

Main points and actions from LINK meeting with Scottish Government on the National Performance Framework, 27 January 2012, Victoria Quay

Attending

SG - Keith Connal, Gareth Heavisides and Charles Stewart Roper of Natural Resources Division in the Environment (shortly to be Environment and Forestry) Directorate

LINK - Dan Barlow, Aedan Smith, Beth Stratford, Maggie Keegan, Diarmid Hearn, Jen Anderson

Background

LINK noted SG's refresh of the NPF in summer and autumn 2011, submitting / supporting briefings (x 2 – see below) and seeking a meeting with Rhona Dubery in the ... unit. There had been no response other than holding emails from Keith Connal, and latterly the offer of this meeting with the Natural Resources Division.

The lead in SG

Keith thanked LINK for coming and gave apologies that a meeting had not happened sooner in response to LINK's requests.

DB thanked Keith and noted the lack of general awareness of the NPF – as a high-level strategy for Scotland - among Scotland's politicians. KC responded that his team were not guardians of the framework, nor responsible for the Parliament's website; he had been aware of LINK's efforts to secure a discussion, but could not offer a lead in terms of government's broader position. DB explained that LINK recognised the NPF was of wider relevance and would work with whichever parts of SG we were advised to, though had struggled to be offered a meeting; if guidance could be given about the lead team for the NPF that would be useful.

Good idea and approach/ what about its application?

DB noted this was a new, innovative approach with overall use to inform policy and strategy development in relation to a range of challenges. He recognised that there would still be some learning to be done and that the NPF had strengths as well as weaknesses.

As there was no longer a live sustainable development strategy for Scotland, LINK saw the NPF as very important in helping to deliver SD things to which SG is committed for social, environmental and economic reasons; without reference to any other SD strategy, LINK and the NGOs attached considerable significance to the NPF and its indicators and objectives.

The dominance of economic growth as a 'goal' confused things: growth is a tool: the NGOs had briefed to this effect during the refresh, remained concerned, would continue to raise.

LINK welcomed the inclusion of sustainability as a target but felt the NPF lacked a high-level indicator of sustainability alongside GHG emissions (which relies on the Climate Act) rather than being a year-by-year measurable. Were the lower level indicators seen as contributing here, eg biodiversity? And was there potential conflict between carbon reduction and biodiversity aims in relation to sustainable development?

KD had not been involved much in the NPF's development or the refresh.

He advised that it is simply a framework, an effort to import a brief, easily promotable model within SG, it has its own limitations; the Government was not interested in anything else. Everything drives towards the front page but it is not only indicators that matter to SG that are reflected. The NPF should not be seen in isolation.

MK asked if the guidance to CPPs on SOA delivery and funding was therefore important. KC confirmed that is the case; that too was part of the suite of material setting out Government's stall, taking forward Government's ambition for Scotland – alongside the economic strategy, programme for Government, spending review, NPF refresh, outcome of Christie Commission. The spending review outline plans for deployment of resources – he advised LINK to see the rural chapter.

DB used the example of a tick against carbon reduction not addressing progress towards sustainable development at the higher level, as an example of LINK concern, and sought reassurance about other ways in which sustainable development and climate would be featured, and the relationship between 38 and 5 year timeframes.

AS pointed to the potential for this Scottish framework to lead in the UK and the EU and the willingness of NGOs to promote a good model, if the NPF could be developed to be clear about its connection to what is delivered on the ground, how post election priorities were captured and what the lessons are that tie in with key messages in the other documents. KC would get feedback from the 'team'.

KC was aware of a decision to simplify the language on the first page, to remove targets (unsure why), that there was a reluctance to spend time and energy on revising from scratch, and that the reordering of outcomes was not consulted on initially, Government being content with the statement of purpose, strategic objectives and national outcomes (bar addition of 16th), so these remain the same; the rest was tidying completed or moribund indicators.

DB reported that LINK had fed in on a couple of angles and tabled the joint NGO briefing and the LINK submission on biodiversity indicators. AS noted that it would have been positive to have involved stakeholders, notwithstanding the desire for speed. KC again indicated a senior ministerial level decision that the construct was not being changed though agreed consultation would have helped. AS endorsed the value of collective ownership of such initiatives and KC replied that he thought there had been some involvement in the process by the Agencies.

DH repeated LINK's question about any formal process to oversee the framework and review progress. KC did not know. He noted that the ScotPerforms website carries more information on the underlying process and there are references to contributory outcomes in the short term to help realise in the long term, though was not sure if these were in fact being developed. AS indicated that it would be useful to know and asked if LINK could please be involved. MK asked how this fits with CPPs and KC said it should not affect that level of action – it is more about achievement of indicators at a national level.

AS welcomed the inclusion of a biodiversity indicator noting however that this is crude in many ways with problems which he outlined in detail; he asked if the LINK submission had been considered during the refresh. Gareth Heavisides reported that this had been a political decision; there was already an indicator with a whole suite of things which SNH monitor. MK asked if UK habitats, about which there is a lot of information, would not be a better measure. Charles Stewart Roper replied that with the decision for only one indicator the important thing had been to choose something that would work over time, for which there was dependable data, about health as a proxy for other things. AS accepted that this was a challenging area but asked if this could be improved and offered suggestions from LINK and help on data and reporting. As it stood the indicator was too broad for this. What scope he asked was there for a change in the next iteration.

KC said he did not know future plans and would check with the 'team, he was doubtful about opportunity during this term of government given the documents outlined.

LINK had encouraged the Finance Cttee away from a GDP focus and to consider the NPF. Keen to support an integrative system which could demonstrate that/when Scotland is flourishing, this was esp. relevant given the current constitutional debate. We were therefore surprised and the lack of resonance and keen to understand what traction the NPF has in Government and how far each plan refers to the objectives.

KC said he could not answer. He was aware that the NPF was referenced in corporate planning documents for SNH and SEPA and there was guidance to all public bodies (2009 letter from Swinney

to 120 pub bods) about adopting an outcomes-based approach and aligning with the national purposes and outcomes. He felt this does influence these bodies' decisions on what they do, and ties into funding and spending review; the same Minister holds the purse strings – arguments for £s have to be couched in terms of the NPF.

MK welcomed the connectivity. KC reiterated that this applies to all public bodies.

DB said LINK was keen to see this pushed, with links to preventative spend particularly important now.

DB asked if a downward direction of travel in a given area would trigger action, and how that would be fed in to the process. KC would check this.

CSR said the Scotland Performs site is updated as and when data is available (some quarterly, some less regularly); it is a rolling rather than specifically timed process. There has to be introductory commentary; some flat-lining is conceivable and acceptable as there may be no reportable activity over quite a long period. Discussions go on all the time, so that downward turns or flat-lining won't be a cause for surprise; the Minister will ask relevant players to explain what's going on behind these trajectories and these players contribute to the ongoing discussion.

DB asked if there was a formal eg cabinet, process whereby people have to account if things are downward, flat too long, or not sufficiently upward. SG's reply was that the responsible Minister asks questions and these trends don't go unnoticed. Action depends on the Minister's satisfaction.

MK asked if there were a downward trend in terms of what CPPs are to deliver what would happen.

KC explained that he would have to talk to his local government colleagues. SG will advise CPPs about changes which SOAs need to reflect though SOAs are up to Councils to refresh. He was not sure whether DGs are all locationally responsible for aspects of SOAs, and would find out. SG's business strategy sets out delivery of the NPF. Then there's the Improvement Framework and the SOAs.

DB reiterated that if LINK could help champion, SG should let the network know how. LINK was keen to get other partners to refer to the Framework, and would promote to them, but this objective was made difficult given the lack of promotion which SG were giving the process. KC indicated that the next likely opportunity for SG to promote would be the next spending review in 2014.