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Programme for Government: Draft Outcomes Framework

Introduction

This briefing note has been prepared for the Committee for the Executive Office, as an addendum to the paper entitled 'Outcomes Based Accountability and the Programme for Government' (NIAR 362-20, published 29th January 2021).

The note details the key changes to outcomes since the first outcomes-based Programme for Government in 2016, and then considers the lack of detail in the draft Outcomes Framework beyond the nine proposed outcomes. Throughout, questions are specified which the committee may wish to consider.

1 Changes to outcomes since 2016 Draft Programme for Government

This section details key changes in outcomes between the 2016 draft Programme for Government (PfG) and the 2021 Outcomes Framework. It then specifies questions arising from these changes, which may be of interest to the committee.

The draft Outcomes Framework is effectively the third version of the draft PfG first published in 2016. Over the course of these iterations, the number and phrasing of the outcomes has changed.

The draft PfG Framework was published for consultation in May 2016, and contained 14 outcomes.¹ These 14 outcomes were retained in the full PfG consultation, then published in October 2016.²

After the political hiatus of the Assembly and the Executive in January 2017, the Civil Service published an 'Outcomes Delivery Plan' in June 2018. This Plan aimed to ensure that Executive business was 'discharged as effectively as possible and in a co-ordinated manner that gives effect to the direction set previously by ministers'.³ The Outcomes Delivery Plan would therefore appear to represent the PfG as it stood when the Executive was suspended. In the Plan, the number of outcomes was reduced from 14 to 12.

In January 2021, the Executive published the draft Outcomes Framework for consultation. In this Framework, the number of outcomes was reduced again to 9.

Full details of the changes in outcomes over the course of the three noted documents – i.e. between the 2016 draft PfG and the 2021 Outcomes Framework - are detailed at Annex 1. They can be summarised as below:

1. The following outcomes were in the 2016 draft PfG, but are removed completely in the 2021 draft Outcomes Framework:
 - 'We have more people working in better jobs'
 - 'We have high quality public services'
 - 'We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure'
2. Two further outcomes which were in the 2016 draft PfG are no longer present in the draft Outcomes Framework:
 - 'We are a shared society that respects diversity'
 - 'We are a confident, welcoming, outward-looking society'

These appear to have been merged with one other outcome ('We have a more equal society') to form the following:

'We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect'

¹ Northern Ireland Executive, *Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-21* (2016)

² Northern Ireland Executive, *Programme for Government Consultation Document* (2016)

³ The Executive Office, *Outcomes Delivery Plan 2018-19* (2018) p3

3. Several other outcomes have had more minor changes in phrasing from 2016 to 2021:
- ‘We prosper through a strong, competitive regionally balanced economy’ becomes
‘Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral’
 - ‘We enjoy long, healthy, active lives’ becomes
‘We all enjoy long, healthy, active lives’
 - ‘We are an innovative, creative society where people can fulfil their potential’ becomes
‘Everyone can reach their potential’
 - ‘We have a safe community where we respect the law, and each other’ becomes
‘Everyone feels safe – we respect the law and each other’
 - ‘We care for others and we help those in need’ becomes
‘We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives’
 - ‘We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest’ becomes
‘People want to live, work and visit here’
 - ‘We give our children and young people the best start in life’ becomes
‘Our children and young people have the best start in life’

Questions raised

The changes to outcomes between the 2016 draft PfG and the 2021 draft Outcomes Framework raise several questions which the committee may wish to consider. For example:

1. Why were the three outcomes on jobs, public services and infrastructure removed?
2. Why were three outcomes on diversity, an outward-looking society and equality apparently merged into one outcome?
3. What is the reasoning for each of the more minor changes in the phrasing of other outcomes?
4. What impact will these changes have on the indicators and delivery plans for each outcome?

2 Absence of detail beyond proposed outcomes

This section considers the lack of detail provided in the draft Outcomes Framework beyond the nine proposed outcomes, and specifies areas in which the Committee may wish to seek further information.

For each of its nine outcomes, the Framework provides some narrative detail of what the outcome means; 'Key Priority Areas' which fall within that outcome; and a list of strategies which could contribute to these key priority areas.⁴

Very little detail beyond this is provided. The Executive repeatedly defines the outcomes as 'the critical first step in the development process'⁵, and states that:

*It is crucially important to get the wording of the Outcomes right as they will provide the starting point for future long-term strategic policy planning by the Executive and act as a touchstone for its strategies and actions moving forward.*⁶

It therefore seems likely that further detail will follow, potentially in further consultation/s on a full PfG, its delivery plans and its indicators. In particular, further information is necessary in the following areas, to permit fuller consideration and scrutiny.

2.1 Key Priority Areas and Strategies: timescales & attribution of responsibility

Each outcome has four to seven key priority areas. For example, the outcome 'We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect' has the following key priority areas:

- Inclusion and tackling disadvantage
- Rights and equality
- Legacy
- Tackling sectarianism, building respect and identity⁷

The Outcomes Framework provides very brief detail on what is meant by each key priority area, along with the Departments involved and Executive strategies which 'could help deliver'⁸ in these areas. Information, however, is lacking in relation to:

1. Timescales for the production and execution of strategies for each key priority area.
2. Departments or agencies with lead or contributory responsibility for each strategy and area.
3. Delivery and monitoring mechanisms that will guide the strategies' contributions to the key priority areas and outcomes.

⁴ Northern Ireland Executive, *Programme for Government: Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document* (2021)

⁵ As cited immediately above, p6

⁶ As cited in footnote 4, p7

⁷ As cited in footnote 4, p16

⁸ As cited in footnote 4, p16

2.2 Ownership of outcomes and indicators

In the 2016 draft PfG, the Head of the Civil Service was appointed the ‘senior responsible owner’ for the PfG as a whole.⁹ Each indicator was allocated to a senior official, who was also responsible for developing and implementing delivery plans aiming to improve performance on specified indicators and outcomes.¹⁰

In the Outcomes Delivery Plan published by the Civil Service, this structure was revised. Each outcome was delivered by an ‘Outcome Team’,¹¹ led by a Permanent Secretary, and incorporating senior officials from relevant Departments and agencies. Indicators were no longer allocated to a single senior official. Instead, the Outcome Team was responsible for delivering overall progress towards the outcome and all of its indicators.

The 2021 Outcomes Framework does not detail the ownership structures of outcomes or indicators. Indeed, there is only one passing mention of indicators in the whole document.¹² The Committee may therefore wish to seek further information on the following:

1. Why the 2016 draft PfG structure of individual ownership of indicators was changed to team ownership of outcomes in the Outcomes Delivery Plan; and whether this represented the last direction given by Ministers.
2. What ownership structure for outcomes, indicators and delivery is planned for the 2021 Outcomes Framework, and why.

2.3 Process for selecting and consulting on indicators

In the RaISe paper entitled ‘Outcomes Based Accountability and the Programme for Government’, the importance of indicators at the population accountability level of OBA is detailed. The outcomes in the draft Framework are deliberately broad and aspirational statements, which constitute a long-term vision for Northern Ireland. It is the indicators that provide more definition to each outcome, by providing relevant, objective data which can be used to measure progress towards the outcome.¹³

In the consultation document, the Outcomes Framework is repeatedly described as a ‘starting point’¹⁴ and ‘critical first step’¹⁵ in the process of developing the full PfG. However, at an engagement event with NICVA in February 2021, TEO officials advised that they are not planning a public consultation on the indicators for each outcome.

In email correspondence, TEO officials further explained to RaISe that:

[. . .] following a review of lessons learned (incorporating feedback from stakeholders and users), a technical evaluation of the current 49 Indicators

⁹ Northern Ireland Executive, *Programme for Government Consultation Document* (2016) p6

¹⁰ As cited immediately above, p5

¹¹ The Executive Office, *Outcomes Delivery Plan 2018/19* (2018) p8

¹² Northern Ireland Executive, *Programme for Government: Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document* (2021) p7

¹³ Stephen Orme, *Outcomes Based Accountability and the Programme for Government* (2021) p12

¹⁴ Northern Ireland Executive, *Programme for Government: Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document* (2021) p3 & p7

¹⁵ As cited immediately above, p6

*and an international comparison exercise, a suite of population Indicators is being developed with a view to demonstrating progress on Outcomes in a way that's meaningful to everyone with due regard to equality of opportunity and good relations.*¹⁶

This process is being overseen by a 'Technical Assessment Panel' of statisticians and economists, as well as policy leads when relevant.¹⁷ The Panel considers each proposed indicator to assess its practicality, precision, ease of understanding, data availability and a range of other characteristics. The intention is to publish the suite of indicators alongside the agreed Outcomes Framework, following consultation.¹⁸

Given the above, the Committee may wish to seek further information on the following:

1. What is TEO's reasoning for holding no public consultation on the indicators?
2. Could TEO explain, in plain English, how it will seek to ensure that selected indicators are 'fit for purpose' – that is, they do what they are supposed to do?
3. How does TEO plan to engage with the relevant statutory committees regarding its initial selection of indicators?
4. Following this, how does TEO plan to undertake such engagement in future, given that 'the new PfG will be maintained in a "live" format'?¹⁹
5. How does TEO plan to conduct its ongoing review of performance against the agreed indicators?

¹⁶ Email correspondence between RaISe and TEO officials, dated 2nd-3rd March 2021

¹⁷ The Technical Assessment Panel incorporates the NISRA Director of Analysis; the DfE Chief Economist; and a Principal Statistician from the Executive Office. Meetings are attended by specific policy leads and responsible statisticians, as relevant. See Northern Ireland Audit Office, *Performance management for outcomes* (2018) p26

¹⁸ See <https://www.nicva.org/article/draft-pfg-outcomes-framework-engagement-event-an-overview>, retrieved 2nd March 2021; also footnote 16

¹⁹ Northern Ireland Executive, *Programme for Government: Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document* (2021) p8

Annex 1: Changes to outcomes since the 2016 draft Programme for Government

2016 Draft PfG	2018/19 and 2019 Outcomes Delivery Plan	2021 PfG: Draft Outcomes Framework
We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy	We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy	<i>Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral</i>
We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment	We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment	We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment
We have a more equal society	We have a more equal society	<i>We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect</i>
We enjoy long, healthy, active lives	We enjoy long, healthy, active lives	<i>We all enjoy long, healthy, active lives</i>
We are an innovative, creative society where people can fulfil their potential	We are an innovative, creative society where people can fulfil their potential	<i>Everyone can reach their potential</i>
We have more people working in better jobs	We have more people working in better jobs	<i>Outcome removed</i>
We have a safe community where we respect the law and each other	We have a safe community where we respect the law, and each other	<i>Everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other</i>
We care for others and we help those in need	We care for others and we help those in need	<i>We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives</i>
We are a shared society that respects diversity	<i>We are a shared, welcoming and confident society that respects diversity</i>	<i>Outcome removed</i>
We are a confident, welcoming, outward-looking society		
We have high quality public services	<i>Outcome removed</i>	<i>Outcome removed</i>
We have created a place where people want to live & work, to visit & invest	We have created a place where people want to live & work, to visit & invest	<i>People want to live, work and visit here</i>
We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure	We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure	<i>Outcome removed</i>
We give our children and young people the best start in life	We give our children and young people the best start in life	<i>Our children and young people have the best start in life</i>

Key:

*Outcome amended**Outcome removed*