striving to improve social progress. They bring together social, economic, environmental and democratic outcomes to build a fuller picture of how people, places and communities are doing. This helps governments ask better questions and actively grapple with policy trade-offs; not only whether the economy is growing, but whether people have the support, services, voice, security and environment they need to live well.

For government decision making establishing a wellbeing framework can create clearer shared priorities, better alignment across departments and a stronger link between evidence, policy and population outcomes. By identifying the outcomes that matter for people and tracking progress over time, frameworks can support more transparent choices about where to invest, where gaps are emerging and who may be at risk of being left behind. They also encourage longer-term thinking, helping governments balance immediate pressures with the wellbeing of future generations.

Wellbeing frameworks provide a shared articulation of the purpose of government. When embedded and used well, they can help shift wellbeing from an aspiration to a practical tool for policy, budgeting, scrutiny and accountability.



History of Ireland's wellbeing framework

Ireland's wellbeing framework has developed from a political commitment into a more established cross-government approach. Its evolution matters because it shows how a broader understanding of societal progress can begin to influence government policy making, data infrastructure and budget discussion over time.

June
2020

Programme for Government commitment

The 2020 Programme for Government committed Ireland to developing wellbeing measures to complement traditional economic indicators and support a broader account of national progress.

July
2021

First report launch

The first wellbeing framework for Ireland report is published, setting out the guiding vision, ambitions and initial dashboard of indicators across the framework's 11 dimensions.

June
2022

Framework refinement

A second report refines the framework following public consultation and further research, with a stronger emphasis on sustainability, while the CSO develops the Well-being Information Hub to support tracking and public access to the data.

2024
–
2025

Budgetary integration

The framework becomes a recurring feature of the National Economic Dialogue, the Summer Economic Statement and Budget Day documentation, while government develops wellbeing budget tagging to show how public expenditure maps against the framework's dimensions and Quality of Life assessments.

2026

Five-year review and next phase of implementation

The current phase of reflection and development provides an opportunity to assess how far the framework has influenced policy and budget processes to date, and to decide how deeply it should be embedded in the next phase of implementation.



Insight from UK wellbeing frameworks

As Ireland moves into the next phase of implementation of its wellbeing framework, experience from similar efforts in the UK offers useful insight on what helps wellbeing governance models and frameworks endure and what enables them to meaningfully and positively influence decision making.

Scotland

A shared outcomes framework still searching for traction

Scotland's [National Performance Framework \(NPF\)](#) offers an important long-term lesson for Ireland: wellbeing frameworks can survive changes in leadership and government priorities and become part of the language of public policy, but that alone does not automatically mean they shape decision making.

Scotland's experience with its National Performance Framework shows that any such wellbeing framework needs to be more than just durable: it must be embedded in public service reform, mechanisms of accountability and the working culture and practice of public bodies. To be successful in delivering population wide outcomes, the framework must genuinely drive and influence how government works and how leaders and managers grapple with policy trade-offs and decision making.

Ways of working matter

A strength of the Scottish model is that it established a clear national narrative around outcomes, helping to shift debate beyond narrow measures of economic growth.

The NPF gave Scotland a durable structure for talking about national progress in broader terms, including health, environment, communities, poverty, and fairness. This mattered because wellbeing frameworks, representing a new and alternative form of governance models, need time to build recognition and legitimacy across government and civil society.

However, Scotland's experience also shows that an outcomes framework is not enough on its own. Where outcomes are not translated into departmental ways of working, delivery plans and operational mechanisms, they risk remaining aspirational.

At Carnegie UK, we have heard time and time again how codified "ways of working" for public servants that align with the wellbeing framework, and which define and incentivise how people and departments should act and interact, are needed to ensure greater uptake and impact.



It is for the Irish Government and its partners to choose which specific ways of working it believes will have the greatest impact for its own context and prioritise embedding these in practice.

However, drawing on the experience from Scotland and from international research, the following themes offer a guide to useful areas of focus:

- **Place:** understanding how outcomes materialise in specific places and for different population groups and using this insight to shape policy and identify appropriate interventions.
- **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.
- **Collaboration:** understanding that solutions don't exist within policy, organisational or sectoral silos, and that multiple contributions need to be recognised and marshalled, including the management of competing priorities and trade-offs.
- **Prevention:** knowing what to do now to prevent problems (and associated human and fiscal costs) occurring or getting worse in the future.
- **People and involvement:** recognising the role for the voice and perspective of people who don't work in the public service system in shaping the design and delivery of policies and services.

Create the conditions for success

Irrespective of which ways of working the Irish Government chooses to prioritise, they will only have impact if they are built into the overall architecture of the framework rather than added on to existing practice. They need to be meaningful enough for people to understand how they apply to their work, clearly relevant to the wider vision, and visible in a way that makes it possible to recognise whether individuals and organisations are working in these ways in practice. They should also be embedded in organisational development strategies from the outset, so that they shape how institutions operate.

Key insight: Connecting population outcomes in the wellbeing framework with a small set of shared ways of working across government and public services can help to shape the culture and practice, alongside the leadership, budget processes, policy tools and scrutiny, needed to ensure the framework drives meaningful change in how policy decisions are designed and implemented.



The accountability gap

One of the clearest lessons from Scotland is the challenge of accountability. The NPF has helped create a shared language of outcomes, but the link between those outcomes and the machinery of delivering government requires attention.

This is especially important where outcomes depend on coordinated action across several departments, such as housing, child poverty, mental health or climate resilience. These are precisely the areas where a wellbeing framework should add most value, but also where traditional accountability structures can make collective action hardest.

In addition, Ireland's formal audit, accountability and scrutiny arrangements should work to support adoption and implementation of the framework, prevention and long-term action rather than working against them.

Key insight: Ensuring there are explicit cross-departmental accountability arrangements for shared wellbeing priorities, backed by named lead ministers, joint targets and published progress reviews, can help to embed the framework into day-to-day ways of working.



Budget alignment

Scotland also illustrates the limits of outcomes frameworks when they sit alongside, rather than inside, fiscal decision-making. An outcomes-based approach is most powerful when it shapes how spending choices are made. If budget processes continue to privilege short-term objectives, collective wellbeing and social progress risks becoming an accompanying narrative rather than a real driver of resource allocation.

Key insight: Ensuring the wellbeing framework informs spending decisions at the point of budget formation, with departments required to show how bids contribute to long-term wellbeing outcomes and how trade-offs will be managed, is a powerful tool for driving systemic adoption of the framework.



Wales

Institutionalising long-termism still to deliver impact at scale

The [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#) has placed wellbeing on a statutory footing and built a wider governance architecture around long-term thinking. National indicators track progress against seven wellbeing goals, while national milestones set expectations for the pace and scale of change over time. However, the experience in Wales to date suggests that legislation, while important, is not sufficient on its own. The second decade of the landmark Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales has been shaped by the practical challenge of implementation.

From compliance to change

A central lesson from Wales is the risk that wellbeing duties become procedural rather than transformative. The Welsh "Five Ways of Working" were designed to reshape how public bodies think and act, but in practice they can be treated as a compliance exercise applied to existing policies rather than as a framework for redesigning priorities from the outset.

Key insight: Consideration – and potentially resource – is needed from the outset to guard against wellbeing frameworks becoming a retrospective, box-ticking approach. Requiring wellbeing assessment at the earliest stage of policy design, before options are narrowed and decisions are effectively made, can help with this.



Oversight needs influence

Wales also shows the value and limits of an independent institutional champion. The Future Generations Commissioner has helped maintain profile and visibility, provide challenge, issue guidance and keep long-term thinking on the agenda across government and public bodies.

The role has also mattered as a source of practical support and coordination, helping organisations interpret the wellbeing framework, connect the wellbeing duties to everyday decisions and build confidence in a different way of working. But the Welsh experience also shows that where oversight is primarily advisory, impact still depends heavily on political will, the wider accountability system, and the willingness of public bodies to respond.



Key insight: If Ireland develops a comparable oversight function and its own “Ways of Working”, they should be designed to do more than advocate. They should work to strengthen accountability by requiring public bodies to explain how major decisions align with long-term wellbeing objectives and help drive cultural change.



Reporting is not the same as resourcing

Perhaps the most important lesson from Wales is that wellbeing frameworks often influence how governments describe policy more quickly than how they allocate money. Progress in reporting can coexist with much weaker progress in budgetary decision-making if finance processes remain largely unchanged.

In Wales, support for future generations in principle does not automatically resolve difficult trade-offs in practice. Governments still face strong pressure to prioritise immediate demands over longer-term investment, particularly in areas such as housing, infrastructure and climate transition.

Key insight: Wellbeing outcomes must be factored into how budgets are set and explicit mechanisms are required to test whether major decisions protect long-term wellbeing, especially where short-term pressures risk crowding out future-focused investment.



Northern Ireland

First steps towards integrating wellbeing into programme delivery

Experience in Northern Ireland offers a different kind of lesson for Ireland. The Executive's [Programme for Government 2024–2027](#) is underpinned by a [wellbeing dashboard](#), tracking around 50 indicators across social, economic, environmental and democratic domains. It is explicitly aligned to the government's priorities of People, Planet and Prosperity alongside a cross-cutting commitment to Peace and is ostensibly designed to help policymakers understand which interventions are working, for whom, and under what conditions.

This experience shows that, even in a politically fragile system, it is possible to build a more coherent wellbeing evidence base and link it to a programme for government. The recent development of the Northern Ireland Programme for Government and accompanying wellbeing dashboard led by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), is important not because it resolves the wider challenges of delivery, but because it demonstrates the value of high-quality, accessible and regularly updated data in giving wellbeing policy greater credibility and continuity.

Data infrastructure can strengthen continuity

A notable strength of the Northern Ireland approach is the role played by NISRA in developing a wellbeing dashboard for the Programme for Government. The dashboard brings together a broad set of indicators across a range of domains and provides a transparent and accessible way of tracking wellbeing over time, with commentary and disaggregation where available. That matters in a context where political interruption has often made long-term policy continuity difficult. A robust analytical infrastructure can help keep attention on long-term outcomes even when wider governance arrangements are changeable or unstable.

Key insight: Dashboards matter most when they are not static publications but living tools that help sustain focus. Investing in the credibility, accessibility and routine updating of wellbeing evidence helps to improve transparency and support scrutiny over time.



Local delivery makes wellbeing tangible

Northern Ireland also reinforces a lesson seen elsewhere: wellbeing feels most meaningful when it is visible in local decision-making. Community planning structures have created a route for connecting broad outcomes to place-based priorities, and this matters in practice because people experience wellbeing through housing, transport, green space, safety and community relationships in the places where they live. It is also notable that this work was initially delivered in the absence of a sitting Northern Ireland Assembly. Wellbeing dashboards can show whether outcomes are improving, but local community planning is what makes those outcomes tangible.

Key insight: Ensuring national wellbeing indicators are mirrored by local wellbeing planning and insight can help to ensure local communities feel connected to national ambitions and the policy trade-offs that shape daily life.



Measurement needs political follow-through

At the same time, Northern Ireland underlines a familiar limitation: better measurement does not automatically produce better joined-up decision-making. A dashboard can improve visibility, comparability and public understanding, but it cannot by itself create political alignment or guarantee that departments will act collectively on the evidence.

The lesson for Ireland is therefore twofold: invest in strong analytical foundations, but do not confuse an improved evidence platform with an embedded system of accountability and delivery.

Key insight: Pairing investment in wellbeing measurement with clear institutional routes for action can help ensure that data informs prioritisation, coordination and follow-through rather than sitting alongside decision-making as an observational tool.





Next phase of embedding Ireland's framework

Carnegie UK believes that the current review of Ireland's wellbeing framework offers an important opportunity to truly embed the framework in the institutions and processes that shape decision making in Ireland. Drawing on the experience of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we believe progress depends not only on good measurement, but on accountability, budget alignment and local traction. On this basis, Carnegie UK recommends the following six priorities as areas of focus for the 2026–2030 period of Ireland's wellbeing framework.

1.

Renew around outcomes

Any updates or amendments to the wellbeing framework dimensions and indicators, should factor in the importance of outcomes focussed language in setting out the overarching purpose of the framework. Experience from Scotland shows that this approach can help enable shared clarity across government, business and civil society on what the purpose of the framework is and can allow different parts of the state to better understand their connection and contribution towards these shared outcomes.

2.

Align with the UN Beyond GDP national indicator set

Ireland should consider adopting, or explicitly mapping its national wellbeing indicators against, the indicator set proposed by the United Nations Secretary-General's Independent High-Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP. Using this as a reference point would help Ireland align its framework with emerging international practice

3.

Put the framework on a statutory footing

Consideration should be given to putting Ireland's wellbeing framework on a statutory footing. Legislation would not by itself guarantee impact, as the Welsh experience shows, but it would provide a clearer basis for continuity, institutional ownership and a more consistent expectation that public bodies consider long-term and intergenerational wellbeing in decision-making. We also recommend that this work should include developing a legal definition of wellbeing that explicitly incorporates equity and long-termism.

4.

Develop institutional "ways of working"

Ireland should develop a shared set of institutional ways of working to support the next phase of the framework. We believe these should help translate outcomes into everyday practice by shaping how policy is designed, how departments collaborate, and how trade-offs are managed from the outset, rather than leaving wellbeing as a reporting framework alone.

5.

Embed wellbeing in budget formation

Ireland should move beyond publishing wellbeing perspectives alongside the budget and require departments to demonstrate, at the point of budget formation, how spending proposals contribute to shared and longer-term wellbeing outcomes, what trade-offs have been made across the eleven dimensions, and how delivery will be tracked over time.

6.

Give the framework local traction and insight

To build public legitimacy and practical relevance, the national framework needs to be visible in places as well as in central government. We therefore recommend that Ireland develop local wellbeing planning so that national outcomes are translated into local priorities, communities can see how decisions affect everyday life, and public bodies are encouraged to work collaboratively around shared outcomes. There is also a need to consider how better local data on collective wellbeing is collected and shared to inform policy priorities.



Conclusion

By 2030, the aim should be for Ireland's wellbeing framework to function less as a dashboard that sits alongside government and more as a core part of how the Irish state plans, budgets and learns.

If Ireland can embed the framework in law, budgeting, long-term governance and local delivery and insight, it will be better placed to judge progress not only by the pace of economic growth, but by whether people are able to live well now and into the future.





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