

National Performance Framework consultation 2023

Response from Evaluation Support Scotland

A: Background

Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) is a unique charity (SC036529) that has been central to the development of evaluation and learning practice in Scotland's third sector over the last 18 years. We work with over 500 third sector organisations and funders each year so they can measure and explain their impact and use learning to improve practice and inform policy. Specifically we:

- Train and support third sector organisations and funders to do evaluation in a straightforward way.
- Provide solutions to evaluation challenges.
- Influence evaluation and learning practice by championing what "good" looks like and sharing third sector experience.
- Broker learning relationships between funded and funders.
- Facilitate the use of third sector evaluation for learning and improvement in third sector organisations and in wider policy.
- Strengthen third sector research practice.

For more information see: www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk

B: Evaluation Support Scotland and the NPF

ESS has always promoted an [outcomes approach](#) and we are **supportive of the NPF**, as are third sector organisations we work with. We, and they, like the values, simple language and positively framed outcomes in the 2018 version.

So the focus of our response is on the barriers to the further implementation of NPF and on how to address them.

In June 2019, ESS ran a joint event with the Scottish Government NPF Unit where third sector organisations explored what the NPF means for the sector. [An event report is on our website](#). We then worked with third sector organisations to produce [case studies](#) on the relevance of the NPF and these were launched at the SCVO Gathering in February 2020 and are on the NPF website. This work reinforced the value of the NPF and identified a number of practical steps to improve its use that are still relevant.

Other relevant ESS activity includes the report of a roundtable we ran in February 2021 with key stakeholders "[Were we wrong to talk about outcomes?](#)"

This consultation response draws on these events and ESS's wider experience.

We feel it is more important to take action to make the NPF central to the delivery of public services than spending time amending outcome wording. It is clear that simply **having** an NPF is not itself enough to **achieve** the outcomes within it. The priority should be on implementation.

C: Why outcomes matter and why they are challenging

ESS believes that the Christie Commission aspiration that “public service organisations work together effectively to achieve outcomes” remains as valid now as it was in 2011. Establishing and maintaining a focus on outcomes in the public and third sectors matters because:

- ✓ Outcomes are why people in the third and public sectors **come to work**. We want to make a difference with and for others. A focus on outcomes is a focus on what **matters**.
- ✓ A focus on outcomes helps our service users **understand** what to expect and helps us explain our impact to funders and stakeholders.
- ✓ A focus on outcomes helps us **learn and improve** – not just counting the number of things we did but helping us critically question whether we are doing the right thing to bring about the change people want. Outcomes provide a route map for measurement and learning.

However, there are some problems with the way the word “outcome” is used:

- Public services **don’t “deliver”** outcomes. They deliver activities that enable people to achieve outcomes. At most the verb should be “achieve”. But in relation to national outcomes, the appropriate word is **“contribute”** since no single activity or organisation can achieve those outcomes on its own. Outcomes cannot be attributed simplistically to the actions of a particular public service.
- Public services can’t **commission** outcomes. They commission services that have the best possible chance of achieving positive outcomes.
- Outcomes aren’t (usually) **targets**. They need to be held lightly; they are a route map for measurement and learning.

Annual budgeting and planning makes things harder by requiring short-term actions whereas working to achieve outcomes needs a **long term** approach.

For more see [“We need to build the focus on outcomes”](#) – our guide on how to build capacity around outcomes and evaluation in health and social care.

D: The trouble with measurement

The NPF outcomes are (rightly) high level so are inevitably hard to measure. The existing indicators – and the NPF reporting website – are a good start but are incomplete and only tell us **whether** outcomes are being achieved (or not) but not why or how. So this data alone cannot inform future action about what public services should do more of, less of etc

In any case, in our experience, the public sector is driven by targets about spend and service use (eg bed days) rather than by outcomes. The NPF has been dropped on top of existing targets rather than replacing less meaningful ones.

Data about need, service provision, service use, value for money and so on help us make decisions or contribute towards understanding about outcomes. But they don’t tell us **if** we are making a difference to people and communities nor help us fully learn and improve. So these data may be necessary but they aren’t

sufficient. Yet public sector action is driven towards hitting non-outcome targets thereby meaning that public services may *hit the target but miss the point*.

D: The trouble with “performance”

In our experience in working with public sector organisations “performance” means accountability. Accountability is important in relation to monitoring delivery against need, plans and spend. However we cannot have accountability for national outcomes because no individual public sector - or third sector organisation - can be accountable for achieving a national outcome all by itself.

So accountability cannot be the **only** driver. We need to increase a culture of **learning** and incentivise it. Without a culture of learning, we (may) know if services have been delivered but not whether these are the right services, delivered in the right way to the right people to achieve the outcomes people want. We may know what’s going wrong but not why or how to put it right.

E: The trouble with “national”

The shift in 2018 to making the national outcomes **Scotland’s** outcomes was welcome. However, it left unanswered questions about how we know what difference the **Scottish Government** itself is making and how its own activities intend to contribute to the NPF outcomes.

Annual Programmes for Government are published but there is no accompanying reflection or analysis of the **previous** Programme for Government. In fact we can’t even see easily if the actions in previous Programmes for Government were delivered fully never mind whether these actions achieved any outcomes. Without SG setting a leading example it is perhaps not surprising that other parts of the public sector are not as outcome-focused as they could be.

F: Some solutions

1. The purpose of the national outcomes framework should be largely as set out on page 8 of your consultation document: namely a description of the Scotland we want to live in and our values, and as a catalyst for collaboration. However these purposes would be less ambiguous if the word “performance” was removed from the title.
2. By all means, monitor the national outcomes by using and improving the national indicators but please recognise that simply recording that one outcome is improving or another is getting worse is only useful if we know why and what we need to do next. So any monitoring of the national outcomes should be **supplemented by investigations and research** about what is helping or hindering the outcome (including external factors outwith public services’ control) to improve the “what works” evidence base and drive future action.
3. A focus on learning could be further enhanced if Scottish Government and partners create and resource **forums for collective conversations about what’s needed from all of us to achieve outcomes**. It would be helpful to have theories of change that describe the range of activities and

approaches needed to achieve the national outcomes and what are the “outcomes along the way”. None of us achieves outcomes by ourselves but different services and sectors make different contributions so we need to build better understanding about the range of actions needed and the roles different organisations play. **Third sector research, evidence and practice experience** would make a significant contribution to such collective conversations and understanding.

4. Public service scrutiny should **reward outcome-focused approaches** in a way that realistically recognises that individual public services don’t “deliver” outcomes. We suggest public services be monitored on the extent to which they are:
 - planning work and evaluating achievements in relation to outcomes that can be mapped onto those in the national framework
 - undertaking and sharing learning and reflection about what’s working, what they should do more of, what they should stop doing.
5. **Scrutiny questions** could be along the following lines:
 - How are you evaluating whether outcomes are achieved with and for the people you work with?
 - What do you know more about what works in achieving outcomes (even if some of that learning has come from getting it wrong!)?
 - Have you used learning from last year to do something better this year?
6. Where it is useful to measure (and have targets about) the use of resources or customer experience, keep them in proportion to reflection on outcomes.
7. All **data and evidence** (whether about outcomes or not) should satisfy the following tests:
 - It should be about what **matters** to people.
 - It should tell us something **useful** and **meaningful**.
 - It should actually be **used** for **improvement**.
8. Publish **guides and case studies** of how different organisations and sectors use the NPF for planning and evaluation and to focus on outcomes. ESS would be happy to contribute.
9. Ensure that **the Scottish Government leads the way on outcomes** by:
 - setting outcomes for all Scottish Government programmes
 - showing how SG believes its programmes and actions contribute towards national outcomes
 - publishing regular reflection and learning about how actions have led to outcomes or not and what this means for future action
10. Be clear that there is **no easy fix**. ESS thinks the Christie’s aspiration of working together towards outcomes has not been fully implemented because

it's **difficult** and because of the **presence** of **disincentives** in monitoring and scrutiny rather than due to lack of legal requirements. If we want to work together towards outcomes then we need to help each other to work together positively. Making individual public sector organisations comply with legal requirements about the national outcomes *might* make things worse (sticks to beat them with rather than rewarding learning and collaboration). We like the Scottish Leadership Forum work on how to support public service leaders to build an outcome focus into their work that draws on behaviour change theory
<https://scottishleadersforum.org/publications-reports/>

I hope this response is helpful. We would be very happy to discuss further.

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