

Melting Pot 2017



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This is a collection of the individual posts which have appeared on our Melting Pot guest blog in 2017.

December 2017

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About Reform Scotland

Reform Scotland, a charity registered in Scotland, is a public policy institute which works to promote increased economic prosperity and more effective public services based on the principles of limited government, diversity and personal responsibility.

Reform Scotland is independent of political parties and any other organisations. It is funded by donations from private individuals, charitable trusts and corporate organisations. The Advisory Board, chaired by Alan McFarlane, meets regularly to review the research and policy programme.

About the Melting Pot

The Melting Pot is our guest blog, where Scotland's thinkers, talkers and writers can indulge in some blue sky thinking. The posts do not represent Reform Scotland's policies.

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i. Foreword

Back in July 2015 Reform Scotland launched our Melting Pot blog as a forum for sharing policy ideas and encouraging blue sky thinking.

Since then we have been delighted at the range of interesting and thought-provoking pieces contributors have written. We have now published over 60 posts all of which add to the public policy debate in Scotland. In this report, our second annual collection of posts, issues from school governance to prison reform; and income tax to corporate governance are discussed.

The contributions to the Melting Pot, whilst representing the views of individuals and not Reform Scotland, have complemented the work that we have undertaken in many areas.

Our blog is entirely dependent on contributors and we are very grateful to the many individuals, from a wide range of backgrounds, who have contributed such interesting pieces. I would like to thank them all for taking the time and trouble to write these blog posts and I look forward to reading further contributions in 2018.

Alan McFarlane
Chairman
Reform Scotland
December 2017

Higher Education: No more time to waste

– Ann McKechin

Originally posted 24 January 2017

The Scottish budget announcement rightly received a good deal of attention given the continued pressure on public spending and the significant new tax powers handed to Holyrood. However it was disappointingly muted when it came to the challenges affecting our Higher Education sector and how we should address the widening access gap. Simply to state that “*We are currently enabling an independent review of student support to make sure the system is fair and effective*” hardly conveys any sense of urgency or much serious thought. In fact the criteria for undergraduate student support next year doesn’t even have an inflationary increase.

It is no longer credible to believe that by repeating the mantra of protecting free university tuition for all eligible undergraduates everything is fine. For years those who work and study in the sector have known that the current financial arrangements are not sustainable – the funding gap for undergraduate courses continues to widen. In addition the disclosure in the summer from the Sutton Trust report that Scotland has the largest university access gap when compared to other UK countries, with children from our poorest areas four times less likely to go to university than those from wealthy backgrounds, should shame us and be a catalyst for hard thinking.

Universities are increasingly shoring up their income streams by growing the intake of international students. This is a topic which probably not surprisingly is almost entirely through the prism of current immigration policy. Regretfully the recent ill advised comments by the Home Secretary, Amber Rudd suggesting she aims to restrict the number of universities who could be able to seek visas for foreign students puts in jeopardy the fiscal stability of those very universities that are the most likely to be accessed by those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds.

However, there has been little serious debate of the long term consequences of such a policy of increasing internationalisation for our indigenous students. English speaking universities have become magnets for those seeking a truly international study experience and Scotland has been no exception in successfully attracting more and more students from all parts of the world. As well as the fiscal advantages for the institutions and the wider communities in which they are based, our academic life particularly in terms of research has undoubtedly benefited from this surge of highly gifted and enthusiastic scholars. But the exchange is almost entirely in one direction – there are very few

Scottish students who choose to spend their entire undergraduate years at a non-English speaking university and that position is unlikely to be reversed. The number of non- UK EU students has doubled in less than 10 years to currently over 24000 (including post-graduates) and even allowing for the uncertainties of Brexit the continued ability of EU undergraduate students to access the same funding package as domestic based students has a clear impact on the number of funded places available to Scottish students – an 11% drop in applications over the last five years for medicine from those living in Scotland is just one example and with a standstill budget the options available to tackle the access gap are becoming more constrained. If the Scottish Government is not prepared to increase the budget when will it articulate what it considers to be the optimum balance on key courses for those students who receive state support?

Excuses for the failure to close the access gap are given by constant comparison with the position in England – indeed the system in England is also unsustainable but for different reasons. In similarly evasive tones to his Scottish counterpart, the Chancellor in his autumn statement last month downplayed the continued failure to sell the student loan book which was to be the key component to finance the lifting of the cap on student numbers south of the border. But in England the crisis is likely to become much more noticeable in 2017 as the impact of withdrawing grant support in its entirety starts to register on government statistics – nursing student applications have already dropped by a fifth at a time when the NHS is facing acute staff shortages. However justified the criticism, constant sniping at others is not a recipe for good and sustainable policy decisions in your own home arena.

Instead of comparisons with a failing model in England, the Scottish Government would be better advised to look at Wales where they have found the courage to face up to some difficult choices. The recently published Diamond Review takes as basic assumption that policy makers need to look at the total costs of study for aspiring students rather than fixate on separate silos of fees, bursaries, grants and loans and it recognises that any funding package must cover the needs of an increasingly diverse student base – with more mature and part time students. The recommendations which create a more generous grant system particularly for those from lower income backgrounds are in direct response to consistent representations from students that it is maintenance assistance that gives them the flexibility to manage their finances and, in some cases, to overcome the real financial challenges associated with a period of higher education study.

The appointment this month of Professor Peter Scott as Scotland's new Fair Access Commissioner is good news but it is anticipated that the new office will not be in place until the summer of 2017. And it's also worth noting that the

Diamond Review process which is still to conclude was started in early 2014 so the Scottish Government will need to make progress fast in the months to follow if it is serious about taking action during its current term of office. For Scottish students and our universities delaying change any longer and clinging to mantras previously set in stone will simply make the position worse.

Ann McKechin is a former Labour MP and was a Minister in the Scotland Office prior to the 2010 election. She is currently a member of the Court of the University of the West of Scotland and the executive committee of the Scottish Fabians but the views expressed here are entirely personal.

Thoughts on Corporate Governance

-Alex Hammond Chambers

Originally posted 14 February 2017

The primary role of companies in a society's economy is to produce goods and services for the benefit of society. It is important that that is done as efficiently as possible. It is largely accepted that this is best achieved by privately owned companies but that there needs to be a public benefit to their performance. So it is that boards of directors, answerable to the owners (shareholders), have a responsibility for the performance of their companies. Hence the concept of corporate governance.

In December 1992, a Committee chaired by Adrian Cadbury produced the first of many subsequent reports on the governance of companies by their boards of directors. It had been commissioned as a consequence of a number of corporate scandals – notably those of Polly Peck and Maxwell Communications. Since then there have been another 6 reports (Greenbury, Hampbel, Turnbull, Myners, Higgs and Smith). As a consequence of these reports and ongoing additions from the Financial Reporting Council (“FRC”), we have today the UK Corporate Governance Code. It is part of UK company law with a set of principles and, increasingly, legal obligations aimed at the governance of companies listed on the London Stock Exchange.

At the heart of the Code lies the practice of comply with its principles or explain why not in the company's annual report. By and large most companies comply – the directors being fearful of the consequences of non-compliance. However, comply or explain has not always worked well in practice – most commonly, I would guess, in the matter of directors' tenure. Institutional investors (most of whom have corporate governance departments) have their own set of governance rules and take little notice of “explain”. In an effort to force institutions to hold the boards of directors of their investee companies accountable for their governance, the FRC established the Stewardship Code, a guide for institutions to raise their level of involvement in corporate governance.

The Code has unquestionably resulted in a box ticking approach to the governance of companies – prioritising procedure and structure over other aspects of governance – including the wider interests of those involved in the welfare of companies. Ownership of any sort (be it a house, a car etc) confers, to a greater or lesser extent, responsibilities on owners to go with the benefits of ownership. In the case of shareholders those responsibilities stretch far and wide because corporate involvement in society, in the economy is far reaching.

Fulfilling those responsibilities is effected by shareholders appointing a board of directors to look after their interests *and their responsibilities*. However, it is not the responsibility of shareholders/directors to assume political responsibilities despite political pressure to make them do so. It would set up dangerous conflicts of interest and confusion of duties.

The Code does not address these issues – and I am not sure that it should. The Code is not perfect by any means but it should be regarded as just a minimum set of governance practices. The trouble is that it tends to be the limit to which directors feel their obligations extend – other than earning a growing profit stream and achieving a rising share price. As a consequence we have today what I would describe as “*share price capitalism*”. Over and above their statutory governance duties, directors should understand that they have ethical and social responsibilities. How these are established is a matter of some importance because ethics cannot be established or enforced by law and social responsibilities will vary hugely from company to company. One size fits all simply won’t work and will conflict with the primary purpose of companies.

Given that the governance of companies and the laws, rules, regulations and practices that determine directorial duties is British, the question arises as to whether corporate governance is a separate matter for us in Scotland. Yes, I believe that it is. It is an important issue because it affects the performance of Scottish companies and thence our economy and our society. Without well managed Scottish companies, our economy and our society will become ever more dependent on England’s commerce at a time when we are achieving ever greater political self-dependence.

The fact is that the two most disgraceful corporate governance scandals of the new millennium were both Scottish, being in banking, a sector in which we have taken pride in setting the highest global standards over centuries. The failures of both the Royal Bank of Scotland and Halifax Bank of Scotland have cost our economy and our society dearly – unquantifiably so. And these failures occurred under the already strict corporate governance regime in existence by 2008.

So clearly there is more to corporate governance than a set of rules and best practices. We need to establish a healthy corporate sector in Scotland – consisting of large, medium sized, small and (importantly) start-up companies. Their successes will provide jobs, investment, then new jobs and rising salaries, tax revenues and, as a package, a rising level of prosperity that we all aspire to. Proper and effective governance of those companies is a key to such success.

I have not attempted to address the “how” in relation to these add-on issues but rather to establish that there is more – much more – to corporate governance than the UK Corporate Governance Code. By setting our own and highest

standards of corporate governance in Scotland, we can help achieve a level of prosperity that would otherwise be unattainable.

Alex Hammond-Chambers is a non-executive director, concentrating on investment trusts and companies, and a member of Reform Scotland's Advisory Board

Towards a Better Environment for Policy-Making

– John Sturrock

Originally posted 28 February 2017

Contemporary politics is perceived by many to be polarising, positional, parochial, unnecessarily partisan, antagonistic and often unhelpfully adversarial. This can be attributed to a number of historical and behavioural factors, including the primacy of political parties, the often binary (yes/no, right/wrong) nature of political decision-making, relatively unsophisticated argument, over-emphasis on debate, and personalisation of issues resulting in animosity, attack and defence on an individual basis. An idea, however sensible, will often be dismissed because of who presents it.

This can result in classic zero-sum outcomes with “winners” and “losers” on the political stage, but sub-optimal policy decisions and loss of focus on the true interests and needs of those affected. Such thinking can be inimical to achieving maximum economic and social performance and use of scarce resources, especially in an uncertain, ambiguous and complex world. It is now well established in many disciplines that cooperation tends to produce more effective outcomes. Indeed, the zero sum approach of the adversarial process can be very damaging to an economy and a society.

Suppose that it is the case that adversarial politics produces sub-optimal results for local communities? What then? Suppose that what is in a particular party’s interests is inconsistent with the national interest?

These issues are particularly concerning at a time of reducing public resources and increasing powers being devolved to Scotland. They can also lead to inadequate accountability, scrutiny and review of legislation and policies, both before and after implementation, and relatively poor policy making and legislation. Overall, the result can be loss of public confidence, belittling of politics and politicians, mirroring of behavior in other public contexts, and damage to parliamentary democracy overall. As an interesting aside, the first President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, in a brilliant essay entitled “*Politics, Morality and Civility*”, suggested that economic improvement was dependent on civility.

So it seems that there is a need for more creative and interest-based approaches to policy-making and future planning in order to maximise use of resources and powers and to minimise unnecessary wastage. Some of the remedies lie in enhancing the performance of public servants and officials generally and, in the context of the work of the Independent Commission on Parliamentary Reform,

in helping members of the Scottish Parliament and those who support them to be more effective in analysis and assessment of policy, more creative and constructive in developing and assessing the options, and more skilled in the areas of scrutiny, communication, preparation and respectful dialogue.

In parliamentary matters, the value of dialogue rather than debate, working creatively together to understand better the real underlying issues and choices/options available, rather than seeking to knock each other's arguments down, could be a model for even more constructive activity in an even more mature Scottish Parliament. This is because issues are rarely purely binary and black or white. Indeed the adversarial, debate-based parliamentary model is often singularly unsuited to the complexities of, for example, modern health service delivery, achieving appropriate educational standards, developing a modern infrastructure, assessing difficult taxation and economic issues and so on.

It is well understood that effective decision-making requires full dispassionate, open exploration of all the underlying factors, including those which are hidden by institutional and individual inertia and fear. The means to do so are often a function of competency and skill. Similarly, once the real underlying problems, concerns, fears, hopes, values, motivations and interests are understood, decision-makers are much better placed to identify, again dispassionately, multiple options and to assess and evaluate their potential against a range of appropriate criteria. This enables those responsible for policy and decisions to propose solutions which are of high quality and more likely to be sustainable, durable and effective.

Similarly, follow through in the sense of ongoing regular review of decisions and legislation against pre-determined criteria and benchmarks would enhance the scrutiny and accountability function of a Parliament – and encourage ongoing learning, rather than merely a superficial fault-finding exercise if things subsequently appear to go wrong.

None of this is new. This type of thinking should be recognised in all good businesses and organisations. However, parliamentary decision-making does not always operate in this way. That will be a function of political partisanship, expectations and, of course, the pressures under which politicians operate. It will also, however, and as noted earlier, be a function of gaps in competency and skill, a presumed deficit which can be overcome at least in part by a good training programme.

Separately, the use of language and tone and the building of relationships and trust across political boundaries is critical to a new approach. So much can be

achieved by careful choice of words, reframing, separating people from the problem, and a manner which is measured and respectful. At the time of the referendum on independence, Collaborative Scotland proposed these commitments in order to underpin a more respectful approach to political dialogue generally:

- **Show respect and courtesy** towards all those who are engaged in these discussions, whatever views they hold;
- Acknowledge that there are **many differing, deeply held and valid points of view**;
- **Use language carefully** and avoid personal or other remarks which might cause unnecessary offence;
- **Listen carefully** to all points of view and seek fully to understand what concerns and motivates those with differing views from our own;
- **Ask questions** for clarification and when we may not understand what others are saying or proposing;
- Express our own views **clearly and honestly with transparency** about our motives and our interests;
- Respond to questions asked of us with clarity and openness and, whenever we can, with **credible information**;
- **Look for common ground and shared interests at all times.**

Politicians could be encouraged to adopt these in their work. This is not a plea for soft, consensual, touchy feely politics. It is a plea for rigorous and robust discussion of the real issues, accompanied by respect for others, whatever views they may hold, and courtesy and dignity in the political process.

Finally, many would argue that there is a need to understand better what are variously described as behavioural psychology, neuro-biology, neuro science and neuro-politics in order to appreciate the impact of, for example, the fight or flight instinct (Systems 1 and 2 as described by Daniel Kahnemann in Thinking, Fast and Slow) on how politicians and others behave under pressure. Research and training could be useful in what are known as cognitive biases (confirmation bias, reactive devaluation, endowment effect, attribution error, group think, peer pressure, wilful blindness, ladder of inference, system inertia and so on). This reminds us that there is now available much research about how the brain works and how our minds think, which can help both explain why politics can seem so adversarial and tribal and how we might learn to do things differently. There are a number of ways in which we might take this forward:

- A **Strategic Plan** should be introduced for the *formal, structured, systematic skills-based training* of all MSPs, support staff and others in relevant areas of parliamentary work. This would include, for example, effective methods for: preparation and analysis of policy and strategy; working collaboratively in committees; the role of committee conveners; scrutiny techniques applicable pre- and post- legislation and to other decision-making (including, critically, effective questioning in a number of settings); use of language; and contemporary tools for risk analysis and problem-solving together with effective decision-making. Understanding the practical application of economic ideas such as game theory seems important, to exemplify the benefits of reciprocity and mutual gains rather than zero sum outcomes.

The plan would include consideration of the latest developments in professional training, group and individual behaviour, psychology, neuro-science, performance under pressure, risk, and performance review. Modules in the practice of economics, accounting, funding models, and other general topics such as effective use of time, could be offered.

Senior judges, lawyers, doctors and many other professionals in public and private service undertake continuing professional training. A world-class Scottish performer, Andy Murray, has achieved that world class performance by seeking out and using the best coaching throughout his career. At the heart of enhanced performance are skills, competency, capability and capacity, leading to professional confidence, with a positive attitude and awareness. These can be taught and learned and this can be expedited with the provision of the proper resources. Marginal improvements and even minor changes in habit can make a huge difference to performance and outcomes. One well framed question in committee may save millions of unnecessarily spent pounds. One incisive analysis of inconsistent facts presented by a minister may lead to a major policy alteration. And so on.

It is strongly arguable that a structured training programme is not a ‘nice to have’ or a luxury, but a necessary investment which could, over time, make a significant contribution to increasing parliamentary effectiveness and enhancing individual and collective performance, improving political decision-making and making politics (and parliamentary democracy) appear more professional, relevant and credible to the wider population.

- An **annual audit** could be conducted, perhaps by a university, to review the extent to which MSPs adhere to the objective benchmarks designed for example by Collaborative Scotland, set out above. This would be aspirational in its ambition, with support for feedback and development. MSPs could be invited to commit to the eight propositions. A working

title for the project might be: *The Beyond Adversarialism in Politics Project Scotland* (BAPPS).

- Encouragement could be given to political parties to identify common ground and to publish a **Joint Manifesto for Scotland**, on an annual or biennial basis, setting out agreed overall strategies for Scotland, and clearly identifying where and how differences exist and how the parties propose to address these. This would encourage more collaborative working across parties and a sense of common purpose, while recognising and informing the public where differences really lie. This would enable focus to shift, at least to some degree, from difference to common ground, of which in private there is usually much more than politicians easily disclose in public. Such a shift seems highly desirable.
- The use of **skilled third parties**, to help facilitate discussions in committees or to act as support for chairs and others, should be considered. These would not necessarily be subject-matter specialists but process facilitators, helping to ensure optimisation of scrutiny and decision-making.

Concluding Remarks

There is a sense in which this is really about maturity: politics in many ways, not least with its deferential hierarchies and squabbling, can seem child-like and immature at times. The work of the Commission on Parliamentary Reform offers a real opportunity to encourage greater maturity in politics in Scotland and in the Scottish Parliament – and to lead the world in a new way of doing politics. It will encourage building on existing skills and experience, in what is after all the evolution of a relatively young institution.

To quote Václav Havel in the essay mentioned above: “....., *if there is to be any chance at all of success, there is only one way to strive for decency, reason, responsibility, sincerity, civility, and tolerance, and that is decently, reasonably, responsibly, sincerely, civilly, and tolerantly. I’m aware that, in everyday politics, this is not seen as the most practical way of going about it.*”

It is time to change this perception about what is most practical so far as it applies to and in Scotland. This is an opportunity for leadership. The window of opportunity may not be open for too long.

John Sturrock QC is the founder, senior mediator and chief executive at Core Solutions Group (www.core-solutions.com) and is also a Visiting Professor in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh. This article is based on his submission to the Commission on Parliamentary Reform set up by the Presiding Office of the Scottish Parliament.

Income Tax in Scotland – small difference?

– Joanne Walker

Originally posted 28 March 2017

Since 6 April 2016, income tax payers resident in Scotland (“Scottish taxpayers”) have been paying the Scottish Rate of Income Tax on their non-savings and non-dividend income.¹ What this has meant in practice during the 2016/17 tax year, since the Scottish Rate of Income Tax was set at 10%, is that Scottish taxpayers have simply been paying income tax at the same overall rates as taxpayers in the rest of the UK.² The difference is that part of the overall rate paid has been set by the Scottish Parliament, and the revenues from the Scottish Rate of Income Tax are given to the Scottish Government.

From 6 April 2017, Scottish taxpayers will pay income tax on their non-savings and non-dividend income at rates set entirely by the Scottish Parliament. All of the income tax they pay on such income will be collected by HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) and then given to the Scottish Government.

We now know that the only difference between the UK and Scottish rates and bands of income tax for 2017/18 will be the higher rate threshold, which will be £43,000 for Scottish income tax and £45,000 for UK income tax, assuming eligibility for the personal allowance of £11,500. So the basic rate band for Scottish income tax will be £31,500, whereas the basic rate band for UK income tax will be £33,500, which could result in Scottish taxpayers earning over £43,000 paying up to £400 more in income tax than taxpayers in the rest of the UK.

Some observers may wonder why only this one minor change in relation to the Scottish Rate of Income Tax and the Scottish income tax rates and thresholds has been made, as on the face of it the devolved powers may seem significant. In fact, however, the devolved income tax powers are in some respects quite limited.

Income tax is only partially devolved under the Scotland Act 2016. Firstly, the Scottish Parliament only has the power to set rates and bands in respect of non-savings and non-dividend income. Scottish taxpayers will continue to pay income tax on their savings income and dividend income according to the rates and bands set by the UK Parliament and that tax will be retained by the UK Government (although Scotland will receive a share of revenues through the block grant). Secondly, only powers to set rates and bands are devolved. Although the rates and bands are perhaps the most visible aspect of income tax,

they are in fact a very small part of it. The majority of tax law relating to income tax remains reserved to the UK Parliament, including the determination of the tax base (that is, what is taxable income), tax reliefs, exemptions and allowances. So, decisions about the personal allowance, for example, are reserved to the UK Parliament.

These limitations not only may have helped ensure an initially cautious approach to setting Scottish rates and bands, but they also militate against handing over the administration of Scottish income tax to Revenue Scotland, the Scottish tax authority. So, although the Scottish Parliament has set rates and bands for income tax payable by Scottish taxpayers on non-savings and non-dividend income, HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) continue to collect and administer all income tax, both UK and Scottish – this is currently the most efficient approach. Otherwise, if Revenue Scotland dealt with income tax on non-savings and non-dividend income, Scottish taxpayers would still need to deal with HMRC in respect of their savings and dividend income.

As noted above, there is only a single point of divergence between the UK and Scottish rates and thresholds. This difference could however, not only result in a greater tax liability of up to £400 for Scottish taxpayers compared to UK taxpayers with the same level of income, but it could also make the income tax position of taxpayers resident in Scotland quite complex, if they have more than one type of income, some of which is subject to Scottish rates and bands, and some of which is subject to UK rates and bands. In such cases, the Scottish taxpayer may have to consider both the UK rates and thresholds and the Scottish rates and thresholds in order to work out their income tax liability. A similar position will arise for Scottish taxpayers with taxable capital gains, since the rates of capital gains tax depend on the UK rates and thresholds.

Other, perhaps less anticipated consequences, may arise. The Marriage Allowance is available to married couples and civil partnerships, where one party has some unused personal allowance in a tax year and the other party does not pay tax at any rate higher than the basic rate.

It would appear, that if the higher earner is a Scottish taxpayer in 2017/18, and has total taxable income between £43,000 and £45,000, on which they pay Scottish income tax at the higher rate, they are not eligible for the Marriage Allowance. Whereas, if they paid tax according to the UK rates and thresholds, they would be eligible, as they would only be paying tax at the basic rate.

So, at first sight, it looks like significant new powers for the Scottish Parliament with only a small change for Scottish taxpayers. In fact, however, the devolved income tax powers may be slightly less significant than is immediately

apparent, or at least they face some restrictions, and the small difference in rates and bands will lead to a lot of additional complexity for some Scottish taxpayers.

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¹ Non-savings and non-dividend income includes employment income, profits from self-employment, pension income and rental profits.

² The income tax rates payable by Scottish taxpayers on their non-savings and non-dividend income in 2016/17 are worked out by deducting 10% from each of the UK basic, higher and additional rates, and then adding on the single Scottish Rate of Income Tax set by the Scottish Parliament. Setting the Scottish Rate of Income Tax at 10% means there is no actual change to the overall rates of tax paid.

Once upon a time... a story of community non engagement – Douglas Flett

Originally posted 10 May 2017

Here is a real story. It is not a management fix, a leadership theory, nor political rhetoric. The story starts in a Business Association, far, far away – South Queensferry actually, a distant outpost from Edinburgh's City Chambers.

Queensferry is a delightful town with a beautiful High Street, albeit subject to excess traffic, noise and carbon particulates. This Royal Burgh boasts the 16th century Black House and the trendy Orocco Pier, a picturesque harbour and now, three impressive bridges.

In 2002, with the close involvement of the Community Council and community groups, the Association presented our community vision for the town to the Councillors and Officers of the City of Edinburgh Council. It was warmly received and, as a result, the City undertook to work alongside the community to help realise this local vision.

Fast forward to 2009. The chair of the Community Council, and me for the business body, met someone from Victoria Quay who was to develop the Scottish Government's initiative, "Community Engagement". We described to him the years of disappointment, frustration, false dawns, departmental change, staff changes, delays and the inability of the various city silos to work together. The bottom line was that, for us, the local authority was structurally incapable of practical engagement with a community.

Admittedly, Councils have been through turbulent times. Most have enormous debt and significant challenges. Yet the need for Councils to engage with communities is paramount. What is the problem?

One reason is that Local Government seems to follow the same bad habits of central government (Holyrood and Westminster). Power is being centralised into a smaller number of hands – whether they meet in Downing Street, Charlotte Square or the few who dominate discussion in Council Chambers across the land. These individuals are spread too thinly over too many important tasks. They do not have sufficient time and they can, as the pressure of governing accumulates, begin to believe in their infallibility the more the media displays their celebrity.

Secondly, the system is broken because relationships and integrity are broken. For Government to adjust and properly interface with the 'relational' mode of

the community, it must sort out its internal relationships. Society desperately needs to engage and empower its communities for the common good. We need to work together, respectfully and cooperatively. But first, politicians need to be PC with one another – personally caring (not politically correct). Leaders in government and in parties need good relationships for consensual governance. Society is sick and tired of leadership squabbles, personal bickering and the party dominance of post truth politics.

Engagement is first about relationship, not systems. Government is focused upon structured control and relational coercion. When politicians relate poorly with one another, then that model of behaviour filters down through the departments and ultimately to staff.

Relationships, integrity and good values affect the structure performance of government. In Queensferry we experienced the systemic failure of local government to deliver agreed objectives. What we all currently experience throughout the UK is a lack of integrity demonstrated through the behaviour of those in government.

Third factor – a fatherly word: When Tam Dalyell stepped down as Father of the House at Westminster, he lamented a change during his decades of public service. He said that when he joined the House, most MPs had a profession, a business background or other rich experience of life. By contrast, when he left he observed that most members were career politicians; many graduated to become researchers or perform some political function before becoming MPs. He observed that the aggregate experience and wisdom of the House had considerably diminished over the years.

Three areas to fix:

1. The structures of government need to become more inclusive. They must bring decision making and envisioning to the community. This means de-centralised power.
2. The leaders of government need to model good relationships, transparency and humility.
3. The members of government need more experience and have proven integrity and wisdom.

To clarify, by humility I mean someone who knows their strengths and weaknesses and is content for both to be known. Wisdom is the best use of information and knowledge for the common good, even when it comes from another party.

Douglas Flett is a National Networker for the Scottish City and Community Networks

Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy results – Keir Bloomer

Originally posted 17 May 2017

Making sound education policy needs information and evidence. Unless policy makers – whether at school, local authority or national level – know what is going on, they cannot make good decisions. Are standards in primary science rising or falling? How much would it cost to introduce a second foreign language into our school? How does the performance of the most disadvantaged children compare with twenty years ago? So far as Scottish education is concerned, these are just three questions out of thousands that we don't have the information to answer.

It is for this reason that the Scottish Government introduced the National Improvement Framework. It sets out some clear worthwhile aims and lists a number of key factors that will generate change. It provides a framework for gathering information. Over time, it will ensure that Scottish education has better evidence at its disposal.

Unfortunately, we are moving in the opposite direction. The figures from the 2016 Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy published last week are to be the last of their kind. The survey, one of the most important sources of information on vital areas of learning, has been discontinued.

In its place will be a new system that is currently untested. The government's original intention had been to rely on standardised national tests to be taken by all pupils at certain stages of their education. Unfortunately, it has bowed to pressure and agreed that the information to be published will be based on teachers' professional judgments. The tests will merely help teachers in reaching their judgments.

Teacher judgment is usually insightful and often quite comprehensive. If you want to learn about a pupil's progress, development, attitudes to learning and much more besides, a view based on teacher judgment is just what you need. If you want to know how the nation's children are coping with a particular aspect of numeracy, a test is better.

National figures based on teacher judgment of the extent to which young people were progressing through *Curriculum for Excellence* were published for the first time last December. The inconsistencies were glaring. If judgment is to be the basis of national measurement of performance, significant resources will need

to be put into creating nationally consistent expectations and into external moderation of individual judgments. These are not the highest priorities but, unless this kind of action is taken, the results of the new system will be of little value.

There is a further problem in replacing SSLN immediately. The value of surveys like SSLN – and PISA, come to that – is that they test in a consistent way at regular intervals. Thus they don't only provide a snapshot of standards in 2017. They enable comparisons to be made over time, thus demonstrating whether standards are rising or falling. Until the new system has been operating for some years, this will no longer be possible. The only way to overcome this difficulty is to run the two measures in parallel for a few years so that it becomes possible to see how the results compare. The government has refused to do this.

Of course, unfortunately the results from SSLN since it started in 2011 have been profoundly worrying.

In 2011/13/15 performance in numeracy was measured while in 2012/14/16 the emphasis was on literacy. The disturbing feature of the results over the years is that overall performance in each survey has been poorer than in the previous survey. Thus, numeracy standards apparently fell between 2011 and 2013 and again by 2015. The same is true of the three literacy surveys.

The literacy survey looks at three aspects of learning; reading, writing and listening and talking. The 2016 results published last week showed performance in reading and listening and talking holding roughly steady but standards in writing declining at all stages with a very dramatic drop in secondary 2. Only 49% young people at this stage were found to be writing 'well or very well' compared with 55% in 2014 and 64% in 2012. Clearly something is seriously wrong.

Surveys like SSLN tell us what has happened. They do not say why it has happened. They cannot answer difficult questions such as "Why could almost two-thirds of second year pupils meet expected standards in writing in 2012 but under half four years later?" The Education Secretary, John Swinney offered one explanation when he suggested that teachers are struggling with what he called too much 'overbearing guidance'. I am sure he is right. I worry too that, in the secondary sector, teachers' time and energy has been focused on changes to the examination system, leading many schools to give scant attention to the period of 'broad general education' in S1 to 3.

We can all speculate and there is certainly scope for the government to invest in relevant research. What is certain, however, is that there are serious problems in relation to both literacy and numeracy. At the same time, the survey that produced these important, if depressing, findings has been discontinued and is being replaced by an unproven and suspect successor. Equally unfortunately, our ability to look at change over time is being discarded.

Keir Bloomer is the chair of the Commission on School Reform.

Institutional Complexity and its brake on the Curriculum for Excellence

– Euan Mackie

Originally posted 6 June 2017

The recent fall in Scottish literacy levels have been blamed on the Curriculum for Excellence.

In this article, I argue that it is institutional bureaucracy which is systematically undermining the true approach of the Curriculum, and these institutional processes now require radical reorientation and simplification.

The Curriculum for Excellence admirably describes the ideal outcomes of Scottish Education through the four capacities:

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- responsible citizens
- effective contributors

This curriculum focuses on the ‘personal development of the individual’, and its terms ‘successful’, ‘confident’, ‘responsible’ and ‘effective’, are relative to the individual and not intended to set an absolute assessment criteria. The intention then is to promote a school experience which pays attention to the active participation of all the pupils in the qualities of their own development. In this scenario, pupils presumably, will be enhanced with higher responsibility for their skills development.

Faced with increasing pressure of public and political scrutiny, the political and institutional focus is on the school as a ‘service provider’, and schools, local authorities, national institutions and government, have created a network of systems, protocols, standard procedure and metrics to create a sense of accountability in all actions.

Look at the bookshelves of any school and you will see them creak and groan with the weight of guidance manuals. There are few areas in contemporary classroom life, which have been left untouched by these prescriptive procedures. These protocols are generated at every level, from the schools themselves up through the corporate structures of the local authority, to our national institutions and government.

This is a fundamentally bureaucratic, ‘top down’ approach, rather than nurturing the entitlement of personal aspiration and citizenship.

In addition, while the construction of this framework was done with the intention of consistency and improvement, it was done without concern for the resource limits and time available at the school level. Furthermore, little attention has gone into measuring the cumulative effective of accountability on the motivation of teachers and pupils.

The elaboration of procedure is a major industry in education and now consumes significant amounts of time to undertake. We understand that bureaucracy and workload is now a significant issue in the system, and we should link it with a critical questioning of these complex institutional processes.

The Curriculum for Excellence, alone, is a very good example of how modern institutional process serves to proceed in expanding documentation over an extensive time, through a multitude of committees, documentation, refining criteria, the further tendency to ‘unpack’ detail, and then providing further clarification to refocus earlier writing. Exemplification and procedures for monitoring follow. The curriculum becomes increasingly confused in complexity to pupils, parents, and even teachers. In this verbosity of documentation and variance in understanding, the fundamental outcomes are lost.

However, the Curriculum is only one area of procedural elaboration. There are many other well intentioned processes which have grown in complexity and requirement: School Improvement Planning and Self Evaluation processes, Standards and Quality reports; The GCTS elaborated Standards, protocols for induction, for Professional Review, Continuing Professional Development; The agreements between unions and authorities at national and local level; The legislation for Additional Needs, and Inclusion; Health and Safety legislation; Local authority and internal school procedures; Devolved School Management; The National Improvement Framework; and Equity Funding. The list goes on... These are of institutional good intention, which cumulatively have a complexity which burdens individuals and reduces the freedom of those who carry out these processes. This total impact is only felt at the base of the system in the school and classroom and is not fully appreciated at the top layers of decision making. Institutional process, at any level, naturally expands as bureaucracy stretches its remit. It is where there is a need to feel in control that we find it expand most rapidly. Hence the heavy prominence of checklists, targets and tracking in our pedagogical culture.

In prioritising the things that can be counted, it gives measurement undue prominence. Conversely it means that those important aspects of relationships and pastoral care, mentoring and coaching, are seen to be less important, and the personal values of young people, like fun, the freedom to choose, to make mistakes, and the growth of personal dignity and grace, are side-lined in favour of target hunting.

Being a professional teacher no longer means to be a leader of learning with intuitive vocational curiosity about valuing and guiding young people. The prize now goes to those who can deliver the ticks on the box, and learn to use the appropriate protocols and play it safe in the face of scrutiny in whichever form it manifests: self-evaluation, risk assessment, class visits, paperwork, assessment, CPD records, reports to parents... ..the list goes on.

Similarly, pupils are increasingly weighed down with assessment criteria, and exhortations to do this and that, to meet the requirements of course criteria. The joy and motivation of learning is lost.

The system trains us to be reliant on protocol, validation by others, and whatever measure is used to hold us to account. This is the antithesis of mature citizenship and value for the individual. So much of Scottish Education now feels arid, and of the nature of educational serfdom.

So while the Four Capacities are flagged up as our main intention, they do not provide the current focus of strategic planning or the priority of those working in schools.

What is required is a significant simplification and rationalisation of institutional process, to reduce 'top down' procedures of accountability, assessment, 'quality improvement' and corporate veneer. The emphasis should allow more time to coach and value individual pupils (and teachers), and focus collaboratively on their skills acquisition, and pastoral care.

Euan Mackie writes in an independent capacity while acting as an educational coach and an area officer of the Association of Head Teachers and Deputies in Scotland.

‘Teaching Scotland’s Future’: a manifesto for liberal education?

– Leonardo Franchi

Originally posted 20 June 2017

The publication of *Teaching Scotland’s Future* (also known as the *Donaldson Report*) at the end of 2010 was a major commitment by the Scottish Government to enhance the role of universities in programmes of study for those intending to become teachers. In Scotland, this process is known as ‘Initial Teacher Education (ITE), not Initial Teacher Training (ITT), which is used in England. This difference in nomenclature is important, as we will see. It is reasonable to ask how far we have come in addressing the report’s recommendations with specific reference to those planning to teach in primary schools.

Donaldson sought to improve professional practice by encouraging all ITE providers to deploy the wider academic resources of the university in the drive to prepare students for the classroom. I will focus here on two of the reports more ‘controversial’ proposals: the inclusion of other areas of the university in ITE programmes and the phasing out of the Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree.

The recommendation to incorporate ITE more fully into the life of the university was the logical development of the moves in the 1990’s to merge Colleges of Education with universities. It is a ‘sealing the deal’, so to speak, ensuring that the merger processes were not just (to use a great Scots word) a ‘flittin’! The proposal for wider study underpinned the politically sensitive *Recommendation 11* which deserves quoting:

In line with emerging developments across Scotland’s universities, the traditional BEd degree should be phased out and replaced with degrees which combine in-depth academic study in areas beyond education with professional studies and development. These new degrees should involve staff and departments beyond those in schools of education.

According to the report, the BEd degree was not the best model for preparing teachers for the twenty-first century. Of course, serving teachers and policy-makers will have different views on this but the debate has now moved on. It is time to think long and hard about how ITE can be enhanced. I will make two suggestions.

I suggest first that the proposal to leave behind explicit training paradigms of ITE offers an opportunity for more liberal approaches in what was once known as Educational Studies. Such a move would facilitate a broadening of the knowledge base of students and ground their preparation on solid theoretical foundations.

A liberal pedagogy of ITE, ideally, would focus on the historical, philosophical, cultural and religious contexts which underpin contemporary educational thought. This pedagogical approach requires ongoing critical study of *primary* sources on education and schooling with encouragement to interrogate some of the ‘urban legends’ currently in circulation. I will resist the temptation to name some of these.

Alongside the liberal approach to Educational Studies teachers, I also suggest that we consider the value of a Liberal Arts model of ITE.

Teachers self-evidently must have sufficiently deep knowledge of the subjects they are expected to teach. A good university experience is necessarily rooted in a reflective dialogue with inherited bodies of subject knowledge where students are guided by academic staff with acknowledged expertise in the discipline. This is where the resources of the wider university can come into play, although we should not discount the considerable expertise found in our Schools and Faculties of Education.

Study of the Liberal Arts would complement a liberal approach to Educational Studies. Yet, we need to ask how the inclusion of the Liberal Arts would enhance ITE programmes. Would such an arrangement clash with the ‘professional’ nature of ITE? While ITE programmes must clearly engage with the expectations of policymakers in education, few would argue with the proposition that teachers should be well educated, not just well qualified. A broad-based programme of studies as offered by a Liberal Arts model would place centre stage those classic bodies of knowledge in, for example, History, Art, Drama, Music and Literature which expand the human mind offer windows into the world of ideas.

Study of the Liberal Arts should be essential elements of an educational system which is committed to excellence and general human flourishing. Teachers with such experiences behind them would be very well placed to make a positive contribution to the education of our young people. Indeed, those who are planning to teach in primary schools are those who, perhaps paradoxically, would *benefit professionally* from the incorporation of the Liberal Arts into the ITE curriculum.

To conclude, I detect a gradual return of the language of ‘teacher training’ in the Scottish scene. Some politicians in Scotland have used this term recently to express concern about the quality of ITE programmes. In response, I propose that ITE in the university must use the resources of our ancient Scottish seats of learning to underpin a curriculum which is broad, deep and challenging. The search for professional relevance should not blind us to the value of liberal learning for human flourishing. While it is important to make honest (and well-informed) assessments of ITE quality, it would be short-sighted to jump to the conclusion that universities are places for explicit ‘teacher training’. Donaldson rightly, advocated a move away from this model. It would be a mistake to discard this recommendation.

Dr Leonardo Franchi is a lecturer in Religious Education in the University of Glasgow. He writes in a personal capacity. The full version of this article, ‘Initial Teacher Education in the University: My Little Ship How Ill-Laden Thou Art’, is available on the website of the *European Journal of Teacher Education*.

Nurturing the Four Capacities – Euan Mackie

Originally posted 29 June 2017

In my previous blog, I argued that it is institutional bureaucracy which hinders the development of the Curriculum for Excellence and the Four Capacities:

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- responsible citizens
- effective contributors

In this article I will suggest how the Four Capacities may be nurtured in schools.

To realise the Four Capacities, we need to appreciate the importance of **the motivation** of pupils and the way teachers (and parents) may assist this. Success of schools in the Far East rely on the high regard and value placed on education by families and hence students are very motivated.

Motivation is self-generated and comes from an inner energy of value and of hope for the future, nurtured by parents, teachers and peers. This is not the daily exhortation of telling pupils what to do, in every detail, and hence removing their self drive.

How can we strengthen that sense of value of the individual pupil and let them feel motivated? I would suggest that we need to have time in the school and curriculum, for pupils to exert more choice, feel a sense of value and receive personal feedback. This is the path to nurture our future citizens – a building out of their sense of ownership and hence their personality.

One homeless young person who received counselling recently remarked:
“It made me feel good because I know the counsellor is not asking for what she wants to know. She is interested in what I want to talk about. Normally people just ask you lots of questions, like you are in a police station.”

At a very basic level many young people feel not valued, by families and by school and lack the motivation to engage fully with life- the opposite of being an active citizen.

I recall visiting a 23 year old sociology student on her third week of teaching practice. I noticed that she had made observations of each one of her Primary 4

pupils in her personal folder: a short paragraph about each one, in terms of interests and personality. I saw in her early teaching style, the way she fed back to them her knowledge and value of each individual, and I saw how the pupils responded. The pupils were happy and felt secure in knowing an adult knew them well.

I contrasted this experience with watching another student teacher assiduously using different methodologies and timings, learning outcomes and success criteria, but did not once address a pupil by name. The experience was efficient but soulless.

On another occasion, I observed a Swedish teacher of 9 year olds, discuss with a class when best to go together to the school cafeteria to have their school lunch. They weighed up the pros and cons together. (Later we accompanied the class and sat down beside them for their meal). During the afternoon, the teacher took time to stop work, and to encourage the pupils to support the resolution of a personal problem of a member of their class. She asked her classmates, "How can we help Mia?"

Such an approach builds a sense of value of young people, assisted by the mature modelling of teachers of individual and collective choice and of solving personal problems at classroom level.

Monica (name changed) is a fine young 14 year old currently struggling in Scottish Education. She longs to know who her father is, and her mother has disowned her for her wild behaviour. She is wilful, passionate and challenges adults, hence she is frequently expelled from schools. In seeking attention she goes to parties with older men and she acknowledges that she is engaged in totally inappropriate behaviour. She seems to be beyond the capacity of school or social worker to protect her.

However Monica responds positively in a special project of supervised work experience, linking vulnerable teenagers with vulnerable young nursery children on a one to one basis. Monica positively glows with the feedback she receives about her value in empathising with her young nursery child, and is supported by the resilience of the facilitators (not teachers) who acknowledge and handle her challenges. She is now trying to engage with education from a place of more internal personal worth.

Many of those working in schools appreciate the prime importance of relationships. However many Scottish young people are left to survive in school, without any adult at home or in the institution knowing them in a personal way. These are young people not favoured by natural aptitude or

support at home. When they leave school there is no fanfare or participation in a prize winning assembly. They just disappear.

How can we seriously expect them to buy into personal attainment and good mental health?

I would suggest we need to give more emphasis on the experiential level of pastoral care in classrooms, and give more focus on mentoring and coaching of every young person, encouraging the involvement of parents who themselves are also isolated from value.

The time consuming and hierarchical systems of paperwork, quality assurance, inspection, and school development planning will not deliver the Four Capacities. These processes should be rationalised in favour of an emphasis on dialogue based coaching, and mentoring to strengthen relationships and pastoral care in our classrooms, particularly in secondary education.

Euan Mackie writes in an independent capacity while acting as an educational coach and an area officer of the Association of Head Teachers and Deputies in Scotland.

Reform of school governance

– Keir Bloomer

Originally posted 4 July 2017

The proposals for reform of school governance announced a week ago by John Swinney are hugely significant and full of admirable intent. His concept of a ‘school and teacher-led system’ has the capacity to transform the quality of educational decision-making for the better. Giving headteachers much-increased control over staffing, the curriculum and the use of funding is, without question, the best way of improving performance and raising standards.

This kind of decentralisation of control is well supported by research. It is in line with the thinking of the world’s most influential educational think tank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and with the direction of travel of many of the developed world’s more successful education systems.

Mr. Swinney’s announcement suggests that the Scottish Government has begun to engage seriously with the question of *how* to bring about radical change in a complex system such as school education. Empowering schools can energise teachers, giving them a sense of ownership of the process of change. It can encourage initiative while reducing bureaucracy and pointless aspects of accountability. Perhaps most important, it could change the culture of education by reducing hierarchy and improving relationships.

In short, the potential of the proposed reforms is enormous. However, that does not mean that the potential will necessarily be realised. The history of Scottish education is full of examples of good ideas implemented ineffectively and fatal compromises with vested interests. This year, the government introduced a Pupil Equity Fund intended to devolve significant sums of money to headteachers that they could use to narrow the attainment gap. Then it issued guidance requiring headteachers to have their plans approved by local authorities.

The basic principles underpinning the new proposals are admirable but will they be implemented effectively and courageously? There are already some worrying signs.

For example, we are told that headteachers will ‘select and manage the teachers and staff in their schools’. Does that mean they will no longer have to accept teachers that the local authority wishes to transfer – for whatever reason – from

another school? If not, in what sense can the headteacher be said to ‘select’ staff? This is a difficult question. Local authorities are the employers of school staff and the government says they will remain so. Employers have a legal obligation to redeploy surplus staff if they can before resorting to redundancy. How is this dilemma to be resolved?

In the same way, heads are to manage and have full control over much more of schools’ budgets. Will they still be bound by the authority’s procurement rules? Will they be free to seek the lowest price for fitting additional electric points or will they be forced, as is often currently the case, to pay over the odds for the council’s own in-house service?

There are clear signs that the proposals have been drafted with secondary schools in mind. While many secondary headteachers will be looking forward to assuming new powers and responsibilities, confident that their schools have the necessary management capacity, many primary heads may be fearful of being expected to take on huge tasks far beyond the capacities of their small organisations. The ability of grouping schools into local ‘clusters’ to address this difficulty is largely ignored.

These are just three examples of many. The government’s lengthy ‘Next Steps’ paper raises more questions than it answers. There are many places where the proposals are not fully thought through or where vital detail is simply missing. The paper purports to be about school governance but actually says remarkably little about it. The Scottish Government proclaims that schools are to be empowered but does not say how. This is empowerment by assertion. To whom will headteachers be accountable? We are not told. What governance structures will be there to support and challenge them? Silence.

There is also one instance of a significant proposal that is simply fatally flawed. The government intends that schools ‘will be supported through a revolutionised offer of support and improvement’. Don’t be fooled by the word ‘offer’. This is the kind of offer you can’t refuse. The government will set up Regional Improvement Collaboratives throughout Scotland and every school will be involved.

There is nothing wrong with collaboration. Several local authorities are already using the notion of the school ‘cluster’ – usually a partnership of a secondary school and several primaries – to encourage school-to-school collaboration. Others have set up authority level collaborations; the Northern Alliance involving seven mainland and island authorities is a good example. The important point is that this alliance is a voluntary association, built from the bottom up on a basis of trust and shared objectives.

The government's collaboratives will be quite different. Local authorities will be grouped together and obliged to share resources according to a central plan. The government will appoint a Regional Director who will be accountable to the Chief Inspector of schools.

At a stroke, the decentralising rhetoric is exposed as a sham. Government control over the system is hugely strengthened. Into the bargain, by giving the Chief Inspector this executive role, the independence of the Inspectorate is destroyed.

There is still time to address the shortcomings of the proposals and ensure that their admirable intentions are properly realised. The government intends to publish a Headteachers' Charter and to introduce legislation on school governance. By the time it does so, the details must be worked out thoroughly. This will involve listening to those with expertise including, of course, serving headteachers.

Finally, the government intends to transfer the legal responsibility for raising attainment and closing the gap that currently lies with local authorities to the schools and, more specifically, to headteachers. This legal responsibility may be more symbolic than real – it is impossible to see how it can be enforced – but, if I were a headteacher, I would want to be assured that I had the powers necessary to meet my obligations. Good intentions, warm rhetoric and half thought-out proposals would not satisfy me.

Keir Bloomer is chair of the Commission on School Reform. A shorter version of this blog appeared in The Times on 28 June 2017.

Tackling the link between disadvantage and suicide

– James Jopling

Originally posted 12 September 2017

Although not often considered in this way, suicide is an issue of inequality. The latest figures from National Records of Scotland show that the rate of suicide is almost three times higher in Scotland's least affluent communities compared to our most affluent. Whilst the causes of suicide are complex, and individual deaths can rarely be attributed to one particular factor, we do know that the economic circumstances of individuals, communities and wider society is a major influencing factor in the overall rate of suicide.

In order to better understand why this link exists, Samaritans and eight leading academics have been gathering and analysing evidence over the past two years. Our report, *Dying from Inequality*, sets out for the first time what exactly contributes to suicide risk in disadvantaged people and communities – and what more can be done to save lives.

We have made significant progress in Scotland in terms of reducing suicide. In the ten years from 2002, when the first Choose Life Suicide Prevention Strategy was published, there was an 18% fall in the suicide rate. Yet despite real progress, a significant difference in rates between the most and least deprived people in Scotland persists. In this way, suicide is an unjust and avoidable difference in length of life that results from being disadvantaged.

Increasing numbers of people have no long-term security and the opportunities of obtaining a secure place to live or work can seem too limited for many. That feeling of insecurity can be all pervasive. Increases in the number of agency workers, people in self-employment and those in short-term/zero hour contracts reflect the flexibility demanded by many parts of today's labour market and may indeed suit some people. But that sort of flexibility does not help with the household bills and day-to-day costs of living that people face and the lack of a reliable, regular wage can be a constant worry for some.

Changes to tax credits and other benefits can add to this worry and, for those outside the labour market altogether, re-assessments of benefit entitlements can be a cause of anxiety, particularly when they are someone's only source of income. Only recently we've seen key members of Scotland's third sector call for a halt to the roll out of Universal Credit. Two of the main concerns expressed being that the new system includes a six-week waiting period and that it is an entirely online.

Unfortunately, it would seem that there is likely to be little improvement in the near future. The Resolution Foundation recently predicted the biggest rise in inequality since the 1980s over the next four years with the ‘after housing costs’ incomes of people in the bottom half of the income scale set to fall significantly while those in the top half can expect their incomes to grow.

That’s a frightening prospect when we know that the risk of a person taking their own life is substantially increased according to how disadvantaged they may be. Crucially, in setting out what needs to change, our report provides the important opportunity to galvanise other agencies and decision makers into action. We are already talking to those who can influence change in housing, stigma, lifestyle behaviours and many of the other factors highlighted in the report.

We’ll be talking about Scottish solutions, in a Scottish policy and political context, with key agencies that can help us affect change. And following the recent publication of the new Programme for Government, we’ll be seeking to influence thinking right across the poverty and inequality agendas too. Work is currently underway on the Scottish Government’s forthcoming suicide prevention action plan and those areas of work need to take account of each other. Both the poverty and suicide prevention agendas should be considering welfare, education, housing and employment policies.

This is, of course, not an issue that can be tackled solely at a national level. We do also need to target local suicide prevention work to areas of deprivation within individual local authorities. Socioeconomic disadvantage is complex and it can fluctuate. We therefore need those with local knowledge of local issues to be driving this.

Increasingly, Samaritans is seeking to work with others to be there for those on the margins of society. We are providing our services in foodbanks, in homeless drop-in centres and other locations where contact with people in crisis can play a role in helping to manage the situation they find themselves in. We have also made our phone number free to call for everyone, so that the cost of contacting us is never a barrier. But we all need to do more to address this.

Suicide is the biggest killer of men under 50 and young people aged 20-34 in the UK. And none of us should ignore that the lower your social class, the more likely you are to be affected by suicide in Scotland. We need individuals to care more – and for organisations that can make a difference on this issue to step up and to do so.

James Jopling is the Executive Director for Samaritans in Scotland.

Video Calls for Inmates Will Help Turn Prisons into Places of Rehabilitation – George Kyriacou

Originally posted 13 October 2017 2017

Prisoners who are regularly visited by a partner or family member are 39% less likely to reoffend than those who don't. Scotland has just 15 prisons, compared to 131 in England and Wales, so inmates' families are far more likely to have to travel long distances to visit them. The time and expense of these journeys can make a difficult situation even tougher, and result in prisoners having less contact with their loved ones.

If we want to break the cycle of reoffending and maximise prisoners' chances of making a fresh start when they're released, it's crucial that they get the support they need to keep in touch with their families, particularly when distance is an obstacle. This is where Purple Visits comes in. We offer secure video calls to keep inmates connected with their families and enhance the rehabilitative process. By enabling people in prison to maintain close, positive relationships, we hope to help turn prisons into places of reform.

Time after time, research has shown that prisoners who receive regular visits from a partner or family member are less likely to reoffend than those who don't receive regular visits. Prisoners who have steady contact with their loved ones are more likely to stay positive, rather than becoming isolated, committing further offences behind bars or turning to drugs. Prisoners' visitors can encourage them to make long-term plans for their release, and prepare while still in custody by dedicating time to education and employment. Visits help inmates to maintain an identity which has nothing to do with prison, too, whether that's being a good role model for their child, a good partner or a provider for their family. The value of visits – both physical and virtual – couldn't be clearer, and must be supported as part of the government's agenda to reform the prison system.

The recently published Farmer Review, which was a review into the prison system within England and Wales took a close look at how helping inmates to stay in touch with their families can reduce reoffending and concluded that too little is being done to enable visits. The review, by Lord Farmer, found that supportive relationships with family members and significant others give meaning and motivation to other forms of rehabilitation. Lord Farmer said; "As one prisoner told me, 'If I don't see my family I will lose them, if I lose them what have I got left?'"

“My report is not sentimental about prisoners’ families, as if they can, simply by their presence, alchemise a disposition to commit crime into one that is law-abiding,” he continued.

“However, I do want to hammer home a very simple principle of reform that needs to be a golden thread running through the prison system and the agencies that surround it. That principle is that relationships are fundamentally important if people are to change.

“In the course of my Review I met an army of people who instinctively recognised this. Prison governors, their management teams and prison officers of all ranks, as well as the voluntary sector organisations that exist to ensure families and prisoners can keep in touch and have the best relationships possible in highly constrained circumstances.”

The review recommends that video calling technology should be made available to some prisoners so that they can stay in touch with family members who are unable to visit them due to illness or distance.

We here at Purple Visits however feel Virtual visits should be made available to all of the people in custody, as long as the system is robust and secure, we feel it should be considered a leap forward in terms of offender rehabilitation.

Lord Farmer refers to a facility in Northern Ireland where inmates already have access to video calls and says the technology could prevent people in prison from becoming “stuck in a technological dark age which will ill-equip them for life on the outside”.

At Purple Visits, we have worked closely with the criminal justice system to create a service which we believe can make a real difference – not only to the lives of inmates, but to society as a whole, too. By helping to strengthen ties between prisoners and their loved ones – particularly where distance is an obstacle – we believe we can play an important role in reducing reoffending rates and helping the government to achieve their goal of turning our jails into true places of reform.

George Kyriacou is the creator of Purple Visits. Purple Visits is a company which helps facilitate virtual prison visits. For more information visit www.purplevisits.com

Can school governance reform make a difference?

– Iain White

Originally posted 1 November 2017

I was pleased to be invited to be a panel member at the Commission on School Reform conference on 25 October that posed this question. Given the Government's focus in this area it is an interesting question to pose. After all, what is the point of change if there will be no impact?

My answer to the question is an unequivocal, 'Yes!' I can say this from the following evidence base.

As a panel member, I was able to make a contribution that was a bit beyond the realms of hypothesis because of my actual experience over the last 3 years. Before that, I was, for 20 years, Head Teacher in a Local Authority secondary school and had worked in public sector schools since 1977. In 2014, I was recruited to become Principal at Newlands Junior College (NJC), a new independent school that was opening on the Southside of Glasgow. NJC is part publicly funded but most of the sponsorship comes from the private sector. So, after all this time, I was changing sectors and it would be fair to say that I had accrued a significant insight into governance of local authority schools.

Newlands Junior College exists to help young people who are disengaged from education to make a success of their lives and contribute to society.

Scotland has excellent schools. Most young people leave well prepared for adult life and work. But some do not, and among those are young people with much to offer. However, for some reason, the normal school experience has not inspired them and they become demotivated and likely to fail.

NJC has been specifically designed with these young people in mind. Its intensive individual support, emphasis on relationships and strongly vocational curriculum provide a different experience that can re-engage them and set them on the road to success. NJC is not for everyone: it provides a specialist service for a very specific group of students.

NJC aims to provide Scottish education with an additional resource. It is not in competition with comprehensive secondary schools. It aims to work closely with those near to it to ensure that every young person receives the kind of education best suited to their needs.

Local schools are invited to identify pupils of around fourteen years of age who are not currently benefiting from their education but who have shown signs of potential. NJC and school staff work together to ensure that a different kind of opportunity is made available to those young people who seem most likely to gain from it.

The students spend the equivalent of S3 and S4 with us and are prepared for jobs and college places through a vocationally focused educational experience aimed at developing the students' existing and latent potential. With positive relationships as the key to success, the experience provides a skills-based, personalised approach through which individual excellence is fostered in preparation for work.

It only works! All of the NJC graduates in 2016 and 2017 left and went into either employment or a National Certificate course at a Further Education college.

The Governance model at NJC is much different to what I experienced in local authorities. As Principal, I am accountable to the Board of Trustees, a body made up of representatives of organisations that support NJC financially and in other ways. My accountability is quite straightforward and is focused on the core purpose of NJC. With my colleagues, I am expected to take a group of disengaging young people, work with them over a two-year period and, at the end, get each and every one of them into a real positive destination.

Performance is monitored and reviewed at quarterly Board meetings. For each of these I prepare a Progress Report and discuss this with the Board members. An annual Standards and Quality report is also produced. As Principal, I have to work with my colleagues to deliver success for the students. Success is a quality positive destination. It is simple.

Crucially, how we go about doing that is largely up to ourselves as education professionals. We do not have to seek permissions. This is very different from the system to which I had become conditioned in the local authority sector. Indeed, my experience there led me in the early days to be asking the 'Can we' questions quite regularly, until, the Chair of the Board of Trustees said to me, 'Look Iain, will you please stop asking if it is OK to do things. You are the experts in education. Just get on with it and get the job done!' Fair enough.

The differences that I can identify in this new approach to governance are

- improved flexibility
- improved speed of action and response
- elimination of the fear of failure amongst the staff
- improved personalisation in the young people's experience

- young people taking much more responsibility for their own learning
- the ability to recruit members of staff who really believe and are committed
- infinitely more flexibility of operation because of more flexible terms and conditions
- FREEDOM

Paradoxically, although we have this freedom, as Principal I feel infinitely more accountable now than I ever did when constrained in the local authority approach to school governance. Isn't that a strange thing?!

So, what do I mean when I say that I was previously constrained? In the Local Authority, as a Head Teacher I had 95 Management Circulars that told me how I was to operate. One of these was 179 pages long. In turn, this led to around 60 policies and procedural statements produced at school level. The level of bureaucracy is mind boggling. Now, NJC operating under its Board of Trustees, has a couple of dozen policy statements. All of these were written by us with the direct focus on the needs and aspirations of our client group and the school's purpose. It is a whole new world.

For many years I have been concerned about the culture of uniformity and conformity that exists in the public education system in Scotland. Increasingly, schools have been made to follow 'guidelines' that are not guidelines at all but instructions. The system of inspection maintains this uniformity, dressed up as best practice, and the desire on the part of schools, and local authorities, to get 'good inspection reports' brings the conformity. Indeed courses by professional development providers around 'preparing for Inspection' are commonplace. We need greater freedom of action for schools and a variety of governance options. In this way, there can genuinely be a chance that local circumstances can be really taken into account and creativity will flourish. Before we forget, it will also ensure that more young people get the deal from the public education system that they are entitled to and have the opportunity for success and fulfilment in life that they deserve.

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This was prepared by Iain in a personal capacity. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Board of Trustees of Newlands Junior College

