

Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee
Scottish Government's Revised National Outcomes for Scotland
Written Submission from Scottish Environment LINK

Scottish Environment LINK¹ is a member of the National Performance Framework (NPF) Round Table and the only Round Table member organisation representing views focusing on the need for more environmentally sustainable society. As an active stakeholder, we welcome the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee's invitation to provide input to on the revise National Outcomes and proposed National Indicators within its remit. As indicated in the documents provided by the Scottish Government, Scottish Environment LINK and its members participated in a number of ways in this review process.

Scottish Environment LINK and its members have been active on the NPF since its inception and working to ensure that its purpose, outcomes and indicators support a more sustainable Scotland, in line with the principles of sustainable development². These shared principles clearly state that "recognising the needs of the economy, society and the natural environment, alongside the use of good governance and sound science" is critical to any sustainable development strategy.

We therefore welcomed the review of the NPF outcomes and the intention of the Scottish Government to align those with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Indeed, this is the only explicit commitment that binds the Scottish Government to translate the UN SDGs into domestic policy. However, we are concerned that the proposed changes to do not fully realise this ambition.

The following paragraphs of this briefing focus on responding to the specific questions of the Committee.

1) How the National Outcomes and National Indicators have changed:

The National Outcomes have been simplified and rephrased to a substantial degree. While we appreciate the need for the NPF to be an accessible document, we highlight that this simplification may lead to inadvertently omitting key aspects of the NPF outcomes as originally developed. For example, in the course of the drafting process we were very concerned that the aspect of "enhancing our environment for future generations" had been omitted. This would have potentially compromised efforts to reverse environmental degradation with consequences for our ability to tackle climate change (for example through peatland restoration or forestry targets) or enhance our ecosystems (for example through the conservation and improvement of key habitats on land and water). We therefore welcome that in the final iteration of the draft Outcomes Scottish Government has retained the aspect of "enhance[ing] our environment".

¹ Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 35 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

² The guiding principles for sustainable development are a set of shared principles that form the basis for sustainable development in the UK and devolved administrations. See here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/323193/Guiding_principles_for_SD.pdf

At the same time, however, the National Outcome that reads “We reduce the local and global environmental impact of our consumption and production” has been eliminated and is no longer reflected in any of the other outcomes. We believe that this Outcome should have been reflected in the wording or the indicators of the National Outcome that focuses on the economy that reads “We have a globally competitive, entrepreneurial and sustainable economy”, as reflected in our views on changes regarding the National Indicators further below (under question 2).

Furthermore, while we welcome the intention of the Scottish Government to ensure that National Indicators are in line with the new Outcomes, at the moment, there is no real clarity on the precise scope of key new indicators that have been proposed. Also unclear is the forward process for finalising the indicators, including any consultation the Scottish Government may conduct and the timeframe within which indicators will be operational. Similarly, we are concerned about the absence of further consideration to ensure that there are clear policy links with the Outcomes. This is not fleshed out in the paper and it is unclear what the status of Annex V of the document will be. This contains very helpful language regarding the rationale behind the Outcomes. We pick up on some of the inconsistencies between the Outcomes, rationale and Indicators in the next section.

We welcome the fact that the National Indicator on the condition of protected nature sites has been retained. We note that the current NPF identifies this indicator as “Improve the condition of protected nature sites” and we would therefore support that it is referred to in the same way in the revised NPF. Protected areas represent the very best of Scotland’s natural heritage and are vital for protecting and enhancing biodiversity. It is crucial that these sites are well-managed and monitored for their designated species and habitats and the indicator has acted as a significant incentive for Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to deliver improvements in feature condition. We acknowledge that the indicator does not communicate data on all elements of biodiversity and ecosystem health but it is nonetheless an important component of the state of nature in Scotland. Furthermore, it is an easily accessible way for citizens and civil society organisations to get up to date data on protected areas and it does not exist in any of the other countries of the UK.

It is important to highlight that this indicator cannot be replaced by a ‘biodiversity’ indicator that amalgamates data on the status/condition of protected species and habitats with, for example, data on water quality or carbon storage. If certain ecosystem health indicators, such as water quality, within protected sites were improving, while the condition of designated species and habitats was declining, this could allow declines in biodiversity to be marked and go unchecked. Whilst measuring and enhancing the ecosystem services provided by protected areas is important, these functions are not the reasons for which these sites are legally protected and should be a secondary concern.

However, we support the Scottish Government’s efforts to introduce further indicators to track the status of our environment and efforts to streamline environmental considerations throughout the NPF. We provide further views on this in the next section.

2) Whether these changes are appropriate, particularly in relation to the marine environment;

As mentioned above, we are satisfied that overall the National Outcome on the environment captures a number of key focal points (“We value, enjoy, protect and enhance our environment”). One aspect that is not captured in this Outcome is the distinction people made in terms of speaking about their local environment and the international responsibility to tackle global environmental changes.

Looking at the Indicators, we are concerned about the lack of clarity around some of the indicators used to track progress towards the aforementioned Outcome as well as other indicators which are critical for realising environmental outcomes. For example, it is unclear to us how ‘access to justice’ or ‘influence over decision-making’ will be pursued. Today, Scotland continues to operate in non-compliance with the Aarhus Convention. LINK has been supportive of the introduction of environmental courts/tribunals to address this. So, in our view, wider policy decisions would be required to provide meaning to this indicator. The indicator proposed to address “access to justice” is therefore welcome, but procuring data through the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey on the percentage of people who are confident that everyone has access to the justice system when they need it is not addressing the underlying policy gap. Similarly, ‘influence over local decisions’³ is a welcome new indicator. To date, data indicates that people are disenchanted when it comes to the opportunities to engage and influence the planning system⁴. It would appear that the underlying concerns would need to be addressed via further policy measures. The issue is very topical given the ongoing Parliamentary deliberations on the Planning Bill.

It is unclear whether the “biodiversity” indicator will attempt to provide a more holistic view of the status of our species and habitats. Today, the NPF indicator concerns terrestrial breeding birds only⁵. LINK members have suggested to expand this to include seabirds (and potentially certain wetland species). This appeared to be possible as statistics are already being collected for this. However, to our knowledge this has not been taken forward. It was therefore interesting to note that the amended “biodiversity index” indicator proposed would need to be developed but would cover both marine and land. This is a positive development but it remains unclear how the Scottish Government will take forward this proposal as no further detail is provided on the scope, precise data set and next steps for developing this indicator. It is also important to note that throughout the process of stakeholder engagement, LINK members highlighted the need to ensure that key species and habitats were captured by any such improved metric, particularly those species and habitats which are internationally important.

With respect to the marine environment, the current indicator “improve the state of Scotland's marine environment” measures the “proportion of key Scottish commercial species landed by Scottish fishing vessels where the TAC (total

³ It is understood that the indicator will be developed on the basis of the percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement ‘I can influence decisions affecting my local area’.

⁴ Scottish Government research reveals that “there is a gap between the rhetoric of community empowerment and communities’ experience of trying to influence the planning system” (source: <https://beta.gov.scot/.../barriers-to-community-engagement-i.../>)

⁵ <http://www.gov.scot/About/Performance/scotPerforms/indicator/biodiversity>

allowable catch) limit is consistent with the scientific guidance, calculated over a centred three year average”. The Scottish Government documents indicate that “a new measure added following the indicator workshops” was added, the indicator that measures “sustainability of fish stocks” as a “percentage of commercial stocks where fishing mortality is below the reference point (F_{msy}) for maximum sustainable yield (MSY)”.

While an indicator on the sustainability of fish stocks may be useful, LINK members have shared concerns that such as an indicator cannot be used to conclude on the wider sustainability of our marine environment. Fishing management must be fully integrated in marine spatial planning systems. We would therefore be supportive of indicators to measure the state of our marine ecosystems (for example, health and condition of supporting species and habitats). Our proposal to the Scottish Government has been to develop an indicator that tracks the percentage of Scottish seas that are part of an actively managed Marine Protected Area. Such an indicator would support the achievement of the overarching goal of a well-managed, ecologically coherent network of MPAs, in line with international obligations under OSPAR. What is more a marine indicator that tracked the wider ecosystem should be consistent with the 11 indicators of the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive, that are designed to help the UK achieve Good Environmental Status.

We understand that other options being considered for a marine indicator were related to marine litter/marine plastics. LINK members have actively engaged with Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament to tackle marine litter and have welcomed the ambitious approach adopted by Scottish Government. However, we believe that an indicator that focuses on tracking the health of our marine environment on the basis of an ecosystem approach is of paramount importance. In addition, we believe that marine litter and concerns over the use of plastic can be measured via enhanced indicators with respect to the generation of waste.

With respect to the Outcome on the economy (“We have a globally competitive, entrepreneurial, inclusive and sustainable economy”), we are disappointed that the Indicators do not seem to look at some aspects of the green economy at all. While existing indicators such as “greenhouse gas emissions”, “carbon footprint” and “natural capital” are retained, these do not reflect on whether the Scottish economy has improved in terms of the circular economy or eco-innovation. It is important to highlight that the ‘natural capital’ indicator is a metric that needs improvement and must be accompanied by the inclusion of ecosystem health indicators to become more comprehensive and rounded. The circular economy is a priority area for Scotland but it seems that most relevant indicator continues to be “waste generated” which highlights the waste aspect only. This is important but not the only way that we can track progress towards a more circular economy. For example, the European Commission has introduced a monitoring framework with more comprehensive indicators to track progress⁶. It would be good to assess to what extent this framework could be applied in Scotland.

3) Whether any wider consultation exercise was sufficient;

⁶ See more here: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/circular-economy/overview> & <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/circular-economy/indicators/monitoring-framework>

Wider consultation was helpful and we appreciate the opportunities provided to exchange views with Scottish Government and other stakeholders in dedicated events, as members of the Round Table and in follow-up meetings. However, some key issues raised by multiple stakeholders have not received any consideration.

We remain disappointed that despite its stated ambition, the NPF lacks any reference to “sustainable development”. Several members of the NPF Round Table called for a review of the Purpose statement to explicitly reference “sustainable development” given that it reflects Scotland’s ambitions vis-à-vis the UN SDGs and as a term it illustrates the importance and interconnectedness of the economy, society and the environment. While the revised statement acknowledges that ‘well-being’ and ‘an inclusive economy’ are important for the prosperity of a nation, these aspects are captured by the term “sustainable development”. There is ongoing concern regarding the use of the term “increased economic growth”, as previously expressed by stakeholders⁷. The economy is an important tool for our wellbeing and prosperity. However, it needs to operate within the carrying capacity of the environment, an ambition referenced in Annex V of the document, which however is then not translated in the revised Purpose statement. If the NPF is to truly reflect Scotland’s ambitions towards sustainable development, then it needs to give equal emphasis to the economic, environmental and social aspects.

4) Whether the Sustainable Development Goals have been incorporated into the NPF in such a way as to ensure that they are fully implemented.

In terms of the UN SDGs, there are 169 targets for the 17 goals. Each target has between 1 and 3 indicators used to measure progress toward reaching the targets. In total, there are 304 indicators that will measure compliance. The NPF Outcomes and Indicators are fewer and as such a number of goals and indicators are not explicitly referenced. For example:

- **Promote sustainable agriculture:** no reference to the need for such indicators or for outcomes to capture more broadly our responsibility to manage common and shared resources.
- **Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns:** as mentioned above, this was an explicit outcome which has been taken away. It would be important to introduce indicators that speak to this priority issue.
- **Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development:** as mentioned above this highlights the limitations of any indicator that looks at fish stocks only rather than our marine ecosystems as a whole.
- **Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss:** most of these aspects are captured in the National Outcomes. There is no explicit reference to forests however it might be worth considering whether an outcome on shared resources and/or relevant land indicators would be helpful particularly in the context of lack of progress around regional land use plans. In terms of the supporting indicators,

⁷ Briefing on the NPF by LINK, Oxfam and STUC: <http://www.scotlink.org/wp/files/documents/NPF-briefing-Jan-2017-2.pdf>

the protected sites, Natural Capital Asset Index and biodiversity indicators go some way to covering this. However, as mentioned in the sections above, additional biodiversity indicators are necessary to give a clearer picture and track progress towards this UN SDG goal.

A unique strength of the UN SDG framework is the fact that environmental concerns are mainstreamed. The NPF can be improved in this respect, as highlighted in previous sections. What is more, given the more holistic view of the UN SDGs it would be helpful to consider whether a more expanded version of the NPF indicators and progress could be released alongside the yearly budget discussions to provide a clearer understanding of the situation. We understand that there are a number of other datasets that the Scottish Government could include, however, the NPF provides an overview. However, for the purpose of the budget it could be argued that the addition of a number of further indicators could be helpful for MSPs. Today the NPF brief accompanying the budget is very short and does not provide analysis or links to other indicators.

This LINK Parliamentary Briefing is supported by the following member organisations:

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