

Programme for Government – Draft Outcomes Framework

Submission by Sustainable Northern Ireland

About us

Sustainable Northern Ireland is a not-for-profit organisation that works with Northern Ireland's public sector to advance sustainable development. Through our network, we support and empower public sector collaboration to accelerate action on climate change and deliver a sustainable future for all.

Sustainable Northern Ireland's vision is *"A world where prosperity is achieved in ways that are good for people and the planet"*.

Delivering for local government and public bodies is the cornerstone of our approach. We do this through a programme of capacity building, communications, campaigns and events focused on key themes and offering opportunities for peer-to-peer support, learning and coordination.

Introductory remarks

Sustainable Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to comment on this new Outcomes Framework for the Programme for Government.

We heartily endorse the fact that outcomes of individual and collective wellbeing have been selected the drivers for the government agenda. We are also pleased to see a link being made to the internationally agreed performance framework for sustainable development, the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

However, we strongly believe this Outcomes Framework isn't a bold enough statement on Northern Ireland's approach to delivering on its commitment to sustainable development. We believe the overarching objective of the PfG should be 'to advance wellbeing through sustainable development'. Essentially placing sustainability at the heart of Government, once and for all.

In this response we offer ideas and thinking on alternative wording of existing outcomes, and some comments on key priorities and indicators, backed by arguments to support our positions.

Outcome 1: Our children and young people have the best start in life

The outcome 'Everyone has access to quality education' is more in keeping with the United Nations sustainable development language, is more specific and encourages more holistic thinking.

Systems thinking is essential if we are to deliver the kind of transformational change needed to put Northern Ireland on a more sustainable footing.

It is important that everyone can access high quality education, at all ages. There is some repetition across the priority areas, for example 'access to education' and 'skills and attainment'. We recommend simplifying and aligning issues where possible.

For example, access to a decent education early in life can support reaching our full potential as an adult. In our view, these outcomes are intrinsically linked.

Key Priority Areas included under this Outcome that are not relevant

We suggest introduction of a separate outcome 'End poverty in all forms' which would include reducing child poverty. Child health could be addressed under 'Good Health & Wellbeing'.

Childhood health and educational attainment are quite often linked to household income. Interventions must aim to tackle issues at source i.e. treating the cause, rather than the symptoms. Following the UN Sustainable Development Goal framework allows policy makers to do that.

Outcome 2: We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment

We advocate alignment of the draft outcomes with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, otherwise sustainable development will continue to be a separate programme, when instead the PfG itself should be the primary instrument for delivery.

Climate action and the circular economy

The World Economic Forum has recently classified climate change as the number one threat facing the world, yet **climate action isn't listed as a priority** in the draft PfG. There is no explicit mention of the climate and nature emergency anywhere in the document. Climate action needs greater prominence if we are to secure the level of urgent change required.

The document lists 'waste management' as a key priority. There must be acknowledgement that efforts to manage waste is one part of a whole system transition towards a more circular economy, achieved through the overarching framework of the UN sustainable development goals.

The move towards a more circular economy will support better resource efficiency by doing more with less (responsible consumption patterns) whilst making a sizeable contribution to reducing carbon emissions. Renewable energy will contribute to reducing c. 55% of carbon emissions, but broader Circular Economy principles/activities will help to mitigate the other 45%.

Shift in focus towards enhancing natural capital

We suggest a re-working of this outcome statement to read, “Our environment is protected and improved for future generations.”

The emphasis in the existing outcome implies that environmental protection is a necessary factor in the pursuit of economic growth, and it confuses ‘ends’ with ‘means’. The distinguished economist Herman Daly has observed that “...the natural world is the envelope that contains, sustains and provisions the economy, not the other way round.”¹

As we strive to grow the size of the economy here, it must not be at the expense of our natural assets. The loss of biodiversity in our countryside is matched by a decline in its environmental quality and its provision of ecosystem services such as the availability of clean water. Much of this damage can be laid at the door of an increasingly intensified agricultural sector. Yet the agri-food sector is a key component of the economy here; if it is to continue to receive substantial public funding, in this post-Brexit era, the industry must deliver wider benefits to society.

A report² for the UN Environment Program calculated the value of the world’s ‘natural capital’ that was consumed by the top industrial sectors. The report found that none of the top 20 industrial sectors would be profitable if the externalised environmental costs were integrated into their financial balance sheets. More pointedly, it falls to the public purse to pay for the remediation of the environmental damage. Less than one third of our rivers are classified as being in good condition; this dismal record is in part due to the ‘substantiated incidences’ of water pollution, 27% of which are attributed to farming.

None of the measures selected for the indicators relating to this outcome really captures the spirit of what the work seeks to achieve – “protecting and enhancing this stock of natural capital...”. Previous Programme for Government measures of progress - household waste recycling, greenhouse gas emissions and the use of public transport – whilst are all valid environmental gauges, none of them related directly to the protection and enhancement of natural capital.

The Scottish Government uses natural capital as one of its national indicators and justifies its use succinctly:

“Natural capital is the elements of nature that produce value for people, including ecosystems, species, freshwater and land. Scotland’s natural assets are the basis of our quality of life and underpin our economy, and it is crucial that they are protected and enhanced in order to benefit us now and for future generations. Investing in Scotland’s natural capital is seen as fundamental to maintaining a healthy and resilient economy.

Many of Scotland's growth sectors, such as tourism, food and drink, depend on high quality air, land and water. There are many other less tangible ways in which nature

¹ <http://www.sustainableni.org/blog/book-review-positive-deviant-sustainability-leadership-perverse-world>

² <https://grist.org/business-technology/none-of-the-worlds-top-industries-would-be-profitable-if-they-paid-for-the-natural-capital-they-use/>

sustains us, contributing to our health, wellbeing, enjoyment, sense of place and who we are as a nation.”

As a measure, it deploys a newly created Natural Capital Asset Index. Since many of the data components of this index are already gathered in Northern Ireland for the DAERA annual Environmental Statistics Report, it should be relatively straightforward to develop something similar here.

Outcome 3: We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect

We recommend alignment with UN SDG 10 and would suggest rewording to the more straightforward 'We reduce inequality within our society'.

Two priorities are missing from the key priority areas, 'income equality' and 'gender equality'.

The Scottish government made a national commitment to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through tackling poverty and inequality within Scotland while, at the same time, helping developing countries to grow in a fair and sustainable manner. This course of action recognises that inequality and poverty are global issues that require a contributory response from all countries. The action plan for this outcome could be used to craft the Executive's response to the SDGs. It may be helpful to refer to the valuable report³ on their UK implementation, published by the House of Commons International Development Committee.

Meanwhile, the Welsh government introduced its ground-breaking Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, strongly linked to the SDGs in spirit and content. There is so much of value within this document, and we commend it to those with the responsibility of creating the action plans for these Framework outcomes.

Outcome 4: We enjoy long, healthy, active lives.

Recommend use of 'good health and well-being' in line with UN SDG terminology.

We strongly support this outcome and its intentions. Among the elements that will make up the Executive's contribution is the implementation of excellent public health strategies. In our view, this is the platform upon which this outcome can best be delivered – 'prevention is better than cure'.

Health inequalities

Tackling health inequalities should be a priority. Health inequalities are avoidable and unfair. They are intrinsically linked with income inequality, and progress in one outcome area (tackling economic inequality) often leads to progress in the other (health and well-being).

The link between food, nature and health

We are convinced that the goal of long, healthy lives is inextricably linked to our diet.

³ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/international-development-committee/news-parliament-20151/sustainable-development-goals-report-published-16-17/>

Public health policy should continue to promote an understanding of the value of fresh, minimally processed, nutritious food, while improving its affordability to tackle the social injustice of food poverty.

If diet is critical to positive health outcomes, so too is regular exercise and access to nature. The natural environment provides widespread opportunities for active engagement at every level of physical ability and for every age. The concept of 'exercise prescriptions' already exists, through which a medical professional may prescribe a specific programme of activities, perhaps gym-based, for a patient's recovery. Other innovative approaches, such as the use of 'green prescriptions', take that idea a step further, using the natural environment for restorative wellbeing benefits.

There are few outcomes in this framework that are of greater relevance to our wellbeing than this one. We suggest that its associated action plan should seek to emphasise, once again, the importance of fresh, healthy food, regular exercise and access to green space, as the foundation for a long, healthy, active life.

Outcome 5 – Everyone can reach their full potential

This outcome is vague and should be split into specific outcomes that deal with 'Ending poverty' and 'Providing access to quality education for all'.

'Everyone can reach their potential' cuts across many other social and economic outcomes and isn't specific.

'Jobs' and 'Skills & Attainment' should become part of a re-titled economic outcome 'Decent work and economic prosperity'.

Sports, arts and culture might fit into a 'good health and wellbeing' outcome, as per the UN SDG framework.

Outcome 6 - Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral

This outcome is market-based and doesn't acknowledge that the fundamental role of any economy is to provide decent work and fair wages, so that individual citizens can meet their basic needs. Economic growth as measured by GDP is therefore no longer an adequate measure of economic success.

The PfG must recognise that economic growth, as measured by GDP, is not itself an objective. There needs to be a shift in focus away from market-based growth (which is a 20th century economic ideology) towards more progressive models of economics that measure success in terms of the economic wellbeing of citizens (e.g. the Donut Economic Theory⁴).

'Globally competitive' and 'regionally balanced' are laudable adjectives but they do not necessarily equate to economic success at the individual level. The economy could be growing at a macro level, but if individuals and communities are left behind, the growth is meaningless.

Reducing poverty is not currently recognised as an outcome or priority in the draft PfG Outcomes Framework. The economy is a primary instrument for reducing poverty, inequality and improving overall societal well-being. Economic prosperity and the

⁴ <https://www.kateraworth.com>

eradication of poverty are, we argue, two sides of the same coin.

There must also be an acknowledgement of the need to also move towards a 'circular carbon-neutral economy' whereby the resources fuelling the economy are renewable and used efficiently, with minimal waste arising.

A fundamental rethink of the language is needed here. Perhaps a better title is:

'Our economy is inclusive, circular and carbon-neutral'

Outcome 7 – Everyone Feels Safe – we all respect the law and each other

We believe the title of this outcome should be broader, reflecting SDG 16: 'Peace, justice and strong institutions' to address issues around injustice, corruption and lack of public confidence in political institutions.

Missing priorities include:

1) Ensure strong institutions:

- Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels
- Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making
- Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms
- Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms

2) Prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime

Outcome 8 - We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives

We recommend the re-organisation of priorities into distinct outcomes, for example:

- End poverty in all its forms
- Good Health & Wellbeing (older people, disability, mental health)
- Sustainable Cities and Communities (housing)
- Reducing Inequalities (inclusion and tackling disadvantage)
- Employment and decent wages

Outcome 9 - People want to live, work and visit here

Northern Ireland has spectacular landscapes, one of the finest coastlines in Europe, some outstanding wildlife sites and an impressive variety of built and cultural heritage assets. That its only World Heritage Site, the Giant's Causeway, is the region's most-visited attraction says a lot about its international standing but also attests to the pulling power of a natural asset. However, it is not only in its tourism potential that our relatively unspoiled environment demonstrates its economic significance; it is also a factor in contributing to that elusive 'quality of life', of interest to companies in attracting people to work in this region.

Although Northern Ireland is viewed as a predominantly rural place, two-thirds of us live in urban areas. In our troubled recent past, it was never easy to attract the inward investment that was deemed important to our economic growth. That sometimes resulted in planning approvals with minimal constraints for physical developments of poor design quality on inappropriate sites.

With the land-use planning process having now moved to councils, the introduction of Community Planning and Local Development Plans, the opportunity exists to plan new urban spaces that demonstrate high levels of social, economic and physical sustainability,

all of which will serve to create places in which people want to live. In this regard, the use of the guidelines in the excellent Living Places document, published by the former DOE, should be mandatory in the planning process.

High levels of optimism and hope have been invested in Community Planning. As the plans develop, it will be critical that departmental resources are combined with those of the councils to promote the collaborative delivery of common outcomes for the wellbeing of the people served by both parts of government.

Key priority areas

There is some repetition of priorities in this outcome. Economic and infrastructure priorities are adequately addressed in other outcome areas. Also, we believe 'Growth' shouldn't be listed as a priority. The out workings of economic growth can be, however. There needs to be a shift in focus towards jobs and prosperity. A 'growth for the sake of growth' ideology is not compatible with sustainable development.

Additional Information

The PfG outcomes are a compelling set of ideals but are somewhat vague and detached from the real world. We recommend paring the outcomes and priorities back to essential components of a well-functioning, sustainable society. Sustainable Development Goals either missing from or not explicit enough in the PfG include:

- Access to affordable, reliable, clean energy
- An end to poverty in all its forms
- Less inequality
- Access to quality education for all
- Income, jobs and decent work
- Citizens having a political voice
- Gender equality
- Social equity
- Access to safe, nutritious food
- Access to clean air and water

The UN SDGs are clear in their intent - that no one should be left behind. The framework is specific and easy to follow. There is a compelling argument that the UN SDGs should be used to guide the design and development of PfG outcomes and priorities. Shared terminology could link PfG outcomes with the SDGs. This would demonstrate political commitment to sustainable development, by making it the overarching objective of the PfG. In this way, the PfG would become Northern Ireland's Sustainable Development Strategy. PfG reporting would be the primary mechanism for reporting progress on sustainable development, rather than having to map PfG indicators to the SDGs. In doing so, sustainable development will be promoted from its current position as an environmental issue, to becoming an overarching cross-cutting government objective.

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22 March 2021