Melting Pot 2020

Melting Pot 2020

This is a collection of the individual posts which have appeared on our Melting Pot guest blog in 2020.

December 2020

Reform Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland (No SCO39624) and is also a company limited by guarantee (No SC336414) with its Registered Office at 14-18 Hill Street, Edinburgh, EH2 3JZ

About Reform Scotland

Reform Scotland, a charity registered in Scotland, is a public policy institute which works to promote increased economic prosperity, opportunity for all, and more effective public services. Reform Scotland is independent of political parties and any other organisations. It is funded by donations from private individuals, charitable trusts and corporate organisations. Its Director is Chris Deerin and Alison Payne is the Research Director. Both work closely with the Trustee Board, chaired by Alan McFarlane, which meets regularly to review the research and policy programme.

About The Melting Pot

The Melting Pot is Reform Scotland's guest blog, where Scotland's thinkers, talkers and writers can indulge in some blue-sky thinking. Melting Pot publications do not represent Reform Scotland's policies. Authors' biographies were correct at the date of publication.

Reform Scotland's Trustee Board

- Alan McFarlane (Chairman)
- Sinclair Dunlop
- Geraldine Gammell
- Isobel d'Inverno
- Sandy Kennedy
- Siobhan Mathers
- Kevin Pringle

Contents

FOREWORD

Something unusual happened to our Melting Pot blog in 2020. It's always been a space for interesting thought and debate, but this year it became "a place to be seen", as one senior political figure put it to me. More and more smart and engaged people began approaching us, asking to write. The impact spread across the mainstream media.

As a consequence we've had more content than ever before, and an array of excellent new contributors. There are so many good articles below, and I urge you to graze through them. Read as many as you can. You'll learn a lot – I certainly did.

With apologies to the others, I'd like to single out a few of my favourites.

- **Paul Gray**, the former chief executive of NHS Scotland, authored a fantastic piece, "We can't go back to the way we were", explaining how the health service has made a huge technological leap forward during the Covid crisis. This nimbleness and dynamism should be the new normal, said Gray. His article was widely read and the headline has become something of a slogan.
- Former first minister **Lord McConnell** argued that "we must not fail the lockdown generation", in a critique of the Scottish Government's plan for post-lockdown part-time learning. His campaign helped persuade ministers to open schools full-time instead.
- Ex-SNP MP and foreign policy expert **Stephen Gethins** explored whether there might be an opportunity for Remain-friendly Scotland to use its links with the EU to build new relationships even as the rest of the UK grows more distant.
- As business clashed with the Scottish Government over its economic recovery plans, **Karen Betts**, CEO of the Scotch Whisky Association, wrote wisely on the need for a relationship reset and for greater effort on both sides.
- **Jenifer Johnston** called for a national online curriculum with lessons broadcast daily on a website, to help home-schooling parents during lockdown. This began a debate in the mainstream media about the difficulties facing parents juggling work and schooling.
- Deacon Blue frontman **Ricky Ross**, who has done a lot of work with overseas charities, described his concern at the merging of DfID with the Foreign Office and its potential impact on the world's underprivileged.
- Businessman **Roy Leckie** made the case that Scotland, with its long and deep links to Hong Kong, should provide a home for immigrants wishing to leave the troubled region. The Scottish Government agreed and has been in discussions with Mr Leckie.

In truth, I could have selected an entirely different set of equally strong articles. This speaks to the quality of the content, the expertise and passion of our contributors, and the role Reform Scotland plays at the heart of the national debate. I've been delighted by the flowering of our blog this year, and with a Holyrood election in 2021, as well as the challenges of Brexit and the aftermath of Covid, we fully intend to hit the ground running in the new year.

Happy reading!

Chris Deerin
Director
Reform Scotland

Index of Social & Economic Well Being – John Mclaren

Originally posted 23 January 2020

It is popular, including within the Scottish Government, to say that we must look beyond GDP to see how successful we are being as a country.

I have compiled the Index of Social and Economic Well-being (ISEW) to do just that. It looks at four key areas of 'success' (income, education, longevity and inclusivity) across 32 OECD countries, including the four constituent UK countries, and over a period (2006 to 2018) of great economic and fiscal turmoil.

So what does this wider measure of success tell us in general and about Scotland?

The top performing countries have remained generally the same, with Nordic countries doing well, alongside Switzerland and Japan.

At the other end, eastern European countries still dominate the lower ranks, although some are catching up fast, and those Mediterranean countries badly affected by Great Recession have not done well over this period.

The UK is very much mid table, but this hides a slightly above average performance by England and poorer ones by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scotland in particular has done badly, partly due to the impact of the decline of North Sea activity on income, but also due to education (as measured by its PISA scores) standards slipping. Life expectancy meanwhile continues to be a major weakness for Scotland, with little sign of catching up despite its already low ranking.

Caveats abound with such a broad brush analysis (see the full paper on the Scottish Trends website for greater discussion of these) but it seems clear that Scotland's performance, particularly with regards to health and education has been disappointing in comparison to other countries.

Furthermore it's not good enough to simply blame UK wide funding cuts on this performance as most other countries (including England) have lived through similar circumstances and managed to do better.

What might be some of the causes of such a relatively weak performance and what might be done to improve matters?

In each case the answers lie both within and out-with the Parliament.

Within the Parliament, there is a need for greater scrutiny and competition of ideas.

On the former point, the current Committee system is highly partisan and needs overhauling to ensure greater independence from the government, or for some form of bicameralism to be introduced.

On the latter point, a review of public funding for political parties is needed which seeks to ensure at least base funding in order for political parties to formulate their own, evidence based, policy program for Scotland. At present, outside of the SNP, Scotland's political parties are either small operations or effectively branch operations of UK parties and in both cases poorly funded. This has inhibited the development of alternative policy ideas and led to a lack of political competition, as their operations are relatively ineffectual in challenging the well-funded and civil service supported (in technical terms) SNP led government.

Out-with the Parliament, the policy development and evaluation landscape is very weak. For example, few think tanks exist and those that do are mostly poorly funded by either the public or private sectors. In contrast, at the UK level, the health system is analysed and held to account by a mixture of the IFS, the Nuffield Trust, the Kings Fund and a variety of other independent bodies. However, all of these bodies concentrate on the English health system and do little in the way of analysis of any of the devolved health systems.

Whether it be the economy, education or health policy, this lack of 'expert' (if I can use such a loaded phrase in modern politics times!) external involvement leads to a dearth of new policy development and a lack of existing policy evaluation. In many countries the funding for such work will come from the private sector, but in Scotland's case there is next to nil private sector involvement in any activity that impinges on the Scottish Parliament or government policy making.

In general, the problem discussed above comes down to too little scrutiny and proper evaluation of the actions of the Scottish Government, of whatever political hue. As this comes down to a variety of shortcomings, including: a weak Committee system in the Parliament; a lack of academic involvement; a dearth of think tanks; poorly funded political parties; and a declining and underfunded media presence, then the solution is wide ranging and will take time to develop and to bed in. But without a shift then the Scottish Government is likely to continue to be second best in terms of innovating and improving policies that impact on key outcomes.

The lack of helpful supporting bodies in the Scottish political system that, in normal circumstances, would complement the Scottish Parliament, may have been understandable initially but, twenty years into devolution, is becoming a handicap to progress. Unfortunately, at present, given the domination of constitutional events, it seems highly unlikely that any such changes are imminent.

Next month's Scottish Budget is intended to give greater emphasis to well-being. That would be a welcome move but if a Parliament is struggling to come up with successful policies to improve health and education standards then its ability to do so for the more complicated goals associated with well-being must be in some doubt.

John Mclaren is an independent economist at Scottish Trends

Disruptive Ideas: A Statistical Test of Independence – Richard Marsh

Originally posted 13 February 2020

Since devolution there has been an increase in the demand for data to support the evaluation of Scotland's public policy choices and the delivery of public services. However, this demand has exposed significant gaps in the availability of data and the Scottish Parliament's economy committee recently highlighted a precipitous fall in the number of formal evaluations of economic development initiatives.

Responses have sought to patch these gaps rather than take a wider view of Scotland's future data needs. Indeed, if Scotland's statistical system were to be designed from scratch it would almost certainly look very different than it does today.

Without a fundamental change in the way we produce data in Scotland we are likely to find ourselves reheating old data to try to answer new policy questions. Scotland needs to establish an independent Scottish Statistics Agency that is imaginative, agile, forward looking and customer focused.

The Agency should be led by a Chief Statistician in Scotland who should be independent of the government of the day and free to interpret the data needed to support and measure government policy. Countries similar to Scotland operate independent statistics agencies and have already achieved much of Scotland's stated vision of data leadership.

The Bean Review invites a fundamental rethink about the way we produce economic statistics. It is important that Scotland takes up this challenge and looks at new approaches to develop the next generation of economic statistics. This is particularly true when considering the need to blend economic data with wider environmental and social outcomes to measure the effectiveness of public policy choices.

The Scottish Government's Data Delivery Group currently falls short of this aim. The creation of the Scottish Fiscal Commission demonstrates how it is possible to establish an arms-length scrutiny body to produce economic statistics. The Commission was established relatively quickly at minimal cost and has served to significantly increase the scrutiny of government spending and public policy choices.

The Digital Economy Act (2017) will provide the Office for National Statistics with improved access to a range of economic statistics collected by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) covering employment, wages, profits and exports. The vast reservoir of microdata available is an underused resource and cries out for the kind of change in culture advocated by the Bean Review.

At first glance the introduction of an independent statistics agency could barely be described as a disruptive idea.

The First Minister suggested earlier this year that health and wellbeing were as fundamental as GDP. There is, therefore, a clear need to support this vision with relevant and reliable data.

It is, equally, entirely plausible that it would be more appropriate to measure GDP taking into account the consumption of natural resources. Scotland, too, needs to keep pace with this agenda, reflecting the Scottish Government's commitment to addressing climate change through a wide range of measures.

The role of data here could signal a game-changer in how Scotland moves forward with this agenda. Additionally, the Scottish Government has arguably produced some of its most policy relevant information when it has produced publications that don't seek to copy an existing UK publication or statistics.

Establishing an independent statistics agency would provide a platform to generate statistics that best support the evaluation of Scotland's public policy choices and the delivery of public services.

Evidence-based policy should start with a focus on the policy choices facing Scotland, the key questions about the delivery of public services and what information is needed for meaningful monitoring and evaluation.

Currently there is a tendency to sift through administrative information and long-standing surveys and ask to which policy questions they could be applied.

While the call for evidence-based policy making has been persistent since devolution, too often we end up with policy-based evidence. Without full consideration of how data is produced to inform and evaluate public policy it is likely that key policy choices will continue to go unmeasured with a poor sense of progress or direction.

For example, a review of Scotland's £5.2 billion city deals by Audit Scotland found that the Scottish Government does not have a plan to measure their success. Additionally, a data deficit can incentivise a rather limited approach to policy making, where the status quo offers the least risky response in a context of limited evidence of different policy options and outcomes.

There are advantages for the Scottish Government as both a user and producer of national statistics. This includes the ability to publish economic statistics without prior notice, the ability to withdraw or delay some economic data publications.

However, the Scottish Government is as likely to benefit from an independent statistics agency as those seeking to hold the government to account. Scrutiny of the UK government's analysis would be significantly strengthened by the more prominent voice of an independent Chief Statistician and an independent Scottish Statistics Agency.

An additional argument can be made here: by having an independent agency, questions of timing and availability of data are no longer subject to accusations of narrow political gain.

Regardless of Scotland's future constitutional status, having an independent Scottish Statistics Agency and Chief Statistician, would inform and improve the quality of public debate. This would provide the necessary foundations for evidence-based policy making in Scotland.

Richard's full paper can be read here.

Richard Marsh is director of economics at 4-consulting, he is an economist specialising in regional economics and economic statistics. Richard contributed to the First Minister's Sustainable Growth Commission, working on the economic value of migration.

Analysing Scottish attainment data – Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 15 February 2020

The latest annual report on school leavers' attainment and destinations does not make heartening reading. Even the Scottish government's media operation could not hide the decline compared with last year, but that untypically but only slightly candid news announcement concealed a deeper problem: decline has been quite consistent since about 2014 or 2015. I'll come back at the end to what happened then.

Consider first what used to be the gold standard – passing three or more Highers. That is still informally the threshold for entry to higher education, and the report shows that 55% of people who reach that level do in fact enter such courses. But the proportion passing 3+ Highers (43%) is now lower than in any year from 2015-16 onwards. (All the dates in this blog refer to the year of leaving school.)

The same is true of other cut-off points for Highers. The proportion with 1+ (61%) and the proportion with 5+ (29%) are almost the same as in 2014-15, and are less than in all the intervening years.

What's more, the purchasing power of Highers is also dwindling (despite their becoming rarer). The proportion of people who got into higher education having left school only with Highers has been slowly falling – to 55% from 61% in 2010. That is in contrast to people who gained at least one Advanced Higher, 87% of whom entered higher education in 2019, equal to or above the rate in every year from 2010. Since few people get any Advanced Highers, however, the rate of entry to higher education has also been stagnating. It was 40% last year, the lowest since 2015 (when it was 39%).

The same slow decline is found at lower levels of attainment. The proportion achieving five or more National 5s (or equivalent) was 56% last year, lower than in every year from 2013-14.

These numbers conceal differences in particular social groups. The proportion of female students passing 1+ Highers was 67%, 12 points higher than for males. The trajectories over time were similar, however. The entry rate to higher education for women last year was 48%, no increase from 2016-17, but above previous years. For men, the rate was 33%, which was below every year from 2013-14, and had hardly changed in a decade.
The downward trajectory of attainment was also not seen in every local-authority area. In Glasgow, most strikingly, the decline in the proportion passing 1+ Highers started only between 2017-18 and 2018-19 (from 60% to 59%). The same was true of East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire and Inverclyde. But in all but three small council areas, the 2018-19 proportion was lower than the peak of the years from 2014-15 onwards. The exceptions – Clackmannan, East Renfrewshire and Orkney – contain just 4% of school leavers. The preponderance of recent decline suggests that the problems lie in some common national feature that must have been growing in the last few years.
There might appear to be a few more positive messages in the data. One is in the rise of attainment in the most deprived areas, and the resulting rise in progression to higher

education. Last year, 26% of school leavers from the most deprived fifth of areas entered higher education, the highest ever, and one-half greater than the 18% in 2009-10.

But there are two caveats. One is that the resulting reduction of the difference between the most and the least deprived areas (from 40 points to 33 points) is partly because of stagnation in the least-deprived areas since 2013-14, at an entry rate of 59%. If the rate had continued to grow in these areas as it had been growing from 2009-10, the gap would have fallen only by about 5 (not 7) points. In other words, just under one third of the closing of the gap has been due to poor progress by the children of the most affluent neighbourhoods.

The other objection to the seemingly good news on inequality is in the well-known flaws of the Scottish government's favoured measure of deprivation – ranking areas by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. About two thirds of socially disadvantaged people live outside the most deprived fifth of areas, and over a quarter of people in these areas are not deprived. In rural areas, the problem is even worse: recent research commissioned by the Scottish government showed that 90% of people with low incomes live outside the most deprived fifth of areas. Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, one fifth of the increase of higher-education entrants from the most deprived areas actually came from families classified as professional or semi-professional, and there was hardly any increase from the opposite group – disadvantaged people living in the least deprived areas. If that trend continued to 2018-19, then about 1.5 points of the 8-point rise in entry from the disadvantaged areas would have been due to advantaged people living there.

So about half of the decrease in the gap (2+1.5 out of 7) is likely to have been due either to non-disadvantaged people living in deprived areas, or to the stagnation of entry from non-deprived areas. The ethical base of policy based on these sleights of hand seems distinctly dubious.

In short, there is little to celebrate in these statistics. Finally, what happened at the point when the decline started? The answer is perhaps too well-known: it was the course and examination changes that followed from Curriculum for Excellence. The curriculum had been put in place in primary and early secondary from about 2010. The schools inspectorate used this as an excuse to reform the courses and assessment at the end of schooling, without offering any rationale. The last year of the former Standard Grade (almost entirely taken in school fourth year) was 2012-13, and the last year of the Intermediate and Higher courses beyond that was in 2014-15. Standard Grade and the Intermediates were replaced by new courses called National 4 and National 5, based on the Curriculum for Excellence. The Higher name was retained, but the syllabuses and assessment were similarly changed to reflect the new curriculum.

So the most plausible explanation for the generally steady decline since the years between about 2014 and about 2016 is this reform. Added to that is the evidence from the recent report on attainment in these new courses, published on 20 February, which not only noted that pass rates in the Higher and National 5 assessments have been falling, but also reported on the main weaknesses in candidates' performance. For

example, many students lacked accuracy in science. In mathematics, too many students' numeracy was weak and too many struggled with algebra. In social subjects and in English there was a tendency to mistake opinions for facts, to make sweeping generalisations, and to answer exam questions with regurgitated model essays that had been memorised.

None of these essentially anecdotal examples offers a proper explanation of the statistics published on 25 February. But the accumulation of these kinds of evidence suggests a steadily deteriorating grounding in basic knowledge, exactly the kind of failure that might be expected from a curriculum based on skills rather than knowledge. That would explain why the decline has not been a one-off event, when the new courses were introduced, but has continued quite steadily. It's not the courses and exams as such that provide the explanation, but rather the pedagogical principles which pervade the entire curriculum from age 3 to the senior years of secondary school. The exam performance is merely a symptom of something deeper. This adds further to the growing sense that Curriculum for Excellence is deeply flawed. The problem, however, is that no-one in the inspectorate, the various educational quangos, the core civil service, the government's council of international experts, the opposition political parties, or the government itself seems willing to admit that anything fundamental is wrong.

Lindsay Paterson is professor of education policy in the School of Social and Political Science at Edinburgh University.
He is also a member of the Commission on School Reform

Not just ‘nice to have’ – Keir Bloomer

Originally posted 16 March 2020

It is good to see that Glasgow City Council has reversed its decision to close Blairvadach Outdoor Centre. However, the position in Scotland as a whole remains bleak. After North Lanarkshire closes its centre in Oban later in the year, only 6 local authority outdoor centres will remain. Two belong to City of Edinburgh Council which, alone, has maintained its provision over the quarter century since local government reorganisation. Four other councils, including Glasgow, have one each, leaving twenty-seven authorities with no provision of their own (although some make limited use of facilities owned by private organisations or trusts).

This is in very marked contrast with the position twenty-five years ago. The former Strathclyde Region alone had more than twenty centres. It was committed in principle to giving all young people an entitlement to two residential experiences in the course of their school careers. Although it never achieved this aim, most school pupils did benefit from at least one visit. Today, a stay at a residential outdoor centre is very much the exception rather than the norm.

Does this matter? Has anything of value been lost?

As a member of the Strathclyde education directorate, I spent a year in the late 1980s reviewing a number of existing policies, including the council’s commitment to outdoor education. The centres were popular but their value was described in many differing ways. The most common was the one given recently by defenders of Blairvadach. They provided activities like sailing, orienteering and hill walking that many young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, would not otherwise experience. However, as I listened to young people, parents, teachers and centre staff, I came to believe that the activities were, in some ways, secondary. There had to be purposeful activity but it could be of many kinds. Castle Toward, for example, had often been used for summer art classes and orchestra rehearsals. The critical factor was a formative social experience; co-existing with peers, collaborating in shared activity, gaining resilience.

All young people, regardless of background, benefitted. However, the impact was perhaps greatest on those who might never have left the city before or had any experience of orderly shared living. A visit to an outdoor centre was always memorable. Sometimes the reasons were surprising and striking. At a centre in remote Argyll, a boy told me with astonishment and at least a little apprehension, “At night, it gets dark here – not like Glasgow, really, really dark”.

The fate of outdoor centres might seem like a relatively minor concern. However, the enrichment of experience is central to the educational process. It is universally accepted that young children who are exposed to rich language, ideas and broad experience in their early years are quicker than others to acquire vocabulary and develop cognitive abilities. This is just as true in later childhood and adolescence (and

indeed in adulthood). It is part of the function of schools to try to supply the cultural capital that some young people would otherwise lack.

Viewed in this light, outdoor education is not an 'extra', something good to have but hardly essential. An even more important example which is also under sustained attack is music. There are other instances too. The essential point is that every school and local authority needs to decide what it is going to offer to enrich the experience of young people and thereby support their development as rounded individuals but also their knowledge and understanding. There are plenty of options available. The key point s that this aspect of education needs serious attention, thoughtful planning and the commitment of resources.

Keir Bloomer is chair of the Commission on School Reform.

We can't go back to the way we were – Paul Gray

Originally posted 26 March 2020

Whatever we do, please don't commit to putting health and care services back to "the way they were" when all this is over.

The NHS has made some radical changes in recent days. Lots of stuff that couldn't be done has been done. The roll-out of digital technology to reduce face to face consultation and limit travel has leapt over hurdles that were apparently insurmountable a few weeks ago.

Pharmacists – highly trained professionals as they are – are making a fuller contribution through an extended minor ailments service and have been given access to the emergency care summary for patients. A few weeks ago, all that was languishing in the "ooh, that's difficult" box.

Out of hospital care services, whether voluntary, state provided, privately provided, or provided by individuals out of the goodness of their hearts, have been recognised as essential – not the poor relation, not an afterthought, but critical equal partners to the NHS. The way we were was the wrong way. This is the right way.

These changes have taken place because people care. They have cared enough to sacrifice some of their own status and power, in order to free up others to move further and faster than we might have imagined possible. They have cared enough to cancel breaks and take on extra shifts to make themselves available. They have cared more for others than they have for themselves and we are in their debt already. And that debt will grow. They must not be forgotten when the new day dawns.

Some of the changes cannot remain in place, of course. Elective surgery that has been cancelled will have to resume at some point. Face to face consultation has its place, and will doubtless be reinstated in some cases, although we will never return wholesale to the old modes.

But what must remain is our capacity to move at speed, to innovate, and to break down barriers to change. Our risk appetite has been altered radically by events, and while that will be recalibrated, let's not over-correct when this is past.

We've also rediscovered our enthusiasm for experts. It's been an odd awakening. You don't become a virologist by distance learning (also known as reading stuff on Twitter, and listening to your mate who knows someone who delivers stuff to a hospital and heard two people chatting about how this thing spreads; he wasn't sure if they were staff or not but they sounded as though they knew what they were talking about).

We've also decided that being kind is ok. We're learning not to mistake decency for weakness. We've learned that it is sometimes important to do what we are asked, lest we end up having to do what we are told.

We want to “take the politics out of the NHS” but we have discovered that the NHS is an intensely political construct. The decision to provide a national health service largely free at the point of delivery is a political decision: it is not therefore unreasonable that politicians have their say. Other decisions are available and other countries have taken different courses. But where we are, whatever the disagreements about the precise way in which the NHS should deliver its services, it has become clear that politicians of every stripe do care about it; they too have set an example in giving due regard to expert advice in this hour of need.

We will have got some things wrong, or less than right. There will be a combination of factors at play here. In any institutional system, the three key factors of time, cost and quality interact. The cost constraint has for the moment been largely removed, and the time constraint is significant. However, even without much cost constraint the lack of time will have an impact on quality in some situations. So we will need to review the quality of what has been done, and do it constructively. It will be unconscionable to review decisions through the lens of our approach to scrutiny heretofore. Our scrutiny will have to be context-sensitive or we will spend more time explaining what was done than we spent doing it; and we will be required to defend people who gave their all, instead of praising them, just because they missed out a step in the governance process while having the misfortune to save a few lives.

The way we were had much about it that was excellent, and it had much to commend it. It was in need of reform and that was not a contested point. But the most excellent part of the way we were was of course the people. And they are the people who transformed the way we were into the way we are, because they had to. Let them be recognised for what they did, and are doing, and will yet do. They are doing it for us, and not for themselves.

Professor Paul Gray was chief executive of NHS Scotland, 2013-19

Learning at home – on Television – Gillian Hunt

Originally posted 27 March 2020

In its paper 'Learning at home', published on Wednesday, the Commission on School Reform states that, "parents are faced with a period of five months with no access to schools" and that, "they will naturally be greatly concerned about the education of their children". He continues by highlighting that many parents will have few ideas about how to go about this and that we don't yet have the necessary support systems in place to address this.

Parents are the primary educators of their children. They do this from the day their children are born and continue to do it every day. This needs to be recognised, celebrated and communicated widely. There is a plethora of educational material out there, mainly accessed through the internet with schools providing online support for pupils. Great use is being made of Glow, and applications such as Zoom and Skype. There is also the vast resource that is BBC Bitesize, both online and on the BBC Scotland channel. But where do parents start when schooling their children at home and how do they navigate the content that's out there?

In the paper Keir Bloomer refers to the impact of equity and the plight of children living in disadvantage. Research evidence indicates that the learning of children living in disadvantage suffers disproportionately during extended periods without schooling. This crisis will widen the poverty related attainment gap as we know that perhaps only 87% of households with children where the net annual income is less than £15k have internet access, and that affluent families will likely be setting up online tutoring for their children. We need to continue to strive to have an education system for all, that is accessible by all. I believe that television and radio offers this, as it is likely all households have a television. Television could provide the necessary support mechanism Bloomer refers to. We could have a co-ordinated, national response to support learning at home at this extraordinary time.

Now more than ever we are relying heavily on television for news and information, with everyone tuning in daily. The Government and the NHS are working closely with the television stations to reach people with vital information. Great use should be made of this medium to support co- ordinated learning at home, delivering something national: a shared resource. The benefits of a national programme delivered on television, and radio, include: a co-ordinated approach to learning at home; guidance provided for all; children being, and feeling, connected to their friends; parents sharing and supporting each other; teachers sharing and supporting each other; people feeling connected and part of a community (you only have to look for rainbows in windows to see how much that is appreciated); and of course the huge economies of scale.

Therefore what we need is a national programme for learning at home, provided on television and an infrastructure for this developed and led by Education Scotland, our national education agency, supported by other national bodies. We have the amazing resource of over 52,000 teachers, and associated educators and support staff who could

provide content from their own homes. This has the potential to support children, parents, and educators, to address inequalities, to bring people together and to help us mitigate isolation.

Gillian Hunt is an education consultant.

The Joy of Mathematics – Paul Hare

Originally posted 30 March 2020

Although an academic economist for most of my adult life, I started off as a mathematician.

At secondary school down in England I took to mathematics from a very early age, always loved it and mostly found it fairly easy. Hence no surprise when it became the subject of my first degree. Back in the early 1960s, when my serious interest in maths gained momentum, everything was enormously different from nowadays. We had no calculators, of course, they weren't invented. So partly as a result, we had no option but to become pretty good at mental arithmetic. From an early age, too, we had to learn how to use log tables to perform routine calculations – I still have the four figure tables I used at school, they still 'work'! At the same time, some of the maths we learned was a bit different from what young people do now. Thus we had a lot more geometry, to do with lines, triangles, circles and the like, and probably more basic algebra to keep us on our toes, and for fun. Until not so very long ago, all this was considered an essential part of what it meant to be reasonably well educated.

In my last year at school I was very lucky with one of my maths teachers. On quite a few Saturday mornings, the three of us in my class who were especially good at maths and keen to try harder problems, would cycle out to our teacher's house; by the time we got there, she would have baked some scones or something else nice, and we would spend the morning scoffing these treats and struggling with some of the problems she had found for us. It was very challenging, and a highlight of the week. It was only much later in life that I fully appreciated what a special privilege all this extra tuition was. Before starting university in October 1964, I was also lucky enough to get into the early days of computing. I worked for nine months as a mathematician at a firm in my home town, Hull. Nowadays that might be thought of as a form of 'gap year', though such things were unheard of then. My work initially involved some statistical calculations using mechanical calculators (the firm had such things, though my school had nothing of the kind), then the firm asked me if I wanted to learn computer programming and do some work on sales forecasting. I knew nothing about either of these, so I said 'yes' to both. I had not even seen a computer before. Soon I read up on sales forecasting methods and taught myself an early programming language. Then I would cycle across Hull to use the University's computer – it only had the one in those days. My program was on a roll of punched paper tape, and the output was another roll of paper tape. Somehow I got my program working and wrote my first ever business report, an amazing experience between school and university. During this period, I was also, periodically, a baked bean taster, one of a panel of tasters. Once we had collected lots of data from tasters, I had to do the statistical analysis to identify the characteristics of the 'ideal' baked bean. I don't think our findings were a big success in marketing terms.

One of the puzzles these days is that somehow, mathematics is widely thought of as a 'hard' subject. This seems a real shame, and mostly unfair. For even getting to a good basic level in maths, something like a Scottish Higher, for instance, can already open up

lots of doors to a wide range of jobs and career paths, and solving tricky problems is immensely satisfying, especially when done without the aid of a solution or even any hints towards a solution. Getting to this point has a huge positive impact on one's self confidence, regardless of whether you carry on doing much maths.

In my own case, after graduating I worked for a while as a mathematician in the chemicals industry, then went back to university to make the career shift into economics. After that I mostly worked in Scottish Universities, first Stirling, then Heriot-Watt. As an academic I did now and again make use of my maths background, writing some technical papers and reports on economic modelling, including a good deal on Eastern Europe where I did a lot of work on various countries. More recently, I've done less maths, but have written various reports, mostly for the EU, on several of the UK's Overseas Territories, including the Falkland Islands, the Turks and Caicos Islands and Montserrat. Partly because we've now left the EU, partly because of the current Covid-19 crisis, this sort of work has largely ground to a halt for now. However, I am still doing some online maths teaching using Skype, and that is very enjoyable.

It's especially satisfying working with young people who want to improve their maths, and even have a go at some tough problems, as I don't know of a better mental exercise. Along the way, I also try to teach my students a bit of the history of maths, as hardly anyone these days seems to know who the great mathematicians were, or what they did, rather a shame. So at the very least I make sure that folk know about Euclid, hugely important as various editions of his *Elements* were for several centuries the best-selling books in Europe after the Bible. Everyone was expected to learn a good deal of basic geometry. And what about Edinburgh's own Napier, the inventor of logarithms, though unfortunately no one cares so much about him these days, as our calculators make everything so easy, but all Advanced Higher students do have to learn about Colin Mclaurin and his famous series. Mclaurin enrolled at Glasgow University at age 11, and was appointed professor of mathematics at Aberdeen University at age 19, quite impressive. Even today, I suppose everyone who takes maths to Higher or Advanced Higher levels knows a bit about Newton and his famous apple tree (which I visited recently in Cambridge) – (or the tree I saw was said to be a descendant of the original one); and they probably know of Euler, the greatest mathematician of all time, in my view, inventor of the number, ***e***, and for a long time official mathematician at the Court of Catherine the Great in Russia. For some reason, I don't think our Queen even has an official mathematician, not sure why not.

There are a few movies which give a feel for the power of mathematics, so I'll mention just two: first, The Dish, about a radio telescope in Parkes, Australia, and the problems of tracking the first moon landing. Second, Hidden Figures, about some of NASA's early work and the struggles faced by some coloured women to be accepted as mathematicians and early computer programmers and for their work to be fully recognised – a really inspiring movie – and in the background some very clever maths, mostly done by hand, without computers.

Yet not only is maths enormous fun, hugely interesting and wonderful exercise for the brain, even still for older folk like me, but it is also of massive practical importance. For now, and to finish off, let me just mention three important, topical examples.

1. Internet shopping. We all do this nearly every day and take it for granted. But some very smart maths is involved in the coding algorithms that keep our shopping secure, much of it based on pure number theory to do with large prime numbers, developed – largely by folk who thought of maths as fun, and who had no interest in its practical utility, back in the 1930s.
2. Covid-19. The virus crisis is going to be with us for a while, and some very interesting mathematical modelling is being done by various teams now, to understand virus transmission and to get a better feel for the likely scale and timing of the crisis, how many people might get ill, how many might die, and what practical steps can we take to limit the harm? This is not easy, and much is not yet fully understood, but I'm doing my best to read as much as I can to learn more about the whole thing, and the mathematical models that can help us.
3. Last, global warming. Despite the distractions of the virus crisis, and other issues the government has to deal with, we should not forget about this major problem. There is loads of science and various economic and mathematical models to help us in understanding the challenges. Yes, much of it is quite difficult and it's hard work to keep up with the latest research and policy advice, much of which will force us to accept quite big changes in our way of life in coming decades. So especially for the young, it's important for them to get a good basic understanding of all this, as part of their core education. This includes, too, getting a feel for some of the most useful mathematical methods and tools.

Hence for young people missing out on schooling while we get through the Covid-19 crisis, especially those in the later years of secondary school, there's loads of maths they could be doing, for a mix of fun, stimulating their developing minds with tricky problems, and just building up their basic knowledge and understanding. All this is important, and if a scheme is developed to offer online tuition and problem solving in maths, I'd be delighted to be a part of it.

Paul Hare is an Emeritus Professor of Economics, Heriot-Watt University

An opportunity for everyone to learn – Keir Bloomer

Originally posted 31 March 2020

Across the world millions of people are waiting for lockdown to be lifted and for life to 'return to normal'. Barring for complete catastrophe, that is – for the most part – what is going to happen. Offices and factories will reopen. Cafes and restaurants will start serving again. Children will return to school.

It is impossible that an upheaval of such magnitude will leave no lasting legacy. At the very least there will be a determination to learn lessons, to ensure that we are better prepared in the future. However, it seems certain that life will change in other ways as a result of the experience of the current crisis. Take, for example, home working and teleconferencing. Neither is a new idea, but they were hardly part of the everyday experience of most people. That has changed dramatically. A threshold has been crossed. Face-to-face meetings will resume, but the electronic alternative will be with us on a greatly enhanced scale. Many employers and employees will have found new ways of working that are productive and congenial. The implications, for instance for transport services, are difficult to foresee but will certainly be significant.

What of education? Schools are closed and will probably remain so for several months. Everyone accepts that learning should go on – somehow. Most young people will learn at home; others by attending 'hubs' for the children of key workers. Schools are trying their best to supply pupils with work and suitable materials for them to use at home. Some are doing a remarkable job, offering lessons on line, taking in assignments and giving feedback. As yet, this falls short of an organised strategy, but that may emerge over time.

There are real concerns about the likely effects on disadvantaged learners. Research has demonstrated that they are put at particular risk by absence from school over the six weeks of the summer holidays. How much further might their learning slip back during a closure of, maybe, five months? A more dramatic way of widening the attainment gap would be difficult to imagine. How can schools try to minimise the impact?

The effect on family life will be huge. For 150 years society has taken for granted that the education service will function also as the national childminding service. At the same time, parents are being required to play an active role in their children's education in an unprecedented way. Most parents of young children will be only too aware of the need to encourage reading and counting. In the case of older learners, parents will want to answer their questions and help them use the online materials schools are issuing. At the very least, all parents will have faced the challenge of keeping their children on task. Of necessity, schools are coming to see supporting parents as a critical part of their function.

By the autumn of this year, many countries will have attempted to run an education system without much use of school buildings. Twenty years ago that could not even

have been contemplated. New technological means of communicating with individuals, groups and whole classes and high-quality materials for distance learning have created a very different situation.

Nobody knows how well all this will work. For certain, everyone will become aware that learning is, at last in part, a social activity and that something important is lost when social interaction becomes impossible. However, there will be positive aspects too. Some young people will find the new ways or organising learning suit them well. Many teachers will appreciate the quality and usefulness of at least some of the online materials. At the very least, a huge experiment will have taken place and there will be a need to evaluate it and try to learn from the experience.

Perhaps a useful way of thinking about it is to consider the impact on the way the service uses the resources available to it. Schools deliver learning *efficiently* by grouping learners together in classes, usually of 20 to 30, in the care of a single teacher. From this several consequences follow – a defined school day and year, a fixed starting point for schooling, a tendency to group according to age and stage. So strong has been the basic model that all these features have come to be regarded as axiomatic. The result is that every school uses a very high proportion of the human resource under its control to provide the frontline service; a teacher standing in front of a class. Preparation, correction and similar activities take up much of the remaining resource. School management accounts for a smaller proportion. The amount available for any other activity is small.

In present circumstances, this model does not work. Class contact has to be electronic. In some schools it does not take place. Even where it occurs, it does not – as previously it did – occupy all of the pupil day. Other activities – searching out materials, setting tasks, providing feedback and supporting parents – take up the slack. In other words, teachers are accepting the reality that there is more than one way to deploy the school's resources and that the traditional way is not always the best.

It is inconceivable that operating in a different way will not affect how teachers think about their role. Long-held assumptions about how schools have to operate will be questioned. These preconceptions are, of course, the factors that have imposed the most powerful constraints on innovation. In future the argument that "it isn't possible" will be less persuasive.

As with life in general, most aspects of schooling will return to normal. However, the system will have taken part in a great learning experiment and will be aware of new possibilities. It is important that we learn from the experience.

Keir Bloomer is chair of the Commission on School Reform

The need for more coherent thinking about teaching & learning
– Carole Ford
Originally posted 2 April 2020

During the current cessation of normal schooling many teachers have found the time, and energy, to read and comment on educational research. Much of the comment relates to new methodologies and the latest trends in educational thinking. As I read the research, and the associated comment, I am forcefully struck by two perennial features of the research itself and the response to it from the small community of interested readers. Every innovation has resulted in improved outcomes and every commentator is impressed with the 'new' approach. Why the inverted commas? Because if you hang around long enough, old ideas often cycle round again, sometimes barely disguised from their previous incarnations. In few other disciplines is success so ubiquitous or so rarely challenged.

A case in point is the current enthusiasm for mastery learning in mathematics.* Having been in the mathematics education world since the 1970s, both in this country and the USA, this is the third time in my career that mastery learning has been cited as the great leap forward for mathematics teaching. The first time I encountered it, I read the research evidence with interest, it caused me to think in closer detail about individual pupil progress and I incorporated some elements into my teaching repertoire. I cannot speak for how other teachers responded but I can speak for the impact overall. Did mastery learning live up to its billing and revolutionise mathematics teaching the first time around? No. Did it do this the second time it gained currency? No. Will we see the revolution this time? I will put my neck on the line and predict, no.

This typical scenario generates two questions. Why are new educational methods apparently so uniformly successful in the research phase? And why do they subsequently fail to deliver the predicted success? Many new pedagogical ideas are presented as game changers, many have been adopted either nationally or at local authority level, yet, since the 1970s at least, none of them have produced the step change in outcomes predicted by their authors and supporters. Mixed ability teaching, resource based learning, programmed learning, active learning, inter-disciplinary learning, discovery learning, investigative approaches, problem solving, Assessment is for Learning, Curriculum for Excellence, Brain Gym, collaborative learning and the 'transformative' impact of IT. Indeed, in Scotland, there has been a steady decline in performance relative to other countries despite this plethora of research-based innovation and the best intentions of teachers and schools.

How can we account for this situation? Educational research is conducted by reputable people following sound experimental protocols. The studies are done. The results are analysed, and conclusive. This new theory or method is indubitably successful when compared to current practice. The claims may be overblown but they have a basis in observable fact. The evidence is compelling and unchallenged. Teachers, either of their own volition or as directed by their employers, change their teaching style or use the

new materials. And the final outcome is, pretty much routinely, no significant change in performance or, as is happening in Scotland at the moment, an actual drop in standards. There are two possible explanations for this conundrum. One has been advanced in the past by frustrated researchers who cannot understand why their approaches are not yielding the promised dividends: the teachers are not doing it properly. The failure of Assessment is for Learning to produce the expected results did prompt one of its creators to complain that it hadn't worked because teachers hadn't implemented the programme correctly. To all the teachers out there who diligently operated 'Three stars and a wish', wrote copious feedback on everything a child wrote, and asked pupils to assess their own or fellow pupils' work, I say, yes you did. Just as teachers have thrown away their textbooks when asked to do so. They have stopped delivering didactic lessons and switched to questioning. They have created independent learning stations, problem solved and investigated, manufactured inter-disciplinary projects, produced a million PowerPoint presentations, not to no avail, but to little or no evidence of improvement.

The second explanation for this *research versus reality* phenomenon is the one I favour, from personal experience in ten secondary schools, at all levels from teacher to Head Teacher, from numerous class observations of all subjects, and from wide reading of educational research. The root of the problem is that research programmes operate inside a bubble. Virtually any new idea, piloted in a few classes, by a few teachers, will demonstrate improved performance. Even disastrous educational initiatives, such as the phonetic spelling programme of the 1960s, probably looked very promising in the pilot stages.

What goes wrong when the pilot study is rolled out across a wider group of teachers and classrooms? Why do the methods or materials not produce the expected improvement when the pilot ends and the real world gets involved? This is actually the wrong question. The correct question is, why do pilot studies always succeed?

It is not that the teaching profession is incapable of delivering the new method; rather that the chosen few in the pilot study are operating in the ideal conditions for learning. The pilot bubble creates its own success.

The teachers involved in a study are either volunteers or selected. The volunteers believe in the new approach and are seriously motivated to demonstrate success. The selected feel special and pull out all the stops to justify their selection. Both groups are more likely than not to be highly effective teachers, open to new ideas. Pupils feel special too. Their work is closely monitored and measured, a sure way to spice up effort. Knowing that an outcome will be scrutinised affects how people perform. Under normal conditions, teachers may have an off day or fail to prepare sufficiently on occasion. Not so in a pilot study. Once the pilot programme meets the reality of everyday classrooms, with the normal range of effort and motivation, it inevitably fails to produce the same results.

The result of this pilot study disconnect has been to send teachers, and the education system as a whole, down a series of blind alleys. It takes time for the educational establishment to acknowledge it is a blind alley, which may result in long periods of less

effective teaching and learning. This seesaw effect between research and reality may also result in the emergence of a teaching orthodoxy which is rarely questioned. Currently in Scotland, we have a uniformity of classroom approach involving such things as learning intentions, starters, a multitude of short activities, plenary sessions and exit passes.

Is this level of uniformity successful? It appears not. As Scotland fails to reduce the attainment gap between the more and the less advantaged, and as it fails to achieve the educational standards of other countries both within the UK and abroad, it is surely time to jump off the treadmill of one bright idea after another, and start thinking much more coherently about teaching and learning.

Educational research builds our understanding of how people learn and adds to the repertoire of possible systems and approaches. But we need to place much less reliance on highly specific pilot studies and much more on long term evaluations of educational practices in whole school systems. We will learn far more from successful practice delivered by mainstream teachers on a routine basis. This may occur in other countries, in geographical areas within Scotland or in specific groups of schools. Let's start from evident success and work backwards to see what is responsible for that. The petri dish of the pilot study is not serving us well.

* Mastery learning is an instructional strategy and educational philosophy, first formally proposed by Benjamin Bloom in 1968. Mastery learning maintains that students must achieve a level of mastery in prerequisite knowledge before moving forward to learn subsequent information.

Carole Ford is a former head teacher and member of the Commission on School Reform

We must learn the lessons of the Covid-19 crisis – Alex Neil MSP

Originally posted 6 April 2020

The world has been caught napping. Nobody saw the pandemic coming. All round the globe, governments have been slow to waken up to the scale of this outbreak and the speed with which it could infect the whole of humanity and bring about a global meltdown.

Coronavirus is a wake-up call to humankind. It has shown beyond all reasonable doubt that a 21st century pandemic can very quickly bring the entire planet to a standstill. It can infect millions in a very short time. It can destroy the global economy almost overnight. It is catastrophic.

Our immediate priority is to tackle Covid – 19. We must firstly stop it spreading and from infecting millions more. Simultaneously we must find ways of mitigating and ideally curing it, thus saving millions of lives. We must rapidly find an effective vaccine to bring it under permanent control.

Worldwide we need to spend whatever amount of money it takes to achieve all these objectives. Otherwise, a coronavirus outbreak could become an annual event bringing repetitive mayhem to the world economy and to the health and wellbeing of the human race.

Beating this virus must be the overriding priority for every government in every country of the world right now. The consequences of failing to do so are too horrific to contemplate.

We must also learn lessons from the outbreak of coronavirus and take the necessary action required on a global scale to try to avoid such a disaster happening again.

Some of these lessons are very specific to this infection. China in particular has to stop to the kind of flea markets, which facilitated the transfer of this infection from bats to humans, and which appears to have been the primary source of this strain of coronavirus.

Modern animal welfare standards should preclude many of these practises anyway, but it is even more urgent to do so if there is the potential to endanger the human species. This will be difficult for the Chinese Government to accept and implement because it will be trying to overturn centuries of Chinese culture. Nevertheless it has to happen and the rest of the world has to pressurise China into doing it.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), which has performed exceptionally well during this crisis, has to be strengthened and better resourced. Once the immediate crisis is over it should scan the world to identify what have been the most effective ways of dealing with this pandemic. It should identify best practice, based on the available evidence, and pull that together as a handbook for handling future pandemics. This

handbook should be updated on a regular basis to take account of new scientific knowledge, the development of new technologies, etc., which can help tackle future pandemics. The world has to be as fully prepared as it can be for future pandemics, whenever and from wherever they come.

WHO should also spearhead a worldwide scientific medical research programme to a) find new ways of being able to spot the potential risk of a new pandemic much earlier than is currently the case b) try to find new methodologies for being able to identify effective treatments and vaccines for new pandemics so that they can be made available much quicker than is currently the case.

Such a research programme should mobilise the global medical science community and make maximum use of artificial intelligence.

A hundred years ago when the Spanish flu killed 50 million people worldwide, the average length of time for developing a vaccine took decades. Today there is a realistic expectation that a vaccine for preventing the spread of Covid – 19 will be available within about 18 months.

Our global aim now should be to make a huge scientific leap forward so that the next time a pandemic breaks out we can produce a vaccine within days rather than weeks or months and have the capability to manufacture and distribute that vaccine throughout the world within a very short timeframe.

The global economy in which we all now live with mass transit across our planet on a daily basis means we have to accept the possibility that one day we may face a pandemic, which poses an existential threat to humanity. We should hope for the best that such a scenario never happens. However, we should prepare for the worst and be ready just in case it does.

Coronavirus, like all pandemics, is primarily about dealing with a public health crisis.
The coronavirus pandemic has also led to an unprecedented worldwide economic crisis, as governments have had to impose lockdowns and bring a virtual standstill to all but the most essential activity until it is medically safe to reboot the economy.

There has been a wide variation in how governments worldwide have responded to the economic fallout from coronavirus.

Small countries like Ireland, Luxemburg, Denmark and Norway have shown that the nimbleness of decision-making in these countries can pay off at a time of crisis. They have moved quickly, comprehensively and innovatively to minimise the economic damage inflicted by this pandemic.

Some countries, like the USA, have been slow to react to the crisis and to waken up to its seriousness and far-reaching consequences.

The Indian Government just got itself into a state of panic. Disgracefully it has used brutality against some of its people, which is totally unjustified and inexcusable. This

violence against some of its own people has made the situation even worse and led to avoidable misery for millions of its citizens.

Clearly the world needs to learn the economic lessons of this crisis so that when another pandemic strikes, we will all be better prepared to adjust in such a way that provides the financial and social protection our peoples need and to do so timeously.

There is no room for complacency. Once the immediate crisis is over the focus will rightly be on recovery, especially for our healthcare systems and economies.

Whilst implementing recovery and reconstruction measures is a priority we must take the time to learn the necessary lessons from the Covid-19 crisis at pace. The future of the human race may depend upon it.

Alex Neil is the SNP MSP for Airdrie and Shotts, and a former Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, and for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights

After the war, we must win the economic peace – Donald Cameron MSP

Originally posted 13 April 2020

Times like these are perfect for revealing one's true nature. For instance, glass "half-full" or glass "half-empty"?

I'm usually the former, so when it comes to considering where next for our economy when we eventually emerge from the shadows of this terrible disease, my natural optimism comes to the fore. Indeed, it was boosted after speaking to a friend who lived in Hong Kong during SARS: he remarked that the Far East economy had in fact bounced back much more quickly and vibrantly than anyone expected, despite the naysayers.

But.

Even if the recovery is quite swift after the crisis, this will still be the most dramatic hit to growth in the UK for 80 years, with long-term effects that will strike deeper and harder than anything we experienced in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008. Plainly, much depends on how long the global lockdown lasts, but in the UK there is no doubt we're in for a recession with a big surge in the national debt, and forecasts of a substantial drop in GDP.

Closer to home, the Fraser of Allander Institute last week estimated that, if restrictions continue for a three-month period, Scottish GDP could contract by around 25%. A quarter of the nation's wealth gone. That would be nothing short of brutal for jobs, growth, and prosperity. And it's hard to see the economics of devolved government returning to normal any time soon.

The Scottish Budget, passed just over a month ago, is already redundant. We're going to see a reduction in income tax receipts and a spike in welfare spending, against a fiscal backdrop which was challenging even prior to the virus. One thing to watch (with specific impact for future Scottish Budgets) is the comparison between how Scotland fares in contrast to the rest of the UK, and to specific regions within the UK, such as the South-East. In any event, the standard forecasts for economic growth (both by the OBR and the Scottish Fiscal Commission) will require significant revision which in turn will affect both the block grant and the adjustments made to that grant under the fiscal framework. Indeed, the crisis may entirely overtake both the current fiscal framework and the next one, due to be negotiated next year.

Much else has been swept away. Just as we wondered at a Labour government bailing out the financial system 12 years ago, so the fact that a Conservative government has enacted an economic rescue, by injecting billions into preserving both the national economy and its workforce, is also astonishing. The old, clichéd arguments we used to have about austerity, state intervention, nationalisation, and NHS investment sound dated, if not obsolete. The rhetoric around tax and spend we've got so used to hearing over the past decade at both Holyrood and Westminster is finished. This is a new world symphony, not merely variations on a theme.

Beyond these general observations, it's a mug's game to try and make any kind of specific prediction about what *will* happen to the economy.

Far better to try to think what *should* happen.

First, we need to concentrate on the local economy and smaller business far more than we do at present. Representing a huge rural area, my inbox has been swamped by small businesses who are bearing the brunt of all this: the little hotels and B&Bs, the town retailers, the family firms, the self-employed. It's a salutary reminder that the real engines of the economy are these small and medium enterprises. They have suffered most and that's where long-term help needs to be directed, and quickly.

Promoting economic growth at the local and national level will become the primary, essential objective. Scotland already lags the rest of the UK in terms of growth and the urgency with which this requires to be addressed will be accentuated. The skills agenda has to be a part of it as well. We have seen a huge dip in demand in most sectors, but a huge increase in others – at least temporarily. The importance of essential transferrable skills is plain to see. That's why lifelong, flexible working needs to be the next stage in the evolution of our skills system. It's directly applicable to the current crisis.

With all that, comes political pressure to 'level up' more generally – a narrative which will continue after this crisis subsides. In many ways, the reckoning that never quite happened in 2008-9 will come to pass. Governments will have to step in to help people or will suffer a backlash: a broad but nimble statism will now be expected by the public. In terms of the private sector, people will remember the companies who conducted themselves well during the crisis. And companies that behave unethically or fail to pay their civic dues in the future, will neither be forgiven nor forgotten. The "responsible capitalism" agenda should rightly see a renewed impetus: firms which prioritise fair work, and place their staff and customers before the bottom line, will benefit. That doesn't require a radical reorganisation of the economy, but it does require agility and imagination by policy-makers in Scotland and the UK, where government has an obvious role to play.

Above all, we need to think about economic recovery now rather than wait till the worst of the crisis is over. We have to get on and win the peace, as well as win the war.

There will doubtless continue to be dark times ahead where companies fail and livelihoods are threatened. But in relation to the economy, somehow, I hope we begin to do things better once we get through this.

So yes, glass half-full.

Donald Cameron is Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Conservative MSP for Highlands and Islands region

Digital healthcare – Paul McGinness

Originally posted 15 April 2020

From time immemorial, an invariable feature of the interaction between patient and doctor is that it has taken place in person, either in the GP surgery or hospital.

That is suddenly changing. The global pandemic COVID-19 presents a unique challenge to health systems around the world and will necessitate the adoption of innovative virtual care solutions.

Ingrained patient and clinical behaviours, entrenched stakeholder interests and a complex regulatory framework have made it difficult to operationalise and scale new technology-enabled approaches.

However, recent events will bring about a paradigm shift to distribute increasing volumes of healthcare interventions away from the hospital and towards the home and community. While COVID-19 will likely be the catalyst there are good reasons why this should happen in any case.

Healthcare is arguably one of the sectors with most to benefit from digital transformation. Digital health sits at the confluence of a number of developments that are with us now:

- New virtual care platforms are capable of supporting an ecosystem of virtual care solutions that can provide care teams with rich knowledge of a patient from afar and on a continuous basis.
- Wearable devices, sensors and digital services can monitor health information remotely, engaging patients and carers, and enabling better self-management. The sophistication of these devices is increasing and adoption across age groups is growing.
- Artificial intelligence can convert these data streams into actionable insight, prioritising patients that require an intervention to prevent a distressing and expensive hospital admission.

This technology can and is being used to address major healthcare challenges such as reducing emergency hospital re-admission rates from patients with long-term conditions and helping meet outpatient waiting-time targets.

An NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde service for remote management of COPD patients (patients with chronic lung disease) is an example of a virtual care model in action today with the aim of reducing hospital re-admission rates.

Moreover, while virtual care can offer effective care delivery – and for patients on immunosuppressant therapies this is currently the safest way to manage these patients – they can also enhance clinical productivity. Adoption of video consultations and asynchronous virtual clinics are examples of how outpatient care can be virtualised.

Outpatient appointments across the UK account for 85 per cent of all hospital activity (excluding A&E) and in Scotland return outpatient appointments account for 55 per cent of all consultant-led outpatient activity and 85 per cent of nurse-led clinics in Scotland. Evidence suggests that virtual outpatient models can deliver greater patient throughput for the same level of resources and meet patients' expectations around convenience and flexibility. Greater adoption of these services would free up clinical teams to help meet rising demand and reduce outpatient waiting times.

Yet, it's worth noting that healthcare is a sector with unique characteristics that make it harder to deliver the kind of disruption and transformation we've witnessed in other industry sectors over the past few years.

Medical Device Regulations on software as a medical device are absolutely necessary to ensure what is delivered does not jeopardise patient safety. This involves companies implementing quality management systems and achieving relevant certification. But while regulation is necessary, it has undoubtedly slowed down the introduction of reimagined services, which in turn makes it harder – and more expensive – to operationalise at scale.

In addition to regulation, in most scenarios we cannot achieve full automation of a healthcare interaction end to end. For the next few years – at least – there will always be a healthcare professional involved in reviewing information that's been provided by a patient, and that individual will also be involved in follow-up actions. So, it will take time for the full efficiencies of digital services to be realised.

Last but not least, after regulation and automation is the question of the digital divide. The health service must be free at the point of need for all, not just the digitally literate. As such we need to be mindful that some patients cannot transact in this way.

Nevertheless, the digital divide is narrowing in Scotland. Recent stats from Ofcom for Scotland showed that ownership of smartwatches and wearable technology has jumped from five per cent to 25 per cent just in the past two years. Seventy-six per cent of people in Scotland now own a smartphone. Even in the lower socio-economic categories, 68 per cent of people have smartphones, and this continues to rise year on year.

Sixty per cent of 65-74 year olds in Scotland now have a smart phone and 75 per cent have a home internet connection. To put this in context, 90 per cent have a landline phone.

Looking further to the future, technologies such as connected sensors, devices and AI will change how healthcare is delivered. A recent study by the American Journal of Preventative Medicine found that clinical care, the primary focus of healthcare, accounts for around 15 per cent of overall health outcomes while health behaviours, social status and genetics account for the other 85 per cent. In the near future patients will generate far more data about their health and wellbeing than is gathered by clinical care. The challenge for the healthcare sector is how to harness this data to deliver better healthcare and health outcomes for all.

Paul McGinness is Director of Storm ID, a digital consultancy working primarily in the health sector

If our universities area bailed out, the price is reform – Daniel Johnson MSP

Originally posted 27 April 2020

The responses by governments to the Covid-19 crisis in recent and coming weeks will fill history books and be analysed and interpreted for years to come. There are no real parallels or precedents. The credit crunch and great depression provide lessons but only incompletely. This is primarily a health crisis but one that looks likely to precipitate an economic one across all sectors. We have never instituted a global lockdown, there is no way of knowing whether the economy will bounce back – whether opening factory doors will neatly coincide with people and companies ready to spend at the levels they were before the crisis.

We cannot predict all the impacts nor plan our responses. But some impacts are foreseeable and where they are, we must prepare now. One such is the university sector in Scotland. Institutions that are avowedly international in perspective and that seek to bring researchers and students from across the globe are bound to be impacted with the world in shutdown.

Universities in Scotland have an annual income of £3.8bn. Just less than half of that income comes from the governments in Edinburgh and London (38.7% and 10.9% respectively). Universities generate almost £1bn in fees from non-EU students and students from other parts of the UK. Another £500m is generated through private consultancy, venue hire and other commercial activities.

All of this looks to be in severe jeopardy. International students may not be allowed to come if travel restrictions are still in place. Even if they are lifted, many anxious would-be students may put off plans for international study for another year (exacerbated by many domestic students considering doing likewise). Conferences, concerts and festivals that have become a vital source of revenue for universities look likely to be impossible until a vaccine is found.

Last week, Universities Scotland and Universities UK circulated figures of the cash shortfalls they may face – £500m and £2bn respectively. The reality is that these numbers were designed to soften the blow and not scare ministers in Holyrood and Whitehall. The worst-case scenario would see no or very few international students arrive in September, and commercial income could easily halve. On those rough calculations, Scottish institutions could need a bail out of £1bn.

Looking at balance sheets shows how existential the situation is. Loss of international fees would wipe out the cash reserves of at least six Scottish universities. If commercial income halves, that number increases to 10. In other words, there is a very real risk that without government intervention, many Scottish universities could go bust.

It is important to set these numbers out, both to understand the seriousness of the problem but also to understand that reflex suggestions offered up on social media are simply inadequate in scale to deal with it. Slash principles' pay, charge tuition fees,

charge EU students – all have been dropped into discussion when the universities came forward to highlight the problem. Halving principles' pay might save £1-2m? Extending that to other well-paid, academics £50-100m? Charging EU students might bring in £64m (assuming they are allowed to travel here in September). Finally, the problem with tuition fees is that unless you charged them upfront, the money does not come through until the students have graduated and are earning. In short, none of these ideas is a solution either in terms of scale or timing. The crisis universities face is an order of magnitude larger and it will be with us in September, not in four years' time.

The reality is that someone is going to have to write a very large cheque and not expect to get their money back, and write it in the next few months. It is for this reason that many in the sector are drawing direct parallels with the credit crunch and the bail-out of the banks that followed. This is the decision that Scottish ministers will likely be grappling with over the summer. And if they are going to underwrite universities without immediate prospect of a return, they will undoubtedly seek a return in terms of reform.

The proposal of mergers is almost inevitable. With 19 universities in Scotland (including the Open University), some would say we have too many institutions doing too much of the same thing. But there is reason to be cautious about the prospect of such moves. Firstly, mergers in and of themselves would do little to soften the financial blow Covid-19 is likely to do to the sector. The credit crunch offers some salutary lessons: HBOS was forced into a hastily arranged and unwilling merger with Lloyds, which did little to prevent the inevitable government bailout. Moreover, it created a huge bank with 60% of all UK mortgages, arguably exacerbating the lack of diversity in the sector that created the need for government intervention in the first place. In short, combining two weakened balance sheets does not create a strong one and could make some matters worse.

Looking closer to home, the college sector provides ominous lessons for any push for consolidation. The merger of 25 colleges into 10 did little to improve financial stability. In fact, it reduced financial flexibility as the colleges lost their autonomous status and with it their ability to retain reserves or borrow. Most importantly, in terms of educational provision, diversity was lost and the number of students attending college fell.

But a billion-pound bail-out will require a quid pro quo. So if the universities are going to go cap in hand to the government, they should expect a demand from ministers. The institutions themselves need to prepare for this and offer suggestions both in terms of the form and purposes of any reform offered in return for a bail-out. This might mean confronting some home truths and bringing forward change much more rapidly than they have been willing to do previously.

In terms of purpose, questions of articulation from college to university and equality of access will need to be front and centre of any proposals. Much progress has been made but there have been lingering difficulties in getting universities to facilitate access. Universities will need to make radical proposals to prepare and ready people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get to and succeed at university. Similarly, they will need

to look at integrated approaches with colleges and other education providers. In Wales, there is a far more consolidated tertiary sector enabling students to transition from college to university.

What is taught at university and how will have to see radical reform. Universities have surprised themselves at how quickly and effectively they have embraced providing teaching through electronic means within days and weeks. A bail-out package would need to drive a radical embrace of technology to deliver teaching, tailor content to individual students and facilitate participation. The need for students to have access to vocational learning at all institutions has been whispered by some at even ancient and august universities who might previously have considered that law and medicine were quite enough vocational provision. The reality of rapidly-changing skills needs following the health crisis, along with economic hardship preventing full-time study, should drive innovation in this regard.

Some institutions may well already have strengths in these areas and formal links could help drive cooperation with those that have a more traditional and academic focus.
Moving on from purpose, any structural change must only be introduced if it helps facilitate any such identified aims. Simply creating larger institutions will not necessarily deliver this and in the case of our largest institutions it may not be desirable at all.

Federated universities exist in many other countries. Wales and Ireland for example have the national universities that are overarching federal structures for the individual institutions. Some of the world's most prestigious institutions exist within such structures. Berkeley is part of the university of California. Creation of over-arching federated structures could bring together academic, research-focused universities with those more focussed on vocational qualifications, providing more options for students and widening the benefits of leading research. Such properly-integrated structures could remove any residual barriers between further and higher education.

Is this the right solution, or even feasible? Possibly, but there will be others. My point is this: unless the sector proposes a realistic change plan and does so accepting weaknesses and issues the sector has previously been reluctant to acknowledge, change will be imposed upon them and it may not be to their liking. There are undoubtedly ways in which our universities could become more effective at preparing people for work, being more open and generating benefits for wider society. Crude mergers would not deliver this, but well-conceived structural change might and is more likely to if the sector itself comes up with a plan.

I started this article pointing out that this situation is without precedent or parallel. What universities are facing has much in common with the banking crisis. What is wholly different is that this level of disruption is likely to be happening in many other sectors, if not simultaneously then certainly in quick succession. In contrast, the universities know that if students do not start in September they have a problem. Charities, small businesses and arms-length agencies don't necessarily have such well-defined points in their financial year. By the time September comes, universities may not be the only ones asking for a cheque.

It is far from clear if a billion-pound bail out could be afforded by the Scottish government in isolation. Coupled with requests from other sectors and organisations it becomes even more questionable. All the more reason for principles and vice-chancellors to hatch a compelling plan sooner rather than later.

Daniel Johnson is Labour MSP for Edinburgh Southern and deputy convener of Holyrood's education committee

Scottish Higher Education Exposure to Covid19

	Assets (£000)			Income (£000)		Income Drop Vs Asses (£000)		
2018/19	Total cash and cash equivalents	Total investments	total	Total Non-EU fees	Other Income	Cash - Non-EU Fees	+50% drop other income'	+Total Assets
Edinburgh Napier University	26,683	279	**26,962**	19,459	15,767	7,224	-660	7,503
Glasgow Caledonian University	9,617	11,057	**20,674**	10,853	9,694	-1,236	-6,083	9,821
Glasgow School of Art	8,826	9,000	**17,826**	8,983	17,357	-157	-8,836	8,843
Heriot-Watt University	76,443	0	**76,443**	87,890	31,022	-11,447	-26,958	-11,447
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	8,082	0	**8,082**	3,110	6,842	4,972	1,551	4,972
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	3,289	1,308	**4,597**	3,956	991	-667	-1,163	641
SRUC	19,998	0	**19,998**	65	34,714	19,933	2,576	19,933
The Robert Gordon University	11,842	7,273	**19,115**	11,226	10,575	616	-4,672	7,889
The University of Aberdeen	35,704	5,000	**40,704**	32,040	31,482	3,664	-12,077	8,664
The University of Dundee	25,739	0	**25,739**	31,009	32,757	-5,270	-21,649	-5,270
The University of Edinburgh	238,496	207,411	**445,907**	198,500	234,018	39,996	-77,013	247,407
The University of Glasgow	204,595	0	**204,595**	141,969	80,236	62,626	22,508	62,626
The University of St Andrews	24,533	33,681	**58,214**	64,800	61,379	-40,267	-70,957	-6,586
The University of Stirling	33,842	17,821	**51,663**	15,846	28,734	17,996	3,629	35,817
The University of Strathclyde	114,686	0	**114,686**	43,217	44,901	71,469	49,019	71,469
The University of the West of Scotland	16,179	0	**16,179**	8,942	8,630	7,237	2,922	7,237
University of Abertay Dundee	5,105	0	**5,105**	1,370	2,450	3,735	2,510	3,735
University of the Highlands and Islands	20,021	6,000	**26,021**	928	13,152	19,093	12,517	25,093
Total	**883,680**	**298,830**	**1,182,510**	**684,163**	**664,701**	**199,517**	**-132,834**	**498,347**
Total (Excl Ed&Gla)	**440,589**	**91,419**	**532,008**	**343,694**	**350,447**	**96,895**	**-78,329**	**188,314**

Source: Hesa/OFS www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/finances'

The Future of Residential Outdoor Learning – Dave Spence

Originally posted 30 April 2020

We are now going through another period of heightened awareness about human impact on the environment. Proposed solutions tend to be change driven: change technologies (more use of renewable, driverless cars) or change behaviour (travel less, use less, recycle more). As is often the case, if older people feel these changes are imposed upon them, they will be reluctant, even resistant to change. What can we do that is positive?

Sustainable solutions are about the decisions and choices that we make. But we're slow. We are being forced into the zone of adaptation. However, while adults beyond a certain age tend to look to the past, future generations must not be held back by nostalgia-laden views. The best thing that decision-makers can do today is focus on the needs of young people, and take action to enable young people to develop the qualities, skills and decision-making capabilities that they will need in order to survive and thrive in their future.

This will not be easy. On many measures we are failing young people. We want them to be confident, connected to the environment, adaptable, positive and brave. But research shows they lack confidence; that screen time is increasing; and that many display behaviours that impede educational and social development. Theirs is a 'cotton wool' society and many are pessimistic about their future.

Education and Curriculum for Excellence lead the way but teachers cannot do it all. Teachers need allies and outdoor specialists are "other educators" able to support and collaborate with teachers to add value to Curriculum outcomes.

We are also hampered by austerity, practically and psychologically. For teachers under financial and staffing pressures at school, taking young people away is a set of problems too onerous to consider. Partnership working and collaboration is fanciful when a potential partner is pressed for time or when they feel under threat.

Other Educators

For 80 years, outdoor education and the residential experience has been a significant life event for Scottish pupils and other young people. This was recognised by the last National Outdoor Learning Strategic Advisory Group (2010) which reported that young people should experience different types of outdoor learning regularly and frequently, and that…

"Progressive outdoor learning experiences are best delivered through a combination of school-based outdoor learning and residential programmes". Ministerial Foreword

More recently, John Swinney has said,
"I am keen to ensure that residential outdoor learning experiences continue to be part of the Curriculum for Excellence."

Yet the disconnect between desire and application is critical. Many young people still experience no outdoor learning at all, and for those doing most to engage young people in outdoor learning – the residential Centre staff teams – the future is bleak. We are sleepwalking to the demise of residential outdoor learning in Scotland.

What's Possible?
The charity and social enterprise delivery model works. In the last decade SOEC has worked with over 150,000 young people providing over 500,000 learning days in away-from home, outdoor experiences (residentials, camps, expeditions.) Last year we worked with 250 schools, youth groups and support networks and over 2,000 teachers and group leaders. We want to double these numbers.

Specialist outdoor educators engage young people in a breadth of activities. Activities might be adventurous, leisurely, educational, environmental or challenging. Activities enable young people to develop knowledge, qualities (confidence, resilience, relationship building) and skills (team work, problem solving, communication etc.) Activities are both formative and fun.

Activities are packaged into programmes to deliver specific outcomes (transition to work, transition to secondary, eco-programme, exploration, adventure). However, success relies on skilled outdoor tutors developing positive relationships with young people, enabling them to review and reflect on their experiences, and facilitating the transfer of lessons learnt to other contexts: school, home and work.

Spending time exploring, engaging in challenges with their peers, learning with other educators and doing this 'away from home' is important in the development of the young person. They become more confident, more resilient and better aware of their potential. Experiences trigger change to more positive behaviours and forges a "can-do" growth mind-set and fundamentally to their self-perception and self-belief.

Other Benefits
Our work can have a remarkable effect on young people. SOEC's Transition to Work Programme for those with autistic spectrum diagnoses provides evidence that experiential learning works. That programme had the twin aims of exploring the therapeutic benefits of the countryside while developing qualities and skills for life and work. Responses from parents and young participants are fabulous and the group now visits on a regular basis.

Remarkable outcomes with schools are commonplace. In one class, 2 pupils had restricted their diet and another was self-selective mute in school. Within 3 days, 2 were eating a wide range of healthy food types and the third was singing in the shower; her teachers quipped they *"couldn't shut her up if they'd wanted to"*. Of course they didn't because they knew these pupils had been chaperoned out of school for half a day every fortnight to see specialists, for six years with no visible improvement.

Many of the young people who come to our Centres live in – and are often constrained to – cities and towns. We introduce thousands of young people to the countryside, often for the first time, where they enjoy the outdoors while protecting the environment. We

must connect young people to the environment. If we do not, the countryside will be an irrelevance to them and they will not be motivated to take action to "save the planet" in whatever form that might take.

With 3 Outdoor Education Centres, SOEC generates £1.5m per annum. Employ over 45 people, our Centres are one of the largest employers in the rural areas they are located in. As a not-for-profit social enterprise, income is directed into the local and national economy through salaries and supplies. For the most part, parents pay for these experiences but the social and environmental benefits are significant; consultants determined SOEC's Social Return On Investment ratio to be £1: £11.

The Threat

Despite these frequent and remarkable outcomes, residential outdoor learning is disappearing in Scotland. The trend of centre closure is coming to a head. Decision-makers and the wider public need to know that opportunities they benefitted from and enjoyed are reducing and may not be available for their children.

SOEC aims to motivate and enable young people to develop the qualities and skills they will need for their future. The next generations must be more confident, resilient, better team players and a whole lot more. They must master these qualities and skills if they are not to be disempowered by threats but instead, see opportunities in a rapidly changing world. Young people need residential outdoor learning experiences more than ever.

Urgent Action Required

The question therefore is, what do we want? Do we, as educators, parents, and business leaders, want the residential experience to be retained as an option for our young people into the future?

If we want to put residential centres on a sustainable basis, we must do things differently. We must organise provision in new ways, and we must stop diverting money to adults and away from young people. Instead we must pivot our efforts toward enabling more young people to directly engage in experiential learning. The Third Sector can help with cost effective delivery. Partnership working (which delivers the best outcomes) must be promoted vigorously.

Decision-makers need to be more vociferous in their support for this. After the tragedy of the Coronavirus and the deep impacts of lockdown, we can expect another decade of austerity. By the time it is concluded, it may be too late for residential outdoor learning. There is a lot at stake. In a few years, we may look back on allowing the loss of these resources and consider it an act of utter folly.

In 1939 Parliamentarians took the time and effort to debate and create residential outdoor Centres. It was described as *"a great educational experiment"* and considered *"the best thing we did at this time"* and "*perhaps the most important educational initiative since school attendance was made compulsory"*. That they showed the foresight and commitment to do this, at a time when 'their backs were very much to the wall', is astonishing. Young people still benefit from their decision.

It is our turn now. The trend of closure is clear and seemingly inevitable. Despite all of the benefits, we must ask, are we now willing to let the residential experience just disappear? Or are there enough of us across the political spectrum, who see the importance and potential of residential experiences for young people and are willing to commit to them being integral to the Scottish Curriculum for decades to come?

Dave Spence is CEO of Scottish Outdoor Education Centres

Will coronavirus make rocks melt in the sun? – Jonathan Simons

Originally posted 4 May 2020

The Covid-19 global health pandemic has placed Scottish universities under significant financial pressure. In common with universities in the rest of the UK, they are facing what is inevitably termed a 'financial black hole' from loss of conference and accommodation income this summer, and fears that international student numbers will drop dramatically for the academic year starting this Autumn – and potential for much longer. Universities Scotland estimates that on a (plausible) drop of international student numbers of 50%, there would be a funding shortfall of £435m across the sector, which is more than 10% of all university income in Scotland.

Universities are already reacting. St Andrews' Vice Chancellor has written to all staff warning them of a £25m gap. Aberdeen has frozen all construction work and staff recruitment and is predicting a significant fall in their £50m income from international students.

This crisis has also not hit a sector in rude health. Audit Scotland calculated that core funding from the Scottish government has declined by 12% in real terms in the last seven years. And the recent European Universities Association survey found the finances of Scotland's universities to be in "sustained decline".

It is implausible that the Scottish government could or would make up the gap from reduced income from international students. The last budget round cut university income further, and as I write, it isn't even clear they'll make up the £90m spent on keeping university fee-free for EU students studying in Scotland at the moment.

So either costs have to shrink significantly – which means either slashing student numbers, closing courses, or potentially even university mergers – or income has to rise from another source. And if we're in a rocks melting in the sun moment, there are lessons from England – including what England didn't do – which is how to raise income through introducing domestic undergraduate fees.

It's difficult to compare performance of English and Scottish universities because of the way in which much Higher Education in Scotland is delivered, with 1 in 3 students studying at colleges, who do not report their data in the same way. But what we can say unequivocally is that, *contra* almost all the folk wisdom since the very first introduction of tuition fees in England over 20 years ago – folk wisdom which has been repeated with every subsequent change – the introduction of fees has led to **more** under privileged full time 18 year students going to university in England, **more** of them going to the highest tariff institutions, and **more** money to universities, putting them in a stronger and more independent position.

Whether we use the traditional measure of Free School Meals entry, or the more sophisticated Multiple Equality Measure developed by UCAS, we see a steady rise in the numbers going, and a falling of the ratio between the most and least advantaged

attending the highest tariff institutions. This data is consistent back to 2006, which is when 'top up fees' of £3,000 a year were introduced.

This is because the student finance mechanism which supports tuition fees is actually very well designed. Here I'm talking about the most current system – introduced when top up fees were increased to £9,000 a year by the Coalition in 2012. Students pay no fees up front and are given loans for both tuition and maintenance. Loans are repaid on a sliding scale upon graduation and are income determined, with repayments of 9% of everything over the threshold starting at just over £26,000. If you earn less, you pay back less – so there's no pressure to go into a high earning job if you don't want to. Interest rates are charged – which upsets a lot of people – but the total sum owing does not change the monthly repayment rate. And after 30 years, all the balance is wiped. The total cost is actually split pretty evenly between the state and individual – latest estimates are that the state covers 45% of the cost of the loan system

It's not a perfect system by any means. In particular, mature entry, part time study, and courses such as those for professions such as nursing have all suffered calamitous falls because the finance system wasn't as generous for such students. Non-HE adult learning has collapsed even more.

It's also not that politically popular. Although there's relatively little public polling on the specific issue of tuition fees, most data shows that the general public would like to see fees reduced, as would students. Labour voters are strongly in favour of such a move, and welcomed Labour's commitment in 2017 and 2019 manifestos to abolish fees, and internal Tory polling of younger voters in particular was one of the motivations behind the commissioning of the still-not-responded-to Augar report, which recommended a cut in headline fees in England to £7,500.

But learning from England – including England's mistakes – what are some of the principles Scotland could look to adopt if they did want to introduce home undergraduate fees? Here's a 4 point plan

Keep the same general principles as England's system…

- As noted above, the actual principles of the English system are well understood by students, including the poorest, and do not deter. Any fee system introduced in Scotland should keep the features of: no costs up front (ie don't have the fee 'flow through' the student), income contingent loan repayment, a wipe off after 30 years
- To make this work, Whitehall pays back a lot of student loans – around 45p in the £ – but is quite cautious about advertising this. The system is actually a good example of cost sharing and benefit sharing. A new Scottish system should build this principle of 'partnership' in from the beginning, not hide it like England does

…but change the way the system is described

- Find someone who doesn't like the English system of fees, but recognises that the whole thing can't be paid for by the state. Ask them to describe their ideal model. It will probably sound a bit like this: nothing up front, financial support for students during study, and then with students only paying back once they've

graduated, probably via an increased tax band or a dedicated graduate tax rate. Congratulations, you've described the current system!

- A 'pure' graduate tax has several – pretty insurmountable – technical barriers to rolling out. It's the main reason why several high profile announcements into introducing one quietly fizzle away. But there's absolutely nothing to stop Scotland introducing a 'capped graduate tax' which has all the facets of the current system. Just don't call it fees and loans. England's failure to do this is probably, in my opinion, the single biggest failure of the policy in the last twenty years.

Focus on money available up front

- Almost every student survey says the thing that causes hardship, and deters students, is not fee levels, but availability of money up front. It should be relatively easy to solve for this and (when one considers how the state pays it back over 30 years, borrowing at about 1%), not too expensive
- Scotland should increase more generous maintenance loans – well above the English level
- The grants for poorest students, which go through cycles of being introduced, scrapped, and reintroduced, should both be a core feature of the scheme, and more than tokenistic

Make totemic changes to the least popular bits of the English system

- The bits of the English system which are generally felt to have worked badly are support for anyone who isn't a full time, first time, 18 year old undergraduate. It's fair that part time students, often working, have a different financial package. But Scotland should consciously design a system that supports all types of students, including adult learners
- All public service degree training like nursing should be funded by bursaries and grants, not loans (even if there are still fees charged for them)
- Additionally, all students graduating into a number of key public service provisions should have their loans paid off for as long as they remain in the profession – teaching, nursing, social work, policing and so on.
- Interest rate charges cause angst among many graduates when they see their annual statements. It's economically an odd thing to worry about, because it doesn't change the monthly payment (though it does extend the payment term). But to the extent it's affordable, Scotland could make a commitment to not charge interest on loans above the rate of inflation (or even the cost of borrowing the capital to pay for the loans)

There's no doubting that anything even close to this direction of travel would cause an almighty political ruckus. But if Scotland wants to preserve its strong universities, now may be the time to take on the shibboleth of free tuition.

Jonathan Simons is Director of Education at the public policy consultancy Public First, and was formerly a senior civil servant working on education – including a period in No10 Downing Street under the Coalition in 2011 when the £9,000 fees were introduced. He can be contacted for constructive criticism or vituperative abuse at jonathan.simons@publicfirst.co.uk

If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change
– Maimie Thompson
Originally posted 5 May 2020

Thinking about what's happening in the NHS in these troubled times, I recently re-acquainted myself with a line in a book called The Leopard by the Italian writer Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. The gist of it is, if you forgive my translation: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

Professor Paul Gray, the former chief executive of NHS Scotland, used a recent blog in The Melting Pot to reflect on this very theme. "Whatever we do," he wrote, "please don't commit to putting health and care services back to 'the way they were' when all this is over."

Many people in all walks of life are saying the same thing. Covid-19 has forced us all to change the way we do things.

I was heartened to learn recently of an initiative by the Scottish Rural Medicine Collaborative, which was set up and is funded by the Scottish Government to devise and test innovative ways of addressing the long-standing problem of GP recruitment and retention in remote and rural areas. Such places have long since proven to be a barometer of problems yet also solutions. Some of the collaborative's work in addressing the issue of GP recruitment in some of our more isolated communities is now being applied in urban settings too. It is a curious fact that rural solutions will nearly always work for urban settings but not the other way round.

With much of the NHS's routine work now in abeyance, while the clinicians involved in it are responding to more pressing matters, the collaborative has turned its attention to looking at capturing the essence of improvements in remote and rural communities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The collaborative recognises that some of the fixes being developed to cope with the current situation may in fact turn out to be long-term, stable solutions for the future. It is therefore looking at developing a template which provides guidance on how information about these potentially sustainable quick fixes can be collated, recorded and shared. The idea is that others might learn from them and they can provide the basis for future working practices.

Like just about every other body, the collaborative's own working practices have necessarily changed during the Covid-19 lockdown. Its core team now meets remotely rather than in person, and when this crisis ends, it will continue to do so. There is less need to travel to meetings and virtual get-togethers are somehow shorter and more productive. And it is taken the coronavirus to force changes that could have happened earlier, why?

Throughout the country, for example, general practitioners are getting used to functioning in like manner. Most consultations with patients now take place remotely, either by telephone or, in Scotland, increasingly by using Near Me. Developed and tested in 2018 and 2019, this video consulting system was initially used mainly in the Highlands, where distances were an issue, to connect patients with consultants and other specialists.

The intention had always been to increase the use of Near Me throughout Scotland including from the comfort and convenience of people's own home but because of the pandemic this plan has been accelerated. Now, every GP practice in the country is equipped to use it, allowing people to receive urgent health care and advice remotely from the safety of their own homes, without exposing them or the staff to infection risk. It is even possible for doctors to use it from their home if they are at high risk of infection. And, of course it is not just about doctors. There has been a surge of interest and use by allied health professionals, social care and other settings.

Is it better to consult with patients this way rather than seeing them face-to-face? While the fight against coronavirus continues, it most definitely is; in most cases, the risk involved in face-to-face consultations is simply too high.

Many GPs who would never previously have considered using video conferencing are now embracing it and say they will continue to use it post-lockdown. Some won't, of course, but they must realise that if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.

The shaping of the 2018 GP contract in Scotland was seen as the most significant reform of primary care in more than a decade. That may be so, but it did nothing whatsoever to change issues around access and an appointments system in need of reform. The coronavirus has done the job for us. As Professor Trish Greenhalgh, who is leading Scotland's Near Me evaluation, recently acknowledged: "Suddenly, the relative advantage of virtual consultations has changed dramatically."

Going to a GP surgery or for a hospital out-patient appointment isn't always easy wherever you live. Carers or parents must get back-up cover for their charges and travelling to see a clinician – and parking when you get there – can be bothersome. Never mind time taken to travel and all the other inconveniences. And who thinks about the impact on climate change on all these high volume, often short car journeys? Bigger hospital car parks are not the intelligent answer. They are not needed while the coronavirus is around, and they certainly should not be needed when this crisis is over.
For as long as I can remember, decisions in the NHS seem to be taken in a mist of well-intention obfuscation or compromise. Ask professionals to come up with and implement something that's forward-thinking and game-changing and chances are you will get something akin to the status quo. Something that may be roundly supported.

But we all know that if things are to stay as they are – if we are to continue to provide a caring, compassionate, free-at-the-point-of delivery, safe and sustainable National Health Service – things will have to change.

The coronavirus is teaching us some harsh lessons and I am sure that what much of we are having to learn will be as applicable post-lockdown as it is now. Video consultations in the health service is a great example of that. If you know of any others, do tell the Scottish Rural Medicine Collaborative and jot down your own insights and learning. Selective memory never tells the real story – the reality of managing change; the history and context of why its often such a struggle.

Maimie Thompson is a former Head of PR and Engagement for NHS Highland

Where did I go wrong? – Paul Gray

Originally posted 6 May 2020

One of the things that the current crisis does is to provide both time and cause for reflection. And one of the things I have been reflecting on has been health and social care integration – as you might expect. The current situation has shown just how vital care services, care homes and carers are, as some of our oldest and frailest citizens are cared for by them. Some care homes are seeing a very significant death rate, as well as serious impacts on carers; the difficulties over supply and access to PPE have also brought the question of whether we value them into sharp relief. And that made me think about the system more broadly. How did we get to where we are, and what might the opportunities be?

So, a bit of background. From December 2013 to February 2019, I was Chief Executive of NHS Scotland, and the Director General for Health and Social Care. It was a role in three parts – principal policy advisor on health and social care to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and other Ministers as required; a member of the Scottish Government's Executive Team and its Strategic Board, with the corporate responsibilities that came with that; and the Chief Executive of NHS Scotland, accountable for a budget of £13 billion and a staff complement of some 160,000, in 22 health boards, each led by their own CEO and Health Board.

The Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014 led to the formation of 31 integration authorities, partnering local authorities and health boards across Scotland. These arrangements were in place by April 1, 2016, with some authorities having shadow arrangements in place in the preceding year.

The aim of integration authorities was to improve the quality and consistency of health and care services delegated to them – with a focus on better outcomes for the public, the people we are here to serve. A key intention was to deliver care in community settings, rather than in hospitals, as far as possible.

NHS and local authority partners delegate budgets to integration authorities so that they can direct spending on the services delegated to them. And I had a key role in overseeing the arrangements for putting the health and social care integration programme in place, and for helping to make it work, under the direction of the Ministerial Steering Group, jointly chaired by the Cabinet Secretary and COSLA. The credit for much of the excellent work to design the legislation, to develop the implementation plan and the guidance that goes with it, and to set up the partnerships, goes to others rather than to me. But as CEO and Director General, I had a role to play in getting health boards to engage, and in working with COSLA and local authority partners to support the implementation and development of integration, in accordance with the legislation.

The aims of integration were right, and in my view they remain so. People who need care and support should not have to navigate the boundaries between the health service and

social care in order to get what they need. Joined up services are better for people – more effective, more efficient, more foresighted and offering better outcomes.

But it was not straightforward – not that anyone thought that it would be. Breaking down institutional boundaries is not easy. We had collectively been trying to integrate care in the community for many years; everybody agreed in principle but in practice it was hard because of a range of factors including protection of budgets, elements of self-interest, and differences in governance and political accountability. These were all excuses, and not good reasons – and the decision was taken to legislate for integration; by putting it on that footing the intentions of government, both local and national, would be clear and the framework for governance would be set out in statute and supporting guidance.

Some partnerships made faster progress than others. There were some outstanding examples of joint working, many of which involved the third sector and care providers. Integration was possible, and where there was commitment and leadership it worked. But it was patchy, and Audit Scotland said so, commenting on financial planning, governance and strategic planning arrangements, and leadership capacity. In 2018, the Ministerial Steering Group commissioned a review, jointly led by COSLA and the Scottish Government health directorates. The CEO of COSLA and I co-chaired the review, which was accepted by the Ministerial Steering Group and published in February 2019. Everybody agreed that there was more to be done, and that the pace of change had to improve.

It would be easy for me to say what I think other people should do, and where I think they are getting things right, or wrong, and what they should do next. But I know that I am looking in from the outside, without access to the latest information or to the discussions that take place and to the advice that is given. So against the background I have set out, I thought instead that it might be fairer to say where I think I got it wrong, or didn't go far enough. I could have done these things but I prioritised other things – whether I would have been successful in doing them is another point, but you never know until you try.

I tended to work within a framework of trying to organise things at 5 levels – national, regional, local, community and personal, with the emphasis on doing as much as possible at personal and community level. But I have to question whether I prompted sufficient changes to funding mechanisms so that prevention and community support are better rewarded and recognised, because they are fundamental to changing the way that care is delivered.

The governance arrangements for health and social care are still complicated and circular. Local authorities and health boards delegate to health and social care partnerships, who in turn commission inputs, outputs and outcomes from these delegating authorities (and others). It's unusual for delegation to run one way, and commissioning to flow the other – and it makes for complicated accountability which in turn makes scrutiny more difficult. This is set down in legislation, so it's arguable that there is no option, but I could have done more to seek improvement and clarity, for the ultimate benefit of the people public servants are here to serve – the public.

There is (despite genuine attempts on both sides) not yet real parity of esteem between the NHS and local government. Some of the best and most productive – and challenging – discussions I had, were with locally elected members but I am sure that we could have found more ways to engage local politicians, as well as officers, in design as well as delivery. I could also have done more to encourage health boards to free up some of their excellent people to engage more fully with partner organisations. There were outstanding examples of what could be achieved when that happened, but I ought to have taken more steps to spread that learning and good practice more widely.

Speaking of esteem, what of the third sector? They have some amazing insights and ideas, and make a huge contribution to supporting those who are most in need. They also have some really valuable community connections, which give people who are in need of support a voice which really is essential to understanding what works and what doesn't. Yet they are too often treated as hired hands, to be picked up and dropped every time a budget is reviewed – with the loss of continuity and erosion of trust that such an approach inevitably generates. I should have done more to insist on treating them as equal partners.

In the context of both local government and third sector capacity and capability, I did try to get everyone to stop saying 'hard to reach' and start thinking about how to meet and engage with people on their terms and not ours. We need to think about how individuals and households are facing problems largely incomprehensible to us – and tailor support accordingly. We can only do that by hearing what they say, on their terms. Investment in smoking cessation doesn't help if you are in an abusive relationship and it won't be a priority until you are in a better context with more hope. Local government and the third sector have a great deal to offer in this context, given their closeness to communities, and I could have tried to make more space for that, and ensure it was more valued and recognised.

We are also making clear statements about what we value by the way we pay and train social care workers (and people who look after small children). If we cannot give people a good start and a good end to their lives, we are falling short. Looking back, I wish that I had done more to prompt thinking and action about that.

I also knew that we needed a good hard look at the way care services are commissioned, the way they are paid for, and the way good care is recognised and rewarded. Our attitude to the private sector was unresolved. We don't 'procure' hospital care, but we do 'procure' home care and care home services. We know that if people can stay at home, or in a homely setting, their prospects of good quality of life are enhanced – yet we have a system which makes it more likely that cuts will fall in these areas. I should have done more about that.

Despite these things, there were some outstanding examples of health and social care integration, largely driven by people who exercised strong and effective local leadership, who worked collaboratively, and who cared less about institutional boundaries than they did about the people they served. These examples came from all sectors – social work, social care, the third sector, the NHS and privately run care homes. Nobody had the monopoly on excellence.

That gives me hope for the future. These same people are the ones who are responding positively to the current crisis and they are the ones we should listen to as we emerge, in small steps, from it. They are the ones who can help to deliver some of the changes that will have the greatest impact, as the mist clears and there is an opportunity to make some sustainable changes with longer-term benefit. To any who doubt that new ways are right or possible and who want to carry on with what was before, to keep things are they were, I offer this plea. There is no place where things are going to be the way they were, except perhaps in sepia photographs – so put away the aspic (please) and learn from my mistakes instead.

Professor Paul Gray was chief executive of NHS Scotland, 2013-19

Acceleration rather than Revolution – How the Coronavirus Crisis will change the shape of Scottish Retail

– Ewan MacDonald-Russell

Originally posted 8 May 2020

In 2017 the Scottish Retail Consortium published a detailed paper on the future of the Retail Industry. Based on interviews, data, and analysis from members and partners, we spoke about how the retail industry was engaged in a long-term structural shift. Technology, customer behaviour, and public policy were creating a series of incentives which would incentivise digital shopping whilst reducing physical retail premises. That included a prediction that 20 percent of retail premises would close within the next decade – but at the same time the overall value of sales to the economy would grow.

A three-year-old paper sounds like a tedious starting point for an examination of the prospects for Scottish retail following the coronavirus crisis. After all, everything is different now, and the kaleidoscope has been shaken.

To an extent that is true. No one predicted a world of social distancing, of closed up high streets and locked down families. However, rather than creating a new world, it's likely coronavirus is going to accelerate existing trends as much as create new ones.

Changing customer behaviour has been at the core of retail transformation, and that's certainly hastened over the last few weeks. According to the SRC's Scottish Retail Sales Monitor in March online non-food sales surged by 18.8 percent. Of course, since online sales were often the only way to get some products that may not surprise. However, the overall trend was for greater online purchasing anyway. The 12-month average growth for online is 4.4 percent – whilst non-food sales overall have declined. Consumers were already moving online before lockdown – and with shopping potentially subject to the same or stricter social distancing rules we already see in supermarkets it's at least plausible the shift to online will accelerate. The pace of change may be increasing, but the direction of travel was clear for some time.

Similarly, recent weeks have seen a series of announcements as retailers have fallen into administration. Yet that's been the theme of recent years, with several prominent brands stumbling and tumbling under the combined pressure of rising employment and property costs. Those brands who prospered did so with a clear universal selling point, or through developing omni and multi-channel propositions more suited to modern consumers. However, even those businesses who have done that face a real struggle – especially if there is a delay until hospitality businesses can reopen. Much city centre shopping is dependent on the synergy between hospitality and retail – without coffee shops and bars footfall will be down and consequently high street sales. Only those retailers who had already adapted their proposition are likely to emerge strongly.

There was already a huge disparity between the retail proposition in different town centres and high streets before this crisis. Places with attractive reasons to encourage visits are likely to recover more quickly. Even those reliant on tourism or culture have a network of good businesses and often affluent local communities who will be able to support those centres in the short-term. It's those places which were struggling, which often face competition from other shopping destinations, and are unsurprisingly economically vulnerable who are most at risk of closures. That was the case before coronavirus. With retailers having had to exhaust reserves to survive the shutdown, stores in those areas will be under the microscope to determine if they can reopen profitably.

So much of what may lie ahead is an exaggeration of existing effects. What makes things different is that whilst there was an expectation of limited economic growth this year, now retailers will have to operate in the context of the worst economic shock in decades. We're already seeing the initial impacts. Consumer confidence has been shaken by this crisis with the GFK consumer confidence index falling to -9. That's already translating into weak sales. The Scottish Government's Retail Sales Index reported the value of sales fell by 1.1 percent in the first quarter of 2020. The SRC's Monitor saw an inflation-adjusted fall of -12.2 percent for March – unsurprisingly the worst figures ever reported.

The most concerning data were the sales figures for the first two weeks of lockdown. That saw retail sales fall by – 44 percent. Even grocery sales fell in those last two weeks. Obviously, that's dismal news for retailers. But it is of concern for the wider economy. Retail sales are a barometer for economic growth. A large number of the products retailers sell are Scottish or British. If they are unable to sell products, that diminished demand filters right back through the supply chain. For example, whilst food sales remain from supermarkets, the food service and export markets have collapsed. That there is reduced demand for dairy products and certain parts of animal carcasses which are generally not sold in supermarkets. Those examples will be true across the economy for all suppliers – both of products but also services. Suppressed demand in other industries will exacerbate this.

Retailers must look at the reality of the economic environment when making decisions about the future. That may mean facing uncomfortable truths. It may not be viable to reopen every shop which closed in March when lockdown ends. Furthermore, it's likely to be economically vulnerable communities which are most at risk of store closures. That assumption is based on SRC analysis of local authority retail data – regrettably there isn't really any countervailing evidence.

Ultimately retail businesses have fiduciary duties to their staff, directors, and where relevant shareholders. They have to run profitable businesses. If the economic incentives are aligned to drive reduced store footprints and greater online sales, then that's what will happen.

However, whilst those incentives are fixed, the economy remains dynamic. Some store closures are probably inevitable, but the scale is most definitely not. That's the debate

policymakers must engage with now. It's not an exciting one. There are far fewer photo calls to be had for saving a store than opening a new one.

Because it's not a matter of economics, but of people. Once a high street stores closes, in many places it will no longer be replaced. Those jobs, and the community contribution from the business will be lost. That contribution isn't just tax revenue but the social and charitable work done by retailers (who last year raised over £18 million for Scottish good causes). It's the anchor stores who drive footfall, and therefore allow a local ecosystem which lets smaller and independent stores flourish around them. Some will be lost, but there is a chance to save many.

But this is the moment for action. In a dynamic environment retailers are going to make decisions now which may not have had to happen for years. The long-term pressures have met with the brutal economic impact of this crisis. This is no longer a theoretical debate about retail trends but the moment when predictions become reality.

Right now, governments are rightly focused on the enormous public health challenge. That's obviously the immediate priority. However, it's also clear they are looking forward to the best way to restart the engine of economic activity. There are three areas which are worthy of consideration.

Firstly, the retail industry is as well prepared as any sector to resume trading. We already have businesses who can safely operate such as pharmacies and grocers. That experience has allowed the SRC to prepare guidance in collaboration with USDAW for non-food businesses to reopen. There are tested approaches which work to maintain social distancing and protect workers. Those will of course adapt in line with new guidance – but retailers are ahead of the curve. Just as crucially, allowing retailers to trade restarts other parts of the economy – generating activity through the multiplier effect. It's also a tangible way to demonstrate that though this virus has changed lives, it won't stop them for ever.

Secondly, once the lockdown has lifted to some degree, Governments will need to think about how to reignite consumer confidence. Whilst this crisis has been a shock to the system, and inevitably will lead to technical recession, in material terms much of the nation's productive capacity has been frozen rather than eliminated. It's therefore essential where possible to restart that capacity – hopefully shortening the period of fallow growth as much as possible. With that in mind a short-term but generous consumer stimulus package may be well worth considering. If the economic harm can be limited, then that will also enormously help reduce the social consequences of recession – which is a moral imperative.

Thirdly, the tax burden on retail needs to fall. Concerningly much current discourse appears to be going in the other direction. Some appear to be looking at the evidence of retail change, and increased online sales, as a sign that the solution to retail's challenges is through various levies or taxes on digital sales. The idea is attractive to politicians, who rarely dislike a revenue stream. However, it's ill-considered. Eight of the ten largest online retailers in Scotland operate physical stores. In many cases online sales are about maintaining market share rather than making profits. And the last thing the over-

burdened retail industry needs is another tax – all that will do is make trading harder and potentially drive up prices to shoppers to pay for it. That's before the complexity of how online retail sales could be differentiated and separated from online sales of hotel bookings and holidays, insurance and banking services, newspaper and media subscriptions etc.

An online tax doesn't make sense, but sadly that's not stopped some in their advocacy. If those siren voices manage to convince politicians to pursue a tax, then any new measures would need to be at best revenue neutral for retail – and if protecting high streets and keeping stores open is the ambition then future total tax burden for the industry will need to fall.

Our high streets will look very different when we emerge from the nightmare of this crisis. It's likely to be some time until hospitality businesses are able to trade. Tourists, who are important customers in Edinburgh and several towns, may not return in numbers until next year.

In the interim the retail industry will remain robust and resilient. There will still be products to sell and customers to sell to. However, to what degree, and what extent, retail remains the cornerstone of every high street will depend on the decisions made by the Chancellor and Finance Secretary over the next few months.

Ewan MacDonald-Russell is Head of Policy and External Affairs, Scottish Retail Consortium

Ultra-liberalism has pitched politicians against the public
– Nick Timothy
Originally posted 11 May 2020

In *The Matrix*, the lead character, Neo, is offered a choice by Morpheus, the leader of a rebel band. Neo can take a red pill, and discover that the world around him is an entirely false construct. Or he can take a blue pill, and wake up in bed, blissfully unaware that everything about his life is a fabrication

.

Of course, we are not living inside some artificial reality, like in *The Matrix*, controlled by powerful forces without even realising it. But if Western citizens were presented with a choice of pills, and opted for the red one, they would see that the world is not as they imagined. Many aspects of life they were told were unavoidable and universal, inevitable and irreversible are really no such thing at all.

We have grown used to being told that globalisation, in the form we have experienced it, is an irresistible force, the product of inexorable progress. We have been told that the nation state – and the collective identity, democracy and solidarity it makes possible – must be subordinated to supranational governance. We have been told that international market forces are impossible to shape, mass immigration is impossible to stop, and the destruction of culture is impossible to resist. We have grown to accept that markets trump institutions, individualism trumps community, and group rights trump broader, national identities. Legal rights come before civic obligations, personal freedom beats commitment, and universalism erodes citizenship.

These things have become the norm not because they are the natural order of things, but because our world is a construct of ideology. That ideology is not as extreme as those our leaders like to reject, like communism or fascism. But it is an ideology nonetheless, and its name is ultra-liberalism. Like all ideologies, as its contradictions and failures mount, ultra-liberalism is growing illiberal and intolerant towards dissenters, and retreating into delusion and denial.

Consider for a moment how the political classes did what they could to thwart Brexit. How, when it comes to public services, the answer is always to turn them into a market. How politicians insist we need more and more immigration. And think about how those who disagree with them are smeared as bigoted, deplorable and incapable of understanding the complexity of the modern world.

My new book, *Remaking One Nation*, sets out why things have got this far, and what conservatives can do about it. We need to counter ultra-liberalism, and develop a new conservative agenda that respects personal freedom but demands solidarity, reforms capitalism and rebuilds community, and rejects selfish individualism while embracing our obligations towards others. In rejecting ultra-liberalism, however, conservatives must be careful to defend the essential liberalism that stands for pluralism and our democratic way of life.

Essential liberalism is what makes liberal democracy function. It requires not only elections to determine who governs us, but checks and balances to protect minorities from the 'tyranny of the majority'. It demands good behaviourial norms, including a willingness to accept the outcome of election results.

And it requires support for free markets. Essential liberalism does not seek to turn every aspect of life into a market, but it knows that economic freedom is closely related not only to personal freedom but other values including dignity, justice, security, and recognition and respect from our fellow citizens.

The power of essential liberalism is that it does not pretend to provide a general theory of rights or justice or an ideological framework that leads towards the harmonisation of human interests and values or a single philosophical truth. It respects political diversity and allows for all manner of policy choices, from criminal justice to the tax system.

And it understands that human values and interests are often in conflict. My right to privacy might undermine your right to security, for example. A transsexual's right to be recognised as a woman might undermine the safety of women born as women. We need institutions, laws, and a limited number of legal rights to handle those conflicts. We need customs and traditions to maintain our shared identities and build up trust. Maintaining the fragile balance between conflicting values and interests is a delicate and difficult job, and this is why ultra-liberalism can be so dangerous.

Of course there is no single ultra-liberal agenda. The ultra-liberalism of Tony Blair may, despite party divides, be similar to the beliefs of Nick Clegg and George Osborne. But it is very different to the form of ultra-liberalism pursued by the left-wingers who have recently dominated the Labour Party.

Blair and Osborne stand for elite liberalism. Their beliefs are shared by most members of the governing classes, but not the general public. And so, despite public opposition, and changes in ministers and parties in government, Britain continues with policies including mass immigration, multiculturalism, a lightly regulated labour market, limited support for the family, and the marketisation of many public services.

And then we have the ultra-liberal ratchet: beliefs that are not shared across the party divide, but which keep propelling liberalism forward. On the right, market fundamentalists think mainly of the economy, while left-liberals pursue their agenda of cultural liberalism and militant identity politics.

One side might attempt to reverse some changes made by the other, but in the end most remain. And market fundamentalism and left-liberalism reinforce one another: both leave us with economic dislocation, social atomisation and a state that is left trying to pick up the pieces.

The trouble with all these forms of ultra-liberalism is that they are based on a conception of humanity that is not real. Right from the beginning, liberal thought was built on the false premise that there are not only universal values but also natural and universal rights.

Early liberals made this argument by imagining a 'state of nature', or life without any kind of government at all. They argued that in the state of nature – life in which was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" – humans would come together to form a social contract setting out the government's powers and the rights of citizens.

This meant, from the start, liberalism had several features hard-wired into it. Citizens are autonomous and rational individuals. Their consent to liberal government is assumed. And rights are natural and universal.

This is why many liberals fall into the trap of believing that the historical, cultural and institutional context of government is irrelevant. Institutions and traditions that impose obligations on us can simply be cast off. All that matters, as far as government is concerned, is the freedom of the individual and the preservation of their property. Liberal democracy can therefore be dropped into Iraq, and made to work like in Britain. At home, we can be given legal rights without any corresponding responsibilities. Our duties to others are merely unjust hindrances.

Liberals ignore the relational essence of humanity: our dependence on others and our reliance on the institutions and norms of community life. They take both community and nation for granted, and have little to say about the obligations as well as rights of citizenship. The nation state can therefore hand over its powers to remote and unaccountable supranational institutions. Transnational citizenship rights can be bestowed upon foreign nationals. Public services should be freely available to those who have never contributed to them.

With later liberal thinkers came further flawed ideas about humanity. The great Victorian, John Stuart Mill, devised the 'harm principle', in which the liberty of the individual should be restricted only if his actions risk damaging the interests of others. Even then, however, there could be no encroachment on liberty to ensure conformity with the moral beliefs of the community, to prevent people harming themselves, or if the restriction was disproportionate.

The problem with the harm principle is that it fails to acknowledge that all our actions and inactions to some degree affect those around us. And, precisely because human values and interests conflict with one another, we will never agree about what clearly constitutes harm. And yet ultra-liberals today echo Mill's harm principle when they behave as though the use of hard drugs has no consequences for anybody but the individual user, or when they are reluctant to force fathers to meet their obligations to their families, or refuse to take action against serial tax-dodging individuals or businesses.

Mill and other liberals sometimes made the case for pluralism and tolerance on the basis that the trial and error they make possible leads to truth and an increasingly perfect society. It is this teleological fallacy – this assumption that one's own beliefs stand for "progress" – that can lead liberalism towards illiberalism: its intolerance of supposedly backward opinions, norms and institutions can quickly become intolerance of the people who remain loyal to those traditional ways of life.

This illiberalism is a particular problem on the ultra-liberal left. And here, left-liberals are influenced by postmodernists such as Michel Foucault and the mainly American thinkers behind the rise of identity politics. Discourse, Foucault argued, is oppressive. People are not in charge of their own destinies. Their social reality is imposed on them through language and customs and institutions, and even the victims of the powerful participate in their own oppression through their own language, stories and assumed social roles.

Because oppressive discourses work to favour those at the top of exploitative hierarchies, we should not simply remove the hierarchy but penalise those who subjugate others. Equal political rights are therefore not enough: because historically power lay with white men, today whiteness and masculinity must be attacked. Because we do not understand how our social roles are constructed, we do not understand the meaning of even our own words. Those who hear us – particularly if they are members of marginalised groups – understand better than we do the true meaning of what we say. Because discourse is itself a form of violence, free speech is no longer sacrosanct, and it is legitimate to meet violent language with violent direct action.

On the ultra-liberal right, support for the free market can turn into extreme libertarianism. Struggling communities shorn of social capital, deprived of infrastructure, and lacking opportunities for young people are simply ignored, in the belief that the "invisible hand" of the market will come to the rescue.

Instead, policy energy is devoted to deregulating the labour market and marketising public goods. Friedrich von Hayek, a hero to many ultra-liberals on the right, argued that no political system, not even a democratic one, nor even a very small and local one, can accurately reflect collective choice in the way a market does. For his disciples, it follows, therefore, that the National Health Service cannot be the right way of delivering healthcare, since consumer choices and real pricing do not drive decision-making. And the same goes for other public services, from public transport to schooling.

In *Remaking One Nation*, I argue that it is time for a decisive break with ultra-liberalism in all its forms. There are signs that under Boris Johnson the Conservatives are shifting away from both economic and cultural liberalism, but time will tell if this marks a lasting change. I certainly hope it does so, for there is more to life than the market, more to conservatism than the individual, and more to the future than the destruction of cultures and nations. It's time for us to take the red pill, see the world around us for what it is, and fight for a different future.

Nick Timothy was Chief of Staff to Theresa May PM. He is a columnist for the Telegraph, a Visiting Professor at Sheffield University, serves as a Non-Executive Director in the Department for Education and is a member of the 2022 Commonwealth Games Organising Committee.

Why we need to deploy healthcare technology – Brian Whittle MSP

Originally posted 19 May 2020

Once it's over, without a doubt, we will be studying the impact of the COVID19 crisis for years to come. There will be much rumination over who did what and when, what should have happened and why we didn't see this coming. However, as eminent microbiologist and virologist, Professor Sir Hugh Pennington recently said,

"The NHS could have been better prepared, but the problem is that people doing these exercises would have to decide how likely it is and whether they were going to invest say £10m in ventilators that they may, but probably wouldn't have to use. Hindsight is a wonderful thing."

Mistakes have been made, no doubt, but the world was not set up for this crisis. To me, it is the lessons we learn from this crisis and the steps we take to prevent the next one that we should be judged on. Covid-19 has highlighted some serious flaws in our system. Those flaws have consistently been there, but Covid-19 has brought them into stark contrast.

I am going to focus on an essential first step in healthcare if we are to learn the lessons from Covid-19 – the adoption of appropriate technology.

I could write about technology in education, given the need for online learning and our recognition that it is far from an equal playing field. Similarly, I could highlight the need for better use of technology in the justice system or the welfare system, both of which have been under pressure throughout the Covid pandemic. For all these portfolios and more, we have been content with a 'make do' approach. Decisions on investment have been based on whether we can 'get by' with what we have. Let's face it, the Scottish Government do not have a great track record when it comes to developing technology platforms and software, so I can understand their reluctance to adapt.

I look at challenges like this one as I would an Olympic Cycle. In other words, look to the end goal first and work your way back. If the end goal is delivering a world-class environment for our health care professionals to deliver quality care free at the point of need, what is the first step that needs to happen to make that goal a reality?

Covid-19 has highlighted that access to quality data is a huge problem. Indeed, the Scottish Government's inability to measure accurately the 'R' number (the measurement of the replication of the virus) is, in no small part, a failure of quality data-gathering. This number is a major contributor to the way in which the virus is being tackled and yet the Scottish Government are unable to say with any certainty what it is or how accurate it is.

Everybody has a unique CHI number that identifies us within the healthcare system. Why can't we automatically access data that can identify those with diabetes or COPD or lung disease or any other such conditions? We should have been able to quickly

identify and contact the most vulnerable by pushing a button and automatically generating a letter/email/text. Instead, it took weeks and even then there are cases where people who should have been advised to shield weren't, and others who were told to, shouldn't have been.

How and what we record about an individual, how that data is accessed and used and, crucially, who owns that data, must be addressed.

How many of us have visited a hospital and watched as trolleys full of paper files are wheeled by? Health boards across the country currently use different systems that cannot speak to each other. In fact, sometimes there are different systems within a hospital that cannot speak to each other. This means that if you record data in, say, Glasgow and then need to access healthcare in Edinburgh, you could well have to re-record all that same data all over again because you can't see what's already in the system. The same is often true for patients moving between primary and secondary care – their medication advice or rehab protocols aren't available to the pharmacist or physio at the touch of a button.

The systems for public procurement and stock management continue to be a massive problem. They're just not agile enough to adapt to working with increased numbers of suppliers in a short period of time. Interfacing with crucial third sector organisations is piecemeal at best. Staffing and workforce planning across the whole of the Scottish NHS remains an issue. Then there is the NHS 24 triage system that has been completely overwhelmed.

We need a collaboration and communications platform that allows for good data in and good data out across all health boards. That is a crucial first step to making the most of telemedicine and facilitating the delivery of healthcare closer to the community and at home.

A key point here is that the technology to do this already exists. The big hurdle is change management and a lack of political will. It is a problem that will take proper planning and time to solve, two commodities that can be painfully rare in politics.

However, the current trajectory of our health service is unsustainable. Today, the Scottish Government are not so much preparing our NHS for the future as they are managing its decline. There comes a point where the ever-increasing percentage of total government spending allocated NHS Scotland can rise no further.

We should always be investing in our NHS, but we must think more about where that investment is going and how it brings us closer to our overall objectives.

The long-term goal must be to deliver quality health-care free at the point of need, sustainably. To do that, however, I would suggest that we also need to add the goal of reducing expenditure on preventable health conditions.

We undoubtedly need to tackle the rising preventable health issues that sees Scotland at the top of the European league table. The Covid crisis has changed public behaviour

in that regard, no doubt. Personal responsibility for our own health has become more evident. This needs to continue. To do so, especially in social prescribing, requires data and knowledge of what is available in our communities. It is really a national campaign delivered at community level that should have technology at its centre.

I wrote a paper last May highlighting that without developing a healthcare technology platform that enables good collaboration and communication, the goal of shifting healthcare towards community care and primary care cannot be achieved. We need it to deploy healthcare technology in homes and wearable technology that allows a greater personal understanding of and responsibility for our own health and that of our family.

To date there has been a 'that'll do' philosophy in Scottish Government. Our inability to utilise big data properly isn't new, but the current crisis has brutally highlighted this failing. As we move forward, to tackle the long-term sustainability of the NHS, the adoption of technology must be front and centre.

Brian Whittle is a Conservative MSP for South Scotland and Shadow Health Minister

Scotland needs a 'virtual school' – Jenifer Johnston

Originally posted 20 May 2020

The author Damien Barr's coronavirus analogy has really stuck on me: "*We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar.*" Your boat might be a luxury cruiser with the mortgage paid off, all mod cons. The next door neighbour's might be a dinghy seeping with leaks of grief and poverty, being tossed from side to side with great uncertainty and not enough lifejackets. Down the street there is a yacht bobbing away but completely isolated and lonely with a one-person crew, trying to signal to others that they still exist.

My boat is far, far better than most, with a garden and the ability to purchase protection and food and skills to advocate for what we need to keep sailing, but the loud creaks began on Monday 23 March, the first day of no school in Scotland, with a simultaneous full day of work to do. At the bow are my children, 6 and 3, beautiful and largely unaware of the storm, safe in their lifejackets of Amazon Prime, plenty of books and felt tips and two parents who love them unendingly. At the stern is my job, important and needed, essential to keep up the next 15 years of payments on the good boat. And I am balancing in the middle maintaining 14 hours of childcare intermingled with 8 hours of work that I want badly to do, and do well. I am not alone in my boat – single parents are in much worse craft than I – but like most mothers I also carry the weight of family labour: the housekeeping, the birthdays, the food planning, medications, direct debit payments, the organising of all the things, and all the other things. We are not unusual in that my husband makes most of the money, and I make things nice. Ever tried securing a canister of helium and a pink inflatable number 6 balloon in a pandemic? It takes time away from rowing to shore for sure.

The best estimate is that there are 40,000 parents in Scotland now working at home with around 60,000 children to keep safe, homeschool, protect and enjoy. The UK Government on 4 April quietly changed their furlough advice to allow employers to furlough staff who have childcare responsibilities, a change still unpromoted widely. This is not a button *employees* can push – the approval to furlough lies solely with employers. And furlough as a scheme only exists for private sector employers: public sector and third sector staff whose organisations receive money from the public purse are ineligible. Households with sympathetic employers like mine might decide to use dribbled-out annual leave to cope with the sudden and draining tasks in front of them, keeping in mind that the advice from Scottish Government and indeed basic common sense is that children babies, toddlers and very young children should never be left alone. The STUC and the Scottish Government have explicitly referenced caring responsibilities in their updated Fair Work statement.

My personal experience of trying to do both at once has been really mixed and as time goes on the kids are clearly getting worn down by my inability to engage with them properly at times through the day, which makes me feel guilty and unhappy, a bit hollow somehow because I'm present but not available. We've also have had new moments of

pure joy as a family that we wouldn't otherwise have had. Other families have lost their income completely, or are at home all day without money for heating or lighting, or have lost someone they love deeply to this virus, and are having a much worse time than us. I'm acutely aware of our health and good luck and nice bosses when all around us inequality is laid bare.

But still, the maths will still not add up. If you want an adult to be with a child for a full day, a two-adult household with 25 days each of annual leave from the day the schools closed can make that stretch to Friday 29 May. A single-adult household going into lockdown with 25 days of annual leave to take and who uses half days also runs out of that option on 29 May. And thereafter there are harder choices, as noted by the excellent employment lawyer Debbie Fellows at Thorntons Law – sick lines, emergency unpaid leave, parental leave, an unpaid leave of absence. There are no grandparents. There are no childminders. We have to stay in our boats by ourselves.

What would make this easier for working parents? All around us friends are being plunged into sudden unemployment that will last for years – so if we have a job it is precious and we have to do everything we can to keep it. But we are currently making decisions about hard-earned and much needed employment in the dark, asking employers for scattered flexible working because we don't know what we need. So firstly, quick confirmation from the Cabinet Secretary for Education that schools are not going to return before August or September, and clear, national guidance about which classes, when, and for how long, would help keep people, especially women, in employment, as then we can plan either to keep going, reduce hours permanently, or quit. If you have a P1 and a P4 child, and the P1 will be phased into school say three mornings a week for six weeks, that is a lot of missed Zoom calls on a half day getting them there and back and settled once home. The P4 is unlikely to be going to school in the first phase of return so will need some entertaining and homeschooling across the whole day. This is of course if parents are confident about their children entering a classroom at all, and a new survey suggests that richer households are happier to send kids back than poorer households: school return reality may be very different to what Ministers are planning for it to be. Keyworkers are so important and if Hubs close in favour of asking nurses, social workers, refuse collectors and doctors to try to accommodate half days here and there, instead of full days that are regular and cover school holidays, this will create a really complicated system and an added mental strain on already badly stressed out essential workers. Scotland will need Hubs for a while.

The second issue is the wide and varied offering that Scotland has presented to children, young people and parents in terms of home learning, and there is an easy solution to this. For the past nine weeks, 32 local authorities, hundreds of schools and thousands of teachers have been quickly staging a schoolbag of paper work, digital learning, and virtual face-to-face contact with teachers in some places. Private schools are ahead of the digital game, providing their pupils with double the amount of online learning of state pupils.

I asked parents about this on Twitter on 4 May – in replies from people across 11 local authorities there is evidence of no online "face-to-face" lessons (either live or recorded),

no or seldom visibility of much needed faces, no marking of work, the functionality of Glow being a daily struggle, and the use of a huge variety of teaching methods – Microsoft Teams, SeeSaw, Zoom, YouTube, ShowMyHomework, Google Classroom, Google Hangouts, emails, printables, and hard copy work were all mentioned. There were also some absolutely lovely messages about individual teachers who are keeping in touch with their kids by phone, daily video lessons, and schools who have found creative workarounds to the inflexibility of what is "allowed" so that teachers can see, speak and listen to their class. Teachers are also producing these solutions from home with young children and all the other challenges this pandemic brings.

My ask of the Scottish Government is that there is a national online curriculum developed and delivered digitally in really simple, open-access websites, no passwords, no gatekeeping, just lessons broadcast daily on a website, join in if you can. Scotland has many superstar teachers who could deliver classes to the nation's kids in a virtual school – we could get to know them as well as our own fantastic class teachers. Lessons could be live and recorded to watch later if children can't get to them right away. The content could dovetail into what is already out there through BBC Bitesize and other trusted teaching and wellbeing materials (and Joe Wicks!). I know some local authorities and schools are culturally against a national curriculum but until there is a vaccine this will be needed by kids who cannot return to school if their parents are shielding, to bridge the half-day phased-return offering that kids will get, and to let teachers truly be present for their class: they could support a national curriculum with additional material, by marking nationally-set work, and to be there for their kids virtually or by phone. And for families without internet access or devices it will be a small investment to bring them online and to connect by paying their WiFi bill and supplying a tablet. In the scheme of what is being spent, after healthcare, if a virtual school is the only reliable and available school that there is then we should pay for everyone to access it equally – no child left behind, getting it right for every child.

If Scotland truly is a "world leading digital nation" then this could be staged in a week. It would free up tens of thousands of hours of preparation and mixed methods of delivery that teachers and schools are trying to undertake in 32 different ways across a small country, an Occam's Razor to deliver one thing – simple, open access websites – that delivers one thing – education
.
So please, give me sail for my boat. We are so lucky, and will keep working with our kids at home for many weeks and months to come, and thank you to our school and their staff for what they've done. I want to keep my children safe and educated, and I want to work. Please make this easier than it has been as we start to see the reassurance of the shoreline on the horizon.

Jenifer Johnston works in communications and public affairs. @TheLastGoodGirl

Video calls can help prisoners maintain family links during the pandemic – George Kyriacou

Originally posted 27 May 2020

Maintaining family ties has proven to be vital for prisoner reform, increasing mental health, and, reducing the likelihood of reoffending. Figures have shown that prisoners who have regular contact with family are 39% less likely to reoffend on release. At this difficult time, prisoners, and their loved ones are struggling with no visits, coupled with isolation in lockdown.

We are currently in the midst of a global pandemic, with some prisons on 23-hour lockdown, and all closing visits for the foreseeable future, in order to protect the staff and residents from this horrific virus.

Family ties are under strain, and lack of face to face visits, which are quite often the main part of a prisoner and their loved one's diary, have a huge effect on the prisoner and their wellbeing, meaning, throughout the SPS, poor mental health, and self-harm is at an all-time high.

The value of real face to face visits should not be underestimated, but video calls can help to bridge the gap, and help to bring those families together again. Across the globe video calls are being made available to the people in custody throughout this unprecedented time, as its uncontested that facilitating family contact is more important now than ever before.

For example, a number of prisons in England and Wales such as HMPs Berwyn, Bronzefield, Downview, Eastwood Park, Garth, High Down, Hull, Wayland, Werrington and Wetherby, have all recently begun using secure video calling technology during the pandemic, the likes of Jersey and Guernsey prisons in the Channel Islands have been using video calling for the past 18 months and many more are starting to adopt the same solution.

Research has shown, consistently, that there is a direct link between prisoners' communication with loved ones, and their mental health and reoffending rate. Stable contact with loved ones is key to giving a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose to a prisoner who might otherwise feel isolated. Prisoners need to maintain a sense of identity outside of the prison walls. They need to have the reinforcement that they are still a husband, wife, son, daughter, mother or father. Knowing that they have a role to perform when leaving the prison, and a place within the family unit, is vital to reducing mental illness, self-harm, and reoffending in Scotland's prisons, and helping to create a place of reform.

The Farmer Review, (which I spoke in more details about back in October 2017, read the article here) 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; “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.”

At Purple Visits, we have worked closely with the criminal justice sector to be able to offer a service which is safe, secure and we believe can make a real difference, not only to the lives of inmates, but to their family, friends, loved ones and society as a whole. By offering the use of video calling securely via Purple Visits, particularly at this worrying time, we believe we can play an important role in facilitating family ties, and maintaining communication and connection during this time of isolation.

George Kyriacou created Purple Visits, which is a platform that helps facilitate secure video calls from prison

Faith and hope are not enough to save Scotland's charities
– Daniel Johnson MSP
Originally posted 2 June 2020

When we look back on this period of lockdown, the role charities, voluntary organisations and community groups have played will be difficult to over-emphasise. I know from my own constituency that many people would have struggled to get food and household basics were it not for their rapid response. Without charities, the inevitable delays and gaps in government response for many in self-isolation would have left the vulnerable and the struggling completely cut off.

I received an email in the last few days from an organisation I visited with the Justice Committee which supports families with a family member in prison. Incarceration often punishes families more than the person sentenced and so this is vital work. Through the crisis they have turned their focus to supporting families struggling with lockdown, but this email was asking for a donation. Like many charities, they had got on with doing the right thing and funding has been a secondary consideration.

Many charities who have responded to the call to action during the lockdown will be having to assess where this crisis has left their finances. Like other parts of the economy, charities have had their usual sources of income dry up. Yet, while some organisations providing critical frontline support have received significant sums through Scottish Government emergency funds, most others have found that they do not qualify. As a result there are concerns in the sector that many charities face a financial black hole as a result of Covid-19.

Back in April, the Scouts, Guides, Outward Bound and Boys Brigade wrote to John Swinney outlining their situation. As charitable organisations providing outdoor education they do not meet the criteria for critical service provision. Nor are they sufficiently close to the financial edge to qualify for other funds aimed at struggling third sector organisations. Yet the Roadmap published by the Government means they will be unable to resume their activities. As the furlough scheme is withdrawn this leaves them with increasing costs, dwindling cash and the prospect of the closure of outdoor centres.

These organisation are not alone. I spoke to SCVO, the umbrella body for the voluntary sector in Scotland, and according to Anna Fowlie, their Chief Executive, the overwhelming majority of the sector finds itself in this financial predicament. According to SCVO research, there are few charitable organisations that hold more than two to three months' cash reserves, nor would they be expected to. They are faced with four or five months in various stages of lockdown and disruption until the end of the year, and SCVO shares the concern that significant number of voluntary sector organisations are facing a difficult if not impossible financial situation.

If these fears prove correct there will be a number of impacts. First, it is very likely to alter the shape and nature of the sector. The organisations most likely to weather the

storm are the large national charities. Many charities providing services in communities have found themselves squeezed in recent years by public-sector tendering processes where they have been undercut by the big corporate charities. A cash crunch could accelerate this process and push small community-based charities over the edge – charities whose finances have been stressed by bidding processes.

Secondly, this could challenge wider public policy and government delivery. Over the last two decades, governments of all stripes have looked to the voluntary sector to deliver key services rather than maintain or create new services run by national or local government. This can make sense in terms of creating services that benefit from the expertise and understanding these organisations have (though others would contend it has more to do with the application of financial pressure discussed in the previous point). Significant levels of failure within the voluntary sector could have very serious impacts on the Government's ability to deliver policies, from childcare through to prisoner release mentoring.

Thirdly, there is a very serious economic issue. The 'Voluntary' in voluntary sector can be a little misleading. Charities are employers, tenants, service providers and customers. Community museums, cafes, sports clubs and all manner of other activities are formally constituted as charities. There isn't a community in Scotland that does not have a network of charities as a vital component of its economy. If charities start to fail, there may be much wider consequences, not to mention loss of jobs.

Finally, there is a political dimension. We hear much of 'Civic Scotland' – indeed the network of third sector organisations played a significant role in the drive for devolution in the 90s. More recently the SNP have viewed the third sector as strategically important and have managed a relationship that has meant there have been few critical voices from the sector through their 13 years in power.

However, the letter from the youth organisations has been sitting in John Swinney's inbox since April. No response has been forthcoming, despite two follow-ups. In response to questions in parliament, ministers express confusion that charities may not qualify for their schemes despite direct evidence that this is the case. This is not behaviour likely to endear ministers to people struggling to keep their charities afloat.
If third sector organisations do start to fail, this seeming inaction from ministers could well have political consequences. There is frustration among many in the sector at the lack of engagement from ministers, or even an acknowledgement of the problem.

A few weeks ago, I wrote a blog for Reform Scotland outlining the financial black hole in University finances. My interest in that issue is in part because of the importance of universities to Scotland, but also because it was an example of the economic impact of Covid-19. It strikes me that these looming problems in the third sector may be another. The economic crisis is likely to be as bad if not worse than the health crisis. How ministers acknowledge, approach and deal with these early emerging issues will be instructive as to how we will cope with the broader challenge. So far the signs are not encouraging.

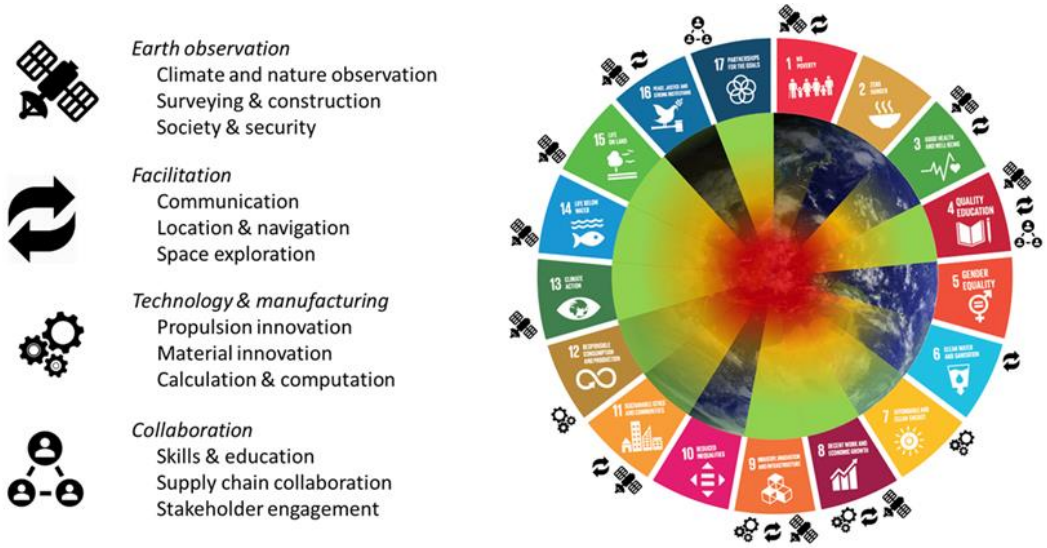
Daniel Johnson is MSP for Edinburgh Southern

How Scotland's space industry can help create world-leading environmental policy – Alan Thompson

Originally posted 8 June 2020

Before the current crisis, there was already a pressing need to tackle the environmental challenges faced by Scotland, the UK and the wider world. There was reason to hope we would rise to these challenges, although we also face many questions about how long it would take before we see any tangible results. So, if there are any positives from the state of lockdown in which we find ourselves, it is that we have time to think differently and create more coherent plans that will successfully navigate the post-Covid era.

This is where the Scottish space sector comes in. I firmly believe that the time is right for the industry to come together with a clear and detailed explanation of how it can lead the way in addressing, monitoring and managing these environmental challenges. The modern-day space sector does not yet have a widespread understanding across the general public, although high-profile events such as the recent SpaceX launch are helping to attract ever-greater attention. I believe that, over time, this understanding will grow, especially relating to how the space industry can help the UN achieve a number of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The below graphic, produced by Luke Deamer at the University of Surrey, details the different components of the space industry and which SDGs they can help realise.



Deamer, L.R., 2020. Potential Sustainability Impacts of Space Companies relative to the UN Sustainable Development Goals [Pending Publication]

However, growing that understanding is a medium to longer-term aspiration. We need to act now to support environmental decision-making and the reason we need to do so is simple. This prolonged period of citizens in Scotland staying at home has created a period of time during which there has been minimal impact from humans on our environment.

We know that in the last few weeks, the planet has become cleaner, and that there are reduced levels of pollutants, nitrogen monoxide and other emissions[1]. Goldman Sachs

has said it expects 2020 to witness the largest decline of CO2 emissions on record, falling by at least 5.4% across the globe. Pollution monitoring satellites from both NASA and the European Space Agency (ESA) have detected significant decreases in nitrogen dioxide (NO2) over China.

This "control" period of severely restricted human activity needs to be captured as quickly and as comprehensively as possible. It can help inform government policy in a number of key areas, not least in measuring the likely environmental impact of any future easing or tightening of restrictions.

How can we practically achieve this? The answer is satellites. We already have companies in Scotland that can use satellites to receive data and extract conclusions about the environment, although the launch locations for these satellites is usually in places such as the USA or New Zealand.

There is an opportunity for Scotland to follow suit and deliver satellites into low earth orbit (LEO), something I believe we are on track to do by end of 2022/23. If we can achieve that target, Scotland would be a leader in Europe, so we must not lose momentum. The recently-established Scottish Space Leadership Council (SSLC) will be an increasingly important player, for both the industry's long-term growth and for our aim of capturing this key environmental data as soon as we can.

On this issue, we see four clear steps to creating a long-lasting, productive system.

Firstly, as mentioned above, we need to capture the data, starting from the beginning of lockdown to the present. This will enable us to detail the key aspects of environmental improvement that we have seen since the end of March.

Second, we should share these findings with leading environmental experts in Scotland, which they can use to validate their own data, feed into their research and identify priority actions.

Third, we then begin a dialogue between the environmental community and the space sector, with a view to working out how these priorities can be best addressed, what resource is currently available and what will require additional investment.
Finally, we can create a new environment action plan, based upon better informed data from satellites in space and driven by a renewed co-operation between the Scottish space industry, government and environmental leaders.

The challenges and the terrible human cost of Covid-19 are all too apparent. There are also, however, opportunities to do things differently and do them better. This is one of those opportunities and it is one that we must seize.

Alan Thompson is Director, Government Affairs, Skyrora May 2020
Skyrora is a member of the Scottish Space Leadership Council

[1] https://www.sustainabilitymatters.net.au/content/sustainability/article/could-covid-19-help-to-build-a-cleaner-planet–946503855

The other social distance – James Corbett

Originally posted 10 June 2020

As Scotland begins to emerge from lockdown, we can expect big policy ideas from many quarters. What I'd like to contribute here are some thoughts from the perspective of one of Scotland's more deprived and less talked about corners – the South West.

During the pandemic, we've all been learning new phrases, but few have become as ubiquitous as "social distancing". But there's another kind of "social distance" which, in the aftermath of COVID, could be anything but good for the health of the nation, medical and economic.

It's the distance between Scotland's most affluent areas, and the worst of its socio-economic deprivation. When so much of current discussion is around challenges "for Scotland", I want to think local.

I've lived in South West Scotland all my life, and now work there, in a job that has introduced me to many community bodies and businesses. From that, some ideas emerge. First, though, some basic facts.

South West Scotland – Ayrshire in particular – includes some of Scotland's most deprived communities. Communities from which the traditional industries like mining, and the associated businesses and manufacturing, have disappeared, to be replaced by – nothing.

Coronavirus, we know, takes its heaviest toll in deprived areas. For example, decades of the health issues associated with poverty has left Inverclyde with more COVID deaths than New Zealand.

National Records of Scotland data shows that someone living in Scotland's most deprived areas is more than twice as likely to die of COVID-19 as someone in the least deprived areas, and you'd find similar stats for any number of other conditions. Post-industrial communities across the South West have some of the worst levels of health inequality and deprivation of anywhere in Scotland.

The general view, and it's hard to disagree, is that the UK is heading for a massive recession. So with job and business losses likely to hit those least able to withstand it the hardest, what hope is there for places like Ayrshire?

The south west, particularly Ayrshire, has never benefitted, at least until very recently, from any concerted national regeneration programme.

Its transport infrastructure is sorely neglected. The M77/A77 is the main route through South Ayrshire and the principal road link between Scotland and Ireland, via the ferry terminals at Loch Ryan. Despite that, the southern part of the route is a single

carriageway, with a succession of 30mph and even 20mph speed limits. Rail is little better and rural bus services are sparse and slow.

There is hope, however, that the Ayrshire Growth Deal, signed last year, offers the area an opportunity to reshape itself.

That deal will be delivered through local authorities. Local government arrangements around here though may, on the face of it, not be best set up to deliver maximum bang for your buck.

What's still commonly referred to as Ayrshire, is actually three separate council areas (North, East and South Ayrshire). These, despite covering an aggregate area of slightly over 1100 square miles, are headquartered within 15 miles of each other. Cooperation on the Growth Deal aside, they are broadly autonomous from each other. Efforts to overcome competition between councils for investment, etc. have met limited success. Money is good, clearly, but the real hope may lie in the ambition and initiative in Ayrshire's business and third sectors.

Based in Kilmarnock, the charity "Centrestage" aims to bring communities together through the creative arts, tackling food poverty and opening up opportunities for everyone. Its latest venture is "Centrestage Village", which will bring all its services together under one roof – that of a former Kilmarnock school, transferred from East Ayrshire Council. The project, made possible substantial government and other grant funding, will be a purpose-designed hub, open to all.

On a smaller scale, two villages have taken the idea of a community hub and gone in very different, but equally successful, directions.

When the last pub in Dunlop came up for sale, local residents banded together and secured funding from various grants to buy it. It now operates (suspended, naturally, by coronavirus) successfully as a café / pub / restaurant with its profits reinvested in the village. Plans are well underway to convert unused parts of the building into a space for the whole community.

In Ochiltree, when the council marked the village hall for closure, residents did a deal with the council for the site and proceeded to raise close to £2million through a combination of local fundraising and national grants to create a purpose built hub with a hall, café, and meeting space. Since opening last year, it's rapidly become the heart of the community.

These are just a few examples of the increasing number of local initiatives using public and private funding to turn around local lives and communities.

In the private sector too, there are success stories that deserve greater recognition than they receive.

One small manufacturer in Mauchline, Kays Curling, is responsible for almost every Olympic grade curling stone in the world.

Wherever you are in the UK, there's a reasonable chance your local fire service has a fire engine that came off the production line of Emergency One in Cumnock.

Even the Harry Potter fanatics among you may not know that the Hogwarts uniforms worn by the cast in all the films were made by Lochaven International in Stewarton. They still make licensed versions that are sold around the world.

These examples were news to me, and would be to much of the local population. That seems wrong, and represents a failure of imagination, if not pride, by those responsible for keeping Ayrshire in the public, and commercial, consciousness. There is, bluntly, more to Ayrshire than "Rabbie Burns was here".

My final example is a unique third sector project, which (more or less) has it all. Charitable conservation, education, environmental initiatives, private sector investment – and royalty.

Situated just outside Cumnock, the Dumfries House Estate, famously saved from sale by Prince Charles, is now the home of his Prince's Foundation. Its operations combine heritage, education, teaching traditional skills, health and wellbeing to transform the fortunes of the area. The restored estate has created jobs and training opportunities for locals and attracted tourists to the area. Over time, the project expanded to include the neighbouring town of New Cumnock, restoring the town hall and the town's outdoor pool, which now attracts swimmers from the local area and as far afield as Glasgow.

Even if few other communities in Scotland are likely to have the good fortune to have the support of a member of the Royal Family, or access to the financial doors that such support opens, Dumfries House demonstrates what's achievable through innovative thinking and making the most of local assets.

So what does the future look like for somewhere like Ayrshire post-COVID?

Personally, I suspect that for most of us, the new normal will look a lot like the old normal. That said, we should be rather more sceptical of those who say "it'll never work". It wasn't that long ago that we were told that remote consultations with clients, or patients, wasn't practical. Employers who clung onto the culture of "if you aren't in the office at your desk then you aren't working" were proved wrong.

For our rural and/ or less thought of communities though, many of the big ideas sound optimistic, even glib. Calls to make use of local shops and services contrast with the reality of hollowed out high streets and local services centralised in the biggest towns. Working from home may be an option – as long as you have a desk-based job, a decent internet connection and good mobile signal. It also assumes that you have the technical skills and access to suitable IT in your home – probably a given for more affluent households but far less so elsewhere.

Put simply, the long-term challenges of poor health, education and housing in rural Ayrshire will not benefit from the introduction of e-scooters.

So, while COVID has shone the light on this other social distance, the way to do something about it isn't necessarily grand ideas "for Scotland". We should learn the lessons of our local success stories, and bring together public funds and private initiatives, to support communities finding their own solutions for their particular challenges.

This is true, I suggest for many parts of Scotland. The pandemic has shown us new ways of doing things, and demonstrated the (literally) deadly consequences of continuing neglect.

For all that "We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns", that's not an argument for assuming that one size fit all. The opportunities for local solutions are clear.

James Corbett is Communications Manager for a Member of the Scottish Parliament. He is writing in a personal capacity.

We must not fail the lockdown generation – Jack McConnell

Originally posted 12 June 2020

Imagine if the First Minister and Health Secretary had announced in March, in response to covid-19, that they would allocate some extra money over the next couple of years, local Health Boards should discuss how best to treat some patients for some days of the week, and it will all work out ok over time. There would have been an outcry, maybe even riots in the streets. So why is this the response to the crisis facing our children and their education? And why does anyone think it is acceptable?

I taught high school Mathematics in the 1980s when Scotland's industrial base collapsed and the economy changed. That generation of children was left to hang and we still live with the consequences today. Many found it hard to keep down a proper job, addiction rates increased, health declined, and these problems were then passed on generation to generation. Their lives were damaged and that impacted the lives of their children and grandchildren, and of course wider society. We must not allow this to happen again.

Governments in Holyrood and Westminster have mobilised a phenomenal national effort to protect health and save jobs over the past 3 months, but just weeks away from Scotland's traditional school holidays the ambition for education coming out of lockdown is woeful.

Home based learning has widened the gaps between those who have and those who do not. Despite the hard work of those teachers who have been working, thousands have missed out completely and most others have had only a small sample of their normal learning experience. Children and young people have been separated from their peers and from other adults beyond their parents or carers. For 12 weeks, there have been no sports clubs or organised group activities. The impact on mental health and educational development will be felt for many years to come.

Mobilising the resources, people, facilities and equipment required is not easy. But it was done for health and jobs in a few weeks. It should have been in place for education as lockdown started to ease, but it is not too late. Part time learning starting 8 weeks from now is just not good enough. The time for leadership on this has come.

We need a national plan of action. We need the Education Secretary and First Minister to lead, with the Scottish Government and 32 Education Authorities working flat out towards the same goals. The objective should be to have every Scottish child in an organised learning environment every day by mid August. And the ambition should be to have closed the gaps for the most vulnerable created by lockdown before the end of the year.

The educational gaps that were already in place have been exacerbated by the lockdown. I salute the work done by teachers and heads to address this – and I have spoken to dozens about the issue in recent weeks – but those gaps have increased and current plans do not provide enough answers to tackle this.

Unless action is taken right now, mobilising resources in the same way that they were mobilised for health and mobilised to save jobs, then these children will come back to school months behind their classmates in curriculum alone. They will find it harder to reintegrate, and will slip even further behind.

To protect health and save jobs, new facilities have been created or converted and staff have been transferred from other duties. Clear priorities have been set. By waiting until August, we will have missed the best chance to use outdoor spaces in the better weather, and I still hope that decision can be reversed. But other options will still exist, and surely having children in an organised safe environment every school day, all day, is better than leaving them to study or stagnate at home. Teachers could target their time on those who have fallen behind and managing the weekly learning plan; and a combination of staff transferred from other areas, retired teachers, volunteers and students in training could supervise and support those learning on-line in an organised site rather than at home. It is not 'too difficult' as I was told this week. It needs imagination, determination and political will. Not only would such a plan, delivered with clarity and urgency, avoid a generation of 'Covid kids' falling further behind, but it would help tackle the significant mental health problems that are developing, and help parents get back to work. It would be win, win, win. But most of all, it is the least our children deserve.

Rt Hon Lord Jack McConnell was MSP for Motherwell & Wishaw 1999-2011 and First Minister of Scotland 2001-2007

We didn't vote for it but there may be Opportunity for Scotland in the Brexit Bùrach – Stephen Gethins

Originally posted 15 June 2020

Dominic Cummings is fond of telling London-based journalists they need to get out of the Metropolitan bubble to find out what people really think. It isn't bad advice, often views are formed in capitals that are out of touch with the rest of the country. It is one of the reasons why politicians value time spent chapping doors in their constituencies. It gives you a feel for what is happening that you just can't get from debates, newspapers or even blogs for think tanks.

Ultimately the disconnect between Westminster politics in London and the population it serves was one of the reasons some believe England and Wales voted to leave the European Union. There is some irony, however, that if Mr Cummings had kept driving on his recent visit to Barnard Castle he would have reached Scotland. Here he could have benefitted from both a free eye test and gained a better understanding of a part of the UK that feels both pro-European and disconnected from the political bubble at Westminster.

The EU Referendum results in Scotland, taken in context with what happened elsewhere in the UK, were striking. Voters had backed the EU by a margin of almost two to one with every single local authority area backing Remain, including those that had voted against the EEC in the 1975 plebiscite. The results have transformed politics across the UK and exacerbated the political divergence in these islands. Polling at the weekend showed that almost one in five No voters now back Independence and the SNP's poll ratings remain high as it comes to the end of an already unprecedented third term.

Those results have not gone unnoticed elsewhere. The mood music towards Scotland in the European institutions and in Member State capitals has changed. There is now an understanding and sympathy towards Scotland that didn't exist in 2014 or in the years when I lived in Brussels during the noughties. Across Europe politicians have expressed solidarity with Scotland, including prominent figures from across the political divide in Madrid.

That sympathy for Scotland in the aftermath of the 2016 vote has not dissipated and if anything has grown stronger given the debacle that passed for decision-making at Westminster in the years after the EU Referendum. All of that could be as nothing with the reputational damage that will be done if many around the Prime Minister get their way and we leave the EU without a deal at the end of this year.

This slash and burn approach would be catastrophic for everyone who relies on that important relationship. There will be a particularly sore impact on smaller businesses and opportunities for young people. It is an economic and social calamity from which it is difficult to see an upside and it is telling that many of those who backed leaving the

EU, including the Prime Minister, have failed to set out any tangible benefits of their plans.

In the face of such recklessness there is a palpable sense of frustration. It was easy to sympathise with former Labour first minister Henry McLeish when he called for Nicola Sturgeon to approach the EU to ask for a Scotland-only extension. The truth is however that the Commission deals with Member States. Michel Barnier has always been clear, in public and private, that as sympathetic as he might be the Commission deals with sovereign Member States. The same goes for Scotland. There may be huge sympathy for us but until Scotland is independent its position is an 'internal matter' for the United Kingdom. An extension would require acquiescence and compromise from London towards Edinburgh and Brussels. This seems highly unlikely.

As difficult as the situation is for many of us, could this European goodwill be turned into an opportunity? Scotland is unusual in the UK in its relative political cohesion when it comes to the question of Europe. At a time when Westminster ground to a standstill in the aftermath of the EU referendum there was remarkable consensus in Holyrood around remaining in the Single Market and Customs Union at least. The Scottish Government's approach, in bringing together a group of politicians and inter-disciplinary experts to draft *"Scotland's Place in Europe"*, helped take the debate forward here at a time of partisan stalemate in the Commons.

The broad consensus across political and civic life, along with the goodwill generated across Europe, could provide an opportunity. We know we are entering one of the most difficult economic periods that most of us will ever have experienced. Every single sector has a role to play in building the recovery. All of this comes at a time we face *"the triple challenge to Scotland of a health pandemic, an economic recession and a No-deal Brexit,"* as Mr McLeish told The National.

Scotland has a unique and possibly beneficial role to play here. As a pro-European part of the UK we can help re-build those links and position ourselves as a bridge between the UK and the rest of Europe. The Scottish Government can build on the goodwill it has generated by increasing its footprint in the EU. Scotland House is a first-class resource and even at a time of shrinking budgets Ministers should consider further beefing up their presence. The German Lander and other devolved administrations have significant presences in Brussels.

This is not a job for the Scottish Government alone. Local authorities, universities, business, the arts and others have a role to play in building and maintaining those relationships. Scotland House in Brussels is a good model for this, housing the offices of the Scottish Government and others whose aim is to work on *"diplomatic engagement, economic development and cultural promotion*".

There is also work to be done in the Member States themselves. Scottish universities for instance have long-standing links with partners, such as that between the Universities of St Andrews and Bonn. Similarly, Scottish business will be able to make use of a national brand that many recognise as being pro-European and an entry point into UK markets.

No-one should doubt the damage that the UK has done to itself in key European markets as a result of the decision to leave the EU and perhaps more so by the way it has been handled since. Scotland has a role to play in re-building that shattered relationship. We could provide a safe space between the EU and rest of the UK and an opportunity for business and the education sector, and for greater diplomatic clout at a government level.

Scotland may not, yet, have the resources of a sovereign Foreign Office or a seat at the top table in Brussels. It does have distinctive branding, a presence and, crucially, the political will to maintain those EU links.

The coming years will be difficult and Brexit will make it more so. There are no easy answers or tartan roadblocks that can be put in the way of Dominic Cummings' plans. Put simply, Scotland will not get an extension if London isn't on board. We can however pull together as a pro-European nation and start building a bridge to Europe.

In the immediate term the Scottish Government could start by pulling together key figures from across the political divide and civic society to look at how Scotland uses the levers at its disposal to build those links. At a time of limited resources it also needs to maintain and strengthen the Scotland House network that will be central to that work. Education, business, the third sector and the arts all have a role to play here in working across Europe and reaching out to counterparts in the UK to help them re-build from Brexit, and also to put Scotland at the heart of the relationship between the two. Even without Independence there is already much that we can do.

Stephen Gethins is a Professor of Practice at the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews and former Spokesperson on Foreign Affairs and Europe for the SNP in the House of Commons

‘Blended learning’ or ‘part-time schooling’? – Keir Bloomer

Originally posted 16 June 2020

Schools in Scotland are to re-open for pupils in mid-August using ‘blended learning’. This new piece of jargon is a potentially misleading attempt to suggest that more will be on offer than part-time attendance at school.

There is no suggestion that blended learning is something positive. It is not, for example, a sign that something has been learned from the period of home-based schooling during lockdown. Rather, the need for it lies in the government’s decision that schools will re-open with social distancing still in place. If pupils are to be kept at least two metres apart, the capacity of the classroom will be drastically reduced. The number of pupils who can be in school at any one time will be limited. Therefore, the length of time any individual pupil can be in school has to be shorter than would otherwise be the case. In short, part-time schooling is a consequence of social distancing.

It is, therefore, worth considering whether distancing is either necessary or feasible. It seems almost self-evident that social distancing in schools cannot be entirely successful. Small children will forget and will have no clear idea of the distance involved. Disaffected teenagers are no more likely to obey this rule than any other. It is likely that distancing measures may reduce the amount of close contact in schools, but they will certainly not totally eliminate it.

Children are apparently not particularly prolific spreaders of the disease. Those who are infected are overwhelmingly likely to suffer only mild symptoms, if any. Social distancing is, therefore, about protecting adults rather than children. This applies most obviously to adults working in schools, particularly teachers. However, there is also concern about children bringing the disease back home with them or, less probably, spreading it to others with whom they come into contact.

The government has decided that the risks involved in re-opening schools without distancing are unacceptably large. It may have deluded itself that it is possible to ensure successful distancing in the school setting. If this is the case, the assessment of the risks involved in re-opening is inaccurate. Alternatively, government may be aware that distancing will meet with only limited success but have decided that the risk is, nevertheless, acceptable. If this is the case, I do not think that the information is widely available or understood.

It is understandable that, when the virus first became known, there was panic, even among governments, and a belief that the only risks to be taken seriously into consideration were those relating to the disease. In other words, decisions had to be taken in the interest of reducing those risks, even if was likely or even certain that other kinds of risk would be incurred. We are surely past that stage now. Governments have to be in the business of evaluating and balancing risks.

We know that continued school closure will damage the educational prospects of young people. We know that the already disadvantaged will suffer most and that the attainment gap is widening. We know that children's socialisation is being set back and that an increasing number will suffer mental health problems. We know that domestic abuse is increasing. The list goes on.

These are not reasons for ignoring risks of a resurgence of the epidemic, but they are reasons to compare the various kinds of risk and engage in an adult dialogue with the public on the merits and demerits of different courses of action. This is not currently much in evidence.

Should government decide that schools can re-open only if social distancing is in place, it then has a duty to try to make a success of blended learning. This will call for much more effective national strategies than have been put in place so far. Over the past three months many schools have been enterprising in their efforts to support learning at home. They have not received effective support in turn. It would be very difficult to portray experience so far as offering an encouraging precedent for the new world of blended learning.

Face-to-face teaching enables interaction which is a vital part of learning. Good electronic communication can offer interaction too although those of us now accustomed to Zoom are familiar with its limitations. Nevertheless, it would be possible to imagine an approach using a reduced amount of time in the classroom supported by whole class, small group or even individual teaching through electronic means. If such an approach were to operate equitably, more would have to be done to ensure the availability of equipment of good quality in homes currently without. Even this would not overcome such problems as poor wifi connections.

There would also be a huge issue of human resources. Schools are currently able to put teacher time into contacting pupils, issuing tasks, giving feedback and so forth because little, if any, time is taken up by normal class contact. That will not be the case after August. Indeed, very small classes will mean that the teaching resource will be spread even more thinly. Who, then, is to give the additional support that blended learning will require? The Commission on School Reform suggested nearly three months ago the recruitment of an army of online tutors from among retired teachers, students and the like. The idea was predictably dismissed by conservative and self-interested groups within the Scottish educational establishment – but its time may come.

Until and unless these strategic issues are addressed seriously, we may as well give 'blended learning' its proper title – part-time schooling.

Keir Bloomer is chair of the Commission on School Reform

The need for educational data – Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 17 June 2020

The Scottish government announced a few days ago that no data would be collected this year on children's progress and attainment in primary schools and early secondary. The Educational Institute of Scotland, the main trade union of teachers, welcomed this as a helpful step.

This suspicion of statistics in the Scottish educational establishment is not a sudden symptom of Covid-19. The range and depth of statistical information on Scottish education has been contracting for two decades. The present Scottish government, to their credit, had been showing some signs of understanding how serious the absence is, through their introduction of the new Scottish National Standardised Assessments. But they incurred thereby the wrath of the people who truly run Scottish schools – the quangoes, the lobbying groups, the utterly conservative trade unions. Whatever their private views, there was no way that Scottish ministers were going to insist on the collection of data during the present emergency.

Let's for a moment, therefore, indulge in a dystopic fantasy to grasp the sheer scale of this obfuscation, a statistical elaboration of Jack McConnell's speculation in a Reform Scotland blog last week. Let's suppose that Scottish health statistics were treated in the same way as the Scottish educational establishment has been regarding educational measurement.

1. We would not know how many people normally contract respiratory illnesses, and so we would not know if this year was any different at all. All we would have would be doctors' judgement of whether each of their patients seemed less well than they should be. [Even in normal times, Scotland has no routine monitoring of pupils' attainment by objective standards, only a summary of teacher judgements.]

2. If someone died this spring and summer with a mysterious respiratory illness, we would not know whether that was because of the illness or because of their parents or because of their neighbourhood or because of their genes. [For a child's progress in a specific school year, no set of Scottish educational data separates the contribution of the school from the contribution of the parents. No routine data allow a distinction to be drawn between inequality due to the family and inequality due to the neighbourhood. And no-one in the Scottish educational establishment will even begin to talk about genetics, despite Scottish researchers being among the world experts in the complex ways in which genes interact with the environment to influence our behaviour.]

3. If someone was admitted to hospital with this mysterious respiratory illness, the doctors could not find out what the previous state of their lungs had been. If the person stayed in hospital for more than a day, the successive shifts of nurses and doctors would not know what had happened to the patient during previous shifts. If the patient developed

secondary infections, there would be no way of assessing whether doing that was common among people admitted at around the same time. [No aspect of a pupil's progress through Scottish schools is tracked longitudinally over time, unlike in England which has been doing this for more than a decade. It may be that the new Scottish National Standardised Assessments will eventually allow this, but the present crisis has put paid to that for many years.]

4. If a hospital was particularly successful at dealing with the mysterious infection, there would be no way of knowing whether this was because of the skill of the staff, the prior health of the catchment area, or luck. [The Scottish government refuses to publish data on schools in a way that can inform valid comparisons. For three decades, the Scottish answer to the challenge that publishing only a few statistics on schools can be misleading is to publish none at all. This would be analogous to a hospital's not publishing data on recovery rates from Covid-19 because they did not routinely publish recovery rates from anything. That would be witch-doctor levels of obscurantism.

5. In this year of economic meltdown, mental-health collapse, and the chaos of children's education, we would know nothing about whether these deliberately induced catastrophes had in fact bought some amelioration of the health crisis that is at the core of it all. We would have no statistical information on the number of Covid-19 cases, the length of patients' stay in hospital, the possible side-effects after recovery, or deaths. [That's where this blog started: the Scottish government has decided not to collate any statistical data on children's attainment and progression this year.]

Given the complacency of every aspect of the Scottish governing class – not just in education, but seemingly on everything – it's difficult to be optimistic that the end of the Covid-19 crisis will lead to anything better. But two smidgeons of hope are just about possible. One is that the health dystopia imagined here has not come about. We do have health statistics. They are published independently of government and of providers (hospitals, doctors, nurses). The debate in the last three months has not been whether to publish them, but how to make sure that what is published is valid. Maybe the analogy with education will be cogent.

The other source of optimism is that we are not an island. One aspect of human activity that will probably have risen in status as a result of the global crisis is proper science – real, well-designed, evidence-based, hard evidence. And central to that has been numbers. Everyone can see that statistics have been crucial to understanding and tackling the epidemic. The global pressure for statistical measurement is therefore likely to increase. Scotland would surely not be so parochial as to resist an international movement of that kind. Would it?

Lindsay Paterson is Professor of Education Policy, Edinburgh University and a member of Reform Scotland's Commission on School Reform.

A new relationship between government, business and the not-for-profit sector – Karen Betts

Originally posted 18 June 2020

The first duty of any government is to protect its citizens. In the weeks since lockdown, the Scottish Government's energies have rightly been focussed on supressing the coronavirus infection, treating those in need of medical care and protecting vulnerable people. As a result, Scotland is now seeing a sustained decline in infectious cases.

However, there's been an economic price to pay – and very likely we will continue to pay this until there is a proven vaccine or treatment for COVID-19 since, until then, at least some measure of social distancing will need to remain in place. So there will be no quick return to pre-lockdown 'normal' for society or the economy. Three months on from the start of lockdown in the UK and the damage is already becoming clear, with job losses announced in a number of sectors which look likely to be followed by more.

We don't know what the economic outlook looks like. Will the recovery be V-shaped, U-shaped or a Nike swoosh? How long will any recession last, and how deep will it run? What will it mean for key sectors of Scotland's economy – for everything from higher education to oil & gas, whisky to tourism? What will this mean for Scotland's micro-firms, for SMEs and for large businesses? What does recovery look like and can we 'build back better'?

These are the toughest questions, to which there are no easy answers or instant solutions. Scotland had economic strengths and weaknesses going into the crisis. It's likely that the weaknesses will be exacerbated by the crisis and that inequalities – health, income, education, gender, ethnicity and opportunity – will rise. We'll need to retain and boost our strengths alongside the right policy and practical interventions to protect those hit by economic hardship. We'll need to look to the future, understand where our economy is headed, and take decisions and make choices which shape or alter this direction to ensure we emerge with as strong an economy as possible that creates opportunities for everyone.

Grappling with this will be hard. We'll need to learn from the past, develop ideas fit for today, and see them through all the way to effective delivery. In my sector, hospitality and tourism particularly concerns us. Pubs, bars, restaurants, hotels and visitor attractions provide jobs and careers in particular for many young people and for those who need flexible employment – and these are the people who show the world what a great place Scotland is, to live in, work in, study in and visit. What will happen if these businesses cannot survive what could well be three consecutive 'economic' winters? We need a strategy for the sector and for those who work in it, to see it re-emerge with vibrancy and ambition.

The extraordinary challenges we are being presented with across the board will require extraordinary solutions – no region, town or sector is unaffected. Unemployment is going to go up; GDP is going to go down; international commerce has fallen to its lowest

levels in four years and is likely to continue to drop. I believe that, across Scotland, this calls for a new relationship between business, government and the not-for-profit sector. These challenges are bigger than any of us and none of us has the ability to find lasting solutions alone; but if we can harness our collective strengths we may actually be able to mitigate the impacts of the coronavirus, and by collaborating we may actually be able to 'build back better'.

Even done well, this won't be easy. It will take time and effort. It will require government to reach into the business community and encourage those who do not normally engage with government to do so. It will require business people to come forward and offer their skills and experience, even when they are flat-out keeping their heads above water and protecting employment. It will require the not-for-profit sector to reach out to new contacts in different ways, rethinking what they can do and inculcating a better, broader understanding of the critical role that they play. There will be different ways of cutting it, but government should act first and fast to create the space for this new kind of interaction; which could be sector by sector and/or issue by issue (and, on issues, skills tops the list). I believe that an open call for all hands on deck would be well-received, with a focus on what everyone can bring to the table and what can be delivered in the short and medium term.

If this pandemic is going to teach us something, the importance of the public, private and not-for-profit sectors genuinely working together in partnership would be a good place to start.

Karen Betts is Chief Executive of the Scotch Whisky Association

Folding DfID into Foreign Office is retrograde step towards isolation – Ricky Ross

Originally posted 19 June 2020

It's hard enough to get people agitated about the amalgamation of Whitehall departments in ordinary times. That the Department for International Development's folding into the Foreign Office took place on the same day a young footballer trounced the government on its school meals policy, as well as the launch of a miracle Covid-19 treatment, helped relegate this important news to near the bottom of the pile. That it occurred while we're trying to fix a global pandemic was, in the words of Rafael Behr in The Guardian, a little like "Denis Healey's maxim that the moment to remove a man's appendix is not when he is busy carrying a piano up a flight of stairs."

There's no doubt that sensible foreign-policy watchers are appalled. Here's former ambassador and Associate Fellow at Chatham House, John Casson: "Merging DfID into the Foreign Office risks squandering and vandalising the national asset, not unleashing it, and at a time when the pandemic will push at least 60 million people into extreme poverty."

Let me explain why I agree. I first travelled on a development visit in 1998. On that occasion I went with Christian Aid to see the work they were supporting with the landless movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra or MST) in Brazil. It was a life-changing visit for me, and about 15 years later I was given the chance to return to see how things were progressing. The MST are not without controversy. On my second visit my kind hosts (friends from Scotland) were visibly appalled that I should be visiting and supporting the landless people. To these prosperous citizens MST were a threat to civil society, and they had a good point. Social movements in South America are a thorn in the flesh of the establishment; they are born out of struggle and continue to exist often because political change has not offered any real progress in living standards for those at the bottom end of the economic scale.

So Christian Aid Scotland supported many groups that sought to gain access to undeveloped land, despite some of that endeavour involving "illegal" occupations on land technically owned, but nevertheless neglected, by absentee, wealthy landlords. It's not hard to imagine that the interests of a development agency and the FCO could well be at odds in this scenario. Multiply that into the many countries supported by DfID and unpromising scenario emerges. Development at its heart seeks not just to offer a sticking plaster to countries suffering from natural disasters, epidemics or famine – it is also there to offer citizens of developing nations the opportunity to act for themselves.
I first went to Brazil with Christian Aid worker, Eildon Dyer. This week I asked her to reflect on the implications of the UK Government's recent decision. She said: "These are the sorts of organisations that can and do make changes through British aid money and without strings attached. It would be a tragedy to stop or withhold financial support from organisations like this, which is likely to be a consequence of this merger."

Earlier this year my wife, Lorraine McIntosh, and I were part of a group who visited the Democratic Republic of Congo to see the work SCIAF are doing in South Kivu. This is an area rich in minerals, where almost all of the wealth that should be channelled back into the local economy is being syphoned off by illegal armed gangs who control the area through a brutal regime of sexual violence.

I asked Douglas Alexander, the former Labour International Development Secretary and also an ex-Foreign Office minister, to reflect on the end of DfID, based on what he knew of working in both departments. "Boris Johnson's decision owes more to populist politics than foreign policy," he told me. "Labour established DfID as an independent Cabinet department with a laser-like focus on poverty reduction. That clarity of purpose has helped deliver the UK its global leadership on development. Having served in both FfID and the FCO, I appreciate that diplomacy and development both really matter… they're just not the same thing."

What is a priority for DfID will not necessarily be an ambition shared by the FCO, where the history of 'tied aid' was often seen as a controlling influence holding countries back instead of allowing them to progress. Douglas reminded me how Labour's decision to separate the FCO and DfID in 1997 was a direct counter to the corruption of the Pergau Dam scandal in the late 80s, when the dam (which Malaysia didn't need) was financed with the money of British taxpayers in order to secure a major arms deal.

On our trip to DRC it was the Church there who were taking up much of the challenge of improving the lives of women affected by years of abuse caused by armed militias. The money SCIAF raised in this year's Lenten campaign was Aid Matched by DfID and meant every pound raised in Scotland was doubled. Time after time we saw where this money had been spent and heard stories and songs of celebration by women who had been on the receiving end of the assistance already given under UK Aid Match. How will these important projects be affected by Monday's restructuring decision? Here's SCIAF's director, Alistair Dutton: "Aid, which has the purpose of providing humanitarian assistance and reducing extreme poverty, must not be made subordinate to foreign policy, the purpose of which is to promote British interests. The two departments serve two very different purposes and the merger will mean that our delivery of international development aid and our response to humanitarian crises will no longer be independent of our foreign and commercial policies."

You might well think Alistair is bound to view the matter this way, but listen too to the voice of a recent Conservative International Development Secretary, Rory Stewart: "Most British diplomats lack the experience and skills to manage £100 million development programs. DfID staff have no background in traditional diplomacy. Trying to pretend these two very different organisations are one, damages both."

We are capable of making a real and lasting difference to people across the world who can most use our advice, aid and investment. Like so many recent decisions made by 10 Downing Street, the decision to dilute the work of an important government department is insular, short-term and antithetical to a modern, international country. Rather than increasing our influence it's yet another retrograde step towards isolation.

Ricky Ross is a musician and activist

A Brave New World: Modest and Pragmatic – David Ross

Originally posted 22 June 2020

What will the cities of the future be like? It's an intriguing question and one which – of all the professionals involved in the creation of our built environment – architects are best placed to respond to. Imagining the future is a pastime which all designers indulge in. It is usually supported by other media which has considered the issue for its own ends. Films such as Metropolis, Blade Runner, The Fifth Element or Brazil are traditionally favourites of many architects because of a vivid depiction of a type of future-city which technological advances underpin. As visually interesting and provocative as they are though, the urban cityscapes in such films invariably utilise a utopian vision of mankind's future as an additional character to propel the plot. As such the focus is often on how technology is likely to triumph over basic aspects of reality such as gravity or the natural rhythm of the seasons.

But there are currently more straightforward explanations for the architect's interest in the future. As students we were encouraged to understand how things have been and to analyse how they are now, to explore how they might be. This is the essence of design process, but it also recognises that architecture has been a relatively slow-moving art which must be in tune with socio-economic developments and cultural nuances for its perpetual redrafting of our desired environment. This being the case, and in an acknowledgement of a view that people make places and not the other way around, any assessments of the future have usually started with the individual and how lifestyles may need to adapt to the premonitory signs and resultant pragmatic trends that are becoming more prevalent.

The global Covid-19 pandemic has turned much of our traditional analytical approaches and market-trend touchstones upside down. Where the commerce of collaboration and connection once drove the type of spaces we wanted to be in, fear of contamination now controls them. Previously buoyant sectors – hospitality, workplace, student residencies, transportation – are facing hugely complex challenges as an unsurprising consequence. Where modernism drove the desire for open, airy, functional emptiness, the requirements of quarantine are primarily defensive and cellular.

There is an unusual paradox in all of this: 'Stay At Home, Stay Safe' suggests wide-open spaces are to be avoided, yet it's undoubtedly safer to be outside – still appropriately distanced from others – in a natural environment, than indoors in a man-made one. The psychological impact of the first six months of 2020 is likely to be long-lasting. When faced with working from home, the perception of personal safety that will have offered for those able to do so will take a long time to break down. The fear will eventually dissipate. We are species that craves contact with others; to be creative, to be stimulated, to love, to laugh, to celebrate, to grieve, to protest, and, yes, sometimes to fight. All are essential and necessary means of human expression. An environment in which these things can return as before is a universally shared ambition, even if currently difficult to imagine. However, architects are – sometimes, to a fault – optimistic dreamers. As a profession we evaluate problems in the wide context where

we find them and explore solutions that overcome not only those known problems, but anticipated ones that may emerge out of new phenomena.

The clues to assist the search for a future lifestyle are evident in the changing climatic conditions worldwide. The way we receive information and communicate with each other are obvious examples of the rapid pace of change. The socially inclusive rules of our society have become attitudes and values by which organisations are now measured. On a more localised level, they can also be found in the developing components of how our lives are slowly changing. In the way we learn, in the way we work, in the way we shop, in the various ways in which we relax and in the ways in which we are treated if we are ill. None of these human needs or desires will diminish as a result of a pandemic; we will merely find different ways of achieving them.

It should be argued that the dramatic change in our climate remains the predominant phenomena of our era. Regular catastrophic flooding from rising water levels is being experienced everywhere from Australia to Brazil, from South West Asia to South West England. These occurrences are not happening once in every two hundred years anymore. With the human capacity for adaptation to changing circumstances, perhaps far less of our new buildings in high risk areas will contain basements and more will be constructed on stilts?

Less obvious effects of the need for a more ecologically sustainable future could see the emphasis on transportation infrastructure reduced. Covid-19 has forced us to be more local, less regional and far less global in our physical movements. If technology can allow people to work globally but without the direct need for travel, then it might be argued that a better work/life balance will be the future aspirational incentive for this, as opposed to the current perception of it being forcibly applied.

More time spent productively and with family, versus increasing time spent log-jammed on the country's overstretched motorways? Less overhead costs for those organisations fortunate enough to have the choice. Consequently, new estates comprised of multitudes of small pitched-roof shoeboxes and very little else, aimed at the travel-orientated nuclear family, might also gradually disappear under these circumstances.

A necessary increase in convenience purchasing via the internet will eventually influence the type of retail establishments that are required. They might get smaller becoming more general, more independent and more community-orientated. Our patterns of relaxation are also certain to change, with leisure pursuits becoming more locally focused as our new communities attempt to become more self-sufficient. Localised energy budgeting, generation, consumption and measurement suggests less nationalisation of employment. Extending this argument to wider community services begins to point to models of Scandinavian living in the form of examples such as Hammarsby in Sweden. It would be difficult to argue that the standard of living and the resultant reduced levels of crime experienced by that community do not have some universal attraction.

As our Learning aspirations also change and we seek safe educational establishments which can contribute more to the communities they are a central part of, these buildings

also need to respond to the challenges of social interaction. Smaller classrooms, especially for younger children, have long been an educational aspiration but a difficult political target. Covid-19 responses are likely to be prioritised towards the adaptation of existing facilities to achieve precisely that. Long-term vocational need rather than being predominantly focused on the demonstration of acquired knowledge through an antiquated examination process may yet be an unexpected beneficial outcome.

Similarly, if logic tells us that people will spend less time in hospital in future as fully invasive procedures become less reliant on long-term observed recovery, the drive towards community-based Health & Wellbeing will surely become more desirable. Who will spend time recuperating in general hospital beds if complex cardiac and neurological treatment can be given laparoscopically, where the surgeon and his team might not even be in the same room as the patient? Especially if that recuperation can be proven to be more effective when centred on the patient's natural desire to be at home. Should the future of retained urban healthcare estates therefore lie in their regenerative transformation into care villages providing us with safe, protected accommodation as we live longer past retirement?

With an economic downturn looming, many in public sector organisations will be faced with retention, maintenance and refurbishment of older buildings in a retained estate where previously the imperative to demolish and redevelop might have been less complex. I suspect most architects might welcome this shift in emphasis as breathing new life into old buildings and working within the constraints of an existing established fabric can often be more rewarding.

In the contradiction between the momentum of global developments and the wish for personal stability, safety and a comfort in the 'known', the aesthetic of the past also seems to promise an obvious way out of the dilemmas of the present. That is why sustainability in architecture is so closely associated with the way things have always been. After all, if such problems as environmental pollution, resource shortages and alienation from other people didn't exist before, why can't we simply go back to 'the good old days'?

The drive towards the future contains an ironic dilemma. How can we develop new and 'innovative' responses to design problems when the predominant phenomena of our age suggest that we look backward to a time when local materials were utilised in a sensible and natural manner, when mass was the major consideration in the conservation of energy, and patrons' expectations of budget were perhaps more attuned to their aspirations? Perhaps the answer lies in that often-used cliché: adaptability. If a large exhibition complex like the SEC in Glasgow can adapt to become the fully functioning NHS Louisa Jordan in just 23 days, and if our bedrooms and dining rooms can adapt to become spaces where we can productively and efficiently work, then our cities can also adapt to reclaim the streets and squares of 'outside space' for people. There's an old saying: 'only architects and prostitutes continually look upwards'. But now everyone's at it. With time and space and little else to do other than walk through our empty towns and city centres, many are discovering views, glimpses, vennels and dramatic skylines, reconnecting with a local environment that they had previously taken for granted. It isn't only Paul Simon seeing angels in the architecture anymore.

If our lifestyles are developing in a way where either through personal choice, technological development or moral/social exigent, a more community-orientated environment where people live, love, work and play in smaller, more self-supporting contexts which have diversity, hierarchy and character due to an appropriately considered mix of the old, the new, the ordinary and the special … then perhaps the future will resemble the past more than many of us might have been led to expect.

David Ross is an architect and writer.
He is a director of Keppie Design www.keppiedesign.co.uk

Job quality, fair work and Scottish working lives – Marek Zemanik

Originally posted 23 June 2020

As official statistics start revealing the extent of the economic crisis upon us – GDP falling, unemployment rising, claimant count increasing – policymakers, employers and employees are all looking at how to weather the coming storm. Naturally, there will be a significant focus on limiting the damage to the economy, ensuring a swift bounce-back and protecting people's jobs as much as possible. However, we at the CIPD believe that job quality must be a part of our recovery too.

Our organisation's purpose is to 'champion better work and working lives', so it would certainly be odd if we argued otherwise. But there are good reasons for why job quality is so important. Firstly, it matters to the wellbeing of individuals and society as a whole, with knock on impacts on, for example, health spending. Secondly, it is crucial for productive organisations and a strong economy. We are beginning to see research that shows a link between job quality and productivity, and issues around flexible working and work-life balance have suddenly shot up to the top of organisations' agendas during the pandemic.

The CIPD conducts a range of research in relation to job quality, but this year is the first year we have published a dedicated report for Scotland. *Working Lives Scotland* analyses employment essentials, the day-to-day experienced realities of work and the impacts on people's lives. It is written around the five fair work dimensions as conceptualised by the Fair Work Convention in Scotland: respect, security, opportunity, fulfilment and effective voice.

It analyses both objective and subjective measures as well as universal and relative aspects of work. This is important, because job quality is not static – what works for some employees will be anathema to others. Objective measures look at things that should be unbiased, for example, how much people earn or contractual arrangements. Subjective measures, on the other hand, include things that reflect opinions or feelings – meaningful work, job satisfaction or quality of relationships. In addition, we also look at measures that are universal and will improve job quality for anyone (e.g. health), but also at aspects that are relative and will differ between employees (e.g. part-time employment). To get an accurate picture of job quality we need to look at all of these in the round.

Working Lives Scotland is based on a YouGov survey conducted earlier this year, before the COVID-19 outbreak, but we already know from follow-up UK-wide research that some of the job quality indicators – especially around health and wellbeing, work-life balance or job security – have got even worse. Our hope is that these findings will help both organisations and policymakers to identify gaps and to shape the debate over public policy interventions and improved practice. There is a lot to unpick and certainly a lot to do.

The results suggest that job quality is not universal and there are trade-offs between elements of it. For example, while salary levels are a good indicator of job satisfaction,

some of the better paid occupational classes identify poorer work-life balance. We also see occupations with a higher incidence of poor mental health and others with poor physical health impacts – sometimes both. We also highlight differences in job quality elements by gender, age and disability. The full report is available here, but I will try and highlight some of the key findings – and what they might mean – across each chapter.
In the **Respect** chapter, we reveal that almost a third of employees feel their job is negatively impacting their mental health and a quarter say the same thing about their physical health. For some reported conditions, especially the likes of depression or anxiety, the majority of employees believe their work has been a contributory factor. Additionally, over half of all employees report going to work despite not feeling well enough to do so – feeling pressure to do so from themselves rather than their colleagues or managers. We also look at the availability of flexible working arrangements for Scottish employees and find significant gaps in provision, but also in uptake. As we enter a post-pandemic world, it will be increasingly important to be creative and, crucially, realise that working from home is only one amongst many types of flexible arrangements.

The **Security** chapter focuses primarily on pay, benefits and contracts. We find – rather unsurprisingly – that there is good correlation between life satisfaction and pay levels as well as job security and pay levels too. The findings also identify other differences between sectors, for example showing that public sector employees are reporting higher levels of job security. Looking at the difference between hours worked and desired hours of work, almost two thirds of employees report some levels of overwork. Only around 8% of employees say they would like to work at least 5h more per week than they are right now – although that is a figure we'll need to keep an eye on as we come out of the recession.

We also examine skills and career development opportunities. The **Opportunity** chapter shows that both personal and career development opportunities differ (often significantly) by gender, age, sector and occupational class. Women, for example, are much less likely to report good prospects for career advancement. We also know that caring responsibilities are still heavily gendered, so the gradual reopening of the economy and schools is likely to disproportionately negatively impact women. Evidence also suggests that employees with disabilities face unique challenges, such as higher levels of presenteeism and poorer relationships with managers.

Another important aspect of job quality is meaningful work and job design. The **Fulfilment** chapter finds that over a third of employees report their workload as too high in a normal week, although this does not differ considerably across occupational classes. We find, unsurprisingly, that employees in better paid jobs report higher levels of job autonomy and job complexity. We also identify a strong correlation between job satisfaction and meaningful work, with public sector employees more likely to feel they are in meaningful jobs. We also see evidence of over-qualification and skills under-utilisation, predominantly in the lower occupational classes – which can be an indication of labour market and skills development inefficiencies.

Lastly, the report highlights some interesting differences in voice channels in the **Effective Voice** chapter. Most importantly, we find that almost a fifth of employees

have no voice channels at work at all – including one-to-ones with managers or team meetings. It shows significant differences between the public and private sectors, broadly aligned with the differences between organisational size. The data suggests that while larger employers are more likely to put in place formal voice arrangements, they perform poorly in responding to feedback.

As the public policy conversation shifts to how to return to relative normality following a period of economic recession, we need to recognise that issues like employee wellbeing, work-life balance and job security are all terms that have quickly gained new layers of meaning and importance during the pandemic. *Working Lives Scotland* finds gaps and identifies areas of focus for improving job quality even before the COVID-19 outbreak. We all have a role to play in ensuring the next few months are not a step backwards.

Marek Zemanik is Senior Public Policy Adviser at CIPD Scotland, the professional body for HR and people development

Let Scotland borrow to meet the moment – Tom Arthur MSP

Originally posted 24 June 2020

A little over four years ago, as the age before Brexit drew to a close, the fifth elections to the Scottish Parliament were held. Along with the largest intake of new MSPs since 1999, Holyrood was set for an influx of new powers. While the majority of fiscal levers and social security spend would continue to be exercised at Westminster, the Scottish Parliament would gain significant, though incomplete, controls over income tax and social security.

Underpinning many of these new powers is the Fiscal Framework, agreed by the Scottish and UK Governments in February 2016. The framework seeks to reconcile greater fiscal autonomy for Scotland while retaining the longstanding Barnett Formula. This attempt to square the circle of Scotland's constitutional divide has produced a system of fiscal governance described by the OECD as "complex" and "largely untested". The inherent sophistication and novelty of approach taken within the framework was undoubtedly a factor in both governments agreeing that it should be reviewed following its first parliamentary term in use.

Ahead of the review in 2021, the Scottish Parliament's Finance and Constitution Committee has been closely monitoring how the framework is operating in practice. One area of concern has been the framework's opaque mechanisms, which create challenges in ensuring scrutiny and establishing political accountability. This concern was echoed by the OECD in their review of the Scottish Fiscal Commission (SFC), which stated that there is "limited public understanding" of how the framework operates. It should be noted, however, that any limits in understanding are not restricted to those beyond the Holyrood bubble, as evinced by the annual rounds of specious political commentary on blackholes, underspends and money cached in sofas.

Of more immediate concern are the rules restricting Scottish Government borrowing. With ministers required to deliver a balanced budget based on independent forecasts, it was recognised that taking on additional tax powers would directly expose public finances in Scotland to the caprices of forecast error. In mitigation, the framework provides for modest resource borrowing powers in addition to permitting the creation of a reserve fund of limited size and flexibility. The expectation was that these measures would enable ministers to manage divergence between forecasts and outturn at the reconciliation point, which takes place at a subsequent budget two years after the close of the financial year.

What has become increasingly evident is that these powers, however well intentioned, are insufficient. The SFC, the body charged with producing forecasts, including on income tax receipts, have indicated that forecast error of £500 million should not be regarded as particularly unusual. This is problematic.

The cap on annual resource borrowing for the Scottish Government is £300 million, some £200 million shy of what is needed to cover potential forecast error.

Consequently, even when fully deploying existing borrowing powers, it could routinely be the case that a shortfall could only be met with funds gained at the expense of public spending, either directly at the budget where reconciliation takes place or indirectly through diverting cash into reserve in previous years.

To compound matters, only a maximum of £250 million in resource spending may be drawn down from the reserve in any one year. Taken together with resource borrowing, the maximum theoretical flexibility available to the Scottish Government to manage forecast error is £550 million, which is below the expected income tax reconciliation due in the 2021/22 budget.

Given the mismatch between risk and means of mitigation, an expansion in resource borrowing limits and increased flexibility over the use of the reserve were likely to have been key asks of the Scottish Government ahead of the Fiscal Framework review. As we face repairing the economic damage sustained in responding to Covid-19, likely to be exacerbated by a no deal or 'low deal' Brexit, recalibrating the framework is now a matter of urgency.

A straightforward change that could be made to the framework, even on a temporary basis ahead of next year's full review, would be to enable the Scottish Government to borrow as required to cover any and all tax reconciliations in next year's budget. This would effectively waive the arbitrary £300 million annual limit currently in place. Additionally, the repayment period for resource borrowing could be increased from the current five years to between eight and 10 years, reducing budgetary pressure. A further change would be to repurpose the redundant cash management powers to provide additional support, while staying within the statutory limit for overall resource budgeting of £1.75 billion. Greater flexibility could also be gained by temporarily allowing for the transfer of unspent capital to resource within the existing budget.

These are relatively modest measures that should be able to command support across parties and the constitutional divide. They do not fundamentally alter the fiscal framework nor prejudge the outcome of its full review and they are certainly not a Trojan Horse for full fiscal autonomy. What they would do, however, is provide the Scottish Government with additional flexibility as we face the most significant economic crisis of the post-war era.

There is also a need to review capital borrowing powers. Getting beyond the immediate crisis and creating a sustainable, green and equitable economic recovery will require a huge fiscal stimulus. The Scottish Government's capital borrowing powers are not of the scale required to meet this historic challenge. Proposals to enhance Scotland's capital borrowing powers need to be considered seriously. One example would be to enable the Scottish Government to issue bonds so as to finance game-changing investment in key sectors, as suggested by former MSP Andrew Wilson. Others will have different ideas – however, doing nothing must not be an option.

As this eventful session of Parliament draws to a close, it's clear that existing borrowing powers represent only a start and as the OECD noted, the fiscal framework is "likely to continue to evolve." As with devolution more generally, Scotland's Fiscal Framework is

less of an event and more of a process. Confronted with the twin challenges of Covid-19 and Brexit, we must now accelerate that process.

Tom Arthur is SNP MSP for Renfrewshire South and a member of Holyrood's Finance and Constitution Committee

How can Scotland use policy to bridge the skills gap? – University of Edinburgh Economics Society

Originally posted 25 June 2020

Reform Scotland has been delighted to act as a mentor to a team of students from the University of Edinburgh Economics Society who carried out a research project into the skills gap in Scotland. The following article is a summary of the full report, which can be downloaded here. The authors of the report are: Clementine Crawford, Arran Thompson, William Hwang & Akbar Muminov.

This paper examines the skills gap in Scotland and suggests policy recommendations aimed to bridge the skills gap.

The skills gap describes the disjunction between the labour available and the skills demanded in the labour market. It is estimated that in 2018 the skills gap cost Scottish organisations approximately £352million. Furthermore it inhibits Scottish firms' ability to compete on a global scale.

To understand the skills gap and evaluate the policies which will be most effective it is useful to examine Scotland's demography. Scotland faces an ageing population. This has several consequences including the lack of workers to fill the demand for Scottish businesses and financial difficulty for the older population to support their lifestyle. Migration Minister Ben Macpherson summarised the challenge to Scotland in his statement in the official inquiry regarding the current immigration system:

"Scotland faces challenges relating to an ageing population and labour shortages, and the need to attract highly skilled labour in the knowledge economy. Brexit and the UK government are making this worse, as the UK looks increasingly insular and less attractive" (Scottish Government, 2019).

Migration is shown to have the greatest variance on population change and age structure particularly in Scotland. For this reason, migration based policies are popular in dealing with demographic crises. Immigration policy is not devolved in Scotland and therefore the responsibility of enacting immigration policy lies solely on the UK government. Suggestions of immigration policies which could be used to bridge the skills gap include – a reintroduction of the post-study work visa, language and employability support for international students as integration programs to retain international students.

The number of international students attending Scottish higher education institutions has increased significantly. This has a large positive impact on the Scottish economy in the form of increased revenue from university fees, accommodation costs and other consumption injected into the Scottish economy. This increasing significance of international students suggests an increasing scope for retention of young skilled workers who have much to contribute to the Scottish economy. Student retention is an area which must be examined when considering policies to bridge the skills gap. A study into the University of Edinburgh's graduating class of 2000 found only 21% of students

from out of Scotland had remained there 5 years after graduation compared to 70% of Scottish students (Bond, 2008). This further suggests that policy on student retention needs to be focused on students coming to higher education institutions from outside of Scotland. To stop university graduates from leaving the country many governments have adopted a mandatory service period after postgraduate studies/ apprenticeships. The Scottish Government has attempted to implement migration based policy to attract a working age migrants in the past running the 'Fresh Talent Initiative' from the summer of 2005 to encourage student immigration and settlement. Although this scheme only ran for three years before being overruled by UK government immigration policy. One of the main goals of the fresh talent initiative was "encouraging students at Scottish universities to stay in Scotland" in order to boost Scotland's high skilled working population.

Analysis of current and past economies from around the world reveal the common nature of the problem of skills gaps. Whilst for some countries, the challenge has consisted of an ageing population and for others a brain drain, the underlying goal of governments has been largely universal and twofold. Firstly, like Scotland, governments have looked to improve the quality of their labour by increasing the skills of the labour force. Secondly, governments have aimed to increase the presence of high skilled labour in the economy through immigration of foreigners and retention of locals.

It is clear that offering education and training schemes through apprenticeship schemes and higher educational institutions is an effective way of enhancing the skills available in the labour market. One of the most successful examples of the apprenticeship schemes is Switzerland's. Switzerland's youth unemployment has consistently been below 4%, as the country's apprenticeship scheme serves over two-thirds of its youth (Leybold-Johnson, 2020). Known as a dual education system, the program, in contrast to the purely academic university path, allows students to learn through a combination of work and class experiences. Scotland offers a similar system called the Modern Apprenticeship which provides youth with the opportunity to earn and learn. First implemented in the 1990s, the system has grown to serve 34,000 Modern Apprentices in Scotland. Yet still, the scheme's success has failed to parallel that of Switzerland's (Scottish Government, 2018). Recent 2018-2019 data shows the Scottish scheme offers less than half the number of opportunities when compared to Switzerland's. Additionally, the employment rate post scheme is only three-fourths of Switzerland's (Skills Development Scotland, 2019). Considering this, there is a strong case to argue that the UK economy would benefit significantly from the implementation of Swiss-style apprenticeships.

The SkillsFuture initiative of Singapore, created in 2016, is an ongoing program aimed at enhancing workers' and businesses' skills with the help of an online platform. Scotland could also look to harness technology in its effort to improve the skills of its population. Regardless of a person's age, location or background, an online platform can offer a relatively effective means of reaching a large number of workers at the relatively low initial cost of establishing a virtual platform. However, unlike apprenticeships, students can't experience a hands-on practical experience. Therefore, the platform may not be a suitable solution to a lot of professions.

The skills gap is an area which should be of utmost concern to the Scottish Government. With the changes that have come as a result of Brexit, and the potential for a second independence referendum, a strong Scottish economy has never been more crucial. The government should harness technology to reduce the costs of spreading education and look to enhance their existing apprenticeship scheme and accommodate Swiss VET characteristics. With these changes in policy, Scotland would be able to lessen the burden that the skills gap brings, and boost its economy.

Clementine Crawford, Arran Thompson, William Hwang & Akbar Muminov are members of The University of Edinburgh Economics Society, a student-run organisation which aims to enhance the student experience for students interested in Economics.

The road to economic recovery hinges on ending homelessness
– Gavin Yates
Originally posted 29 June 2020

The destruction wrought by Covid 19 has been almost indescribable. Some 50,000 dead in the UK, many of the recovered left with life changing medical issues not to mention the huge economic cost to virtually every nation in the world.

The immediate affects of the virus are well documented but as we turn our attention to the consequences of the economic fallout, we must try to hang onto some hope.

Enquiries to debt and employment helplines have spiralled in recent weeks and there is no doubt that the spectre of the end of the UK Government's furlough scheme hangs heavy.

There will be consequences, brutal, nasty consequences as furlough turns to redundancy, that morphs into housing insecurity, empty shelves in food banks and the well known consequences of all that adds up to. Mental ill-heath, impoverished families, rising crime and the inevitable increase in premature death. The situation is inarguably bleak.

So what about that hope?

There is another way to deal with the fallout of Covid 19 that can genuinely benefit society as a whole. It's not even a miracle cure or economic snake oil. It's just a question of learning from the previous times that the UK's GDP was so far in the metaphorical toilet.

After the Great War, the then Prime Minister David Lloyd George promised that returning soldiers would have 'homes fit for heroes'. The passing of the 1919 Addison's Act – promised funding for 500,000 homes, although only 213,000 were built. The aim was admirable but its short-term nature was never going to make the change needed. After the next war, there was another expansion of social housing and with sustained progress we reached peak social house building in the early 1970s. A much longer and sustained cross-party commitment.

This period of post war economic growth was not entirely fuelled by house building but it certainly helped. A new wave of social house building could have a huge impact on Scotland's changes of economic prosperity and also help tackle our stubborn levels of homelessness.

The recent Benny Higgins report for the Scottish Government advised a huge expansion in social housing. Having spoken to house builders over the last three years this is what they have been crying out for. A sustained 30-year house building programme which will allow these businesses to massively increase their workforces, but also providing a genuine economic incentive to increase apprenticeship opportunities for young people.

What we can learn from the past is that short term housing booms don't work, they need to be sustained and the housing crisis in Scotland needs that kind of long term, cross-party commitment.

Over-cooked housing market

However, the main reason for wanting this social housing explosion isn't just about those much needed new houses. It's a way of directly challenging our over-cooked housing market. The lack of suitable accommodation for rent has meant an explosion in housing costs for tenants that are completely unsustainable. The modern day 'heroes' might not be those returning from the Somme but instead they are our nurses and other key workers. Often low paid and under appreciated but they also face paying a majority of their meagre wages in rental costs.

The average rental for a two-bed property in Edinburgh is approaching £1000 a month. Try affording that on a student nurses salary. If we want 'homes fit for heroes' then they also need to be affordable.

The knock-on effect of a huge expansion of homes for social rent would be the realignment of private sector rents. When more homes become available at £350 per month then the market has to adapt and we will see private sector rents reduce to remain attractive in the market.

The other consequence of this proposed house building programme would be the possibility of the eradication of homelessness. In the short term this would aid our efforts to deal with the public health emergency that Covid 19 represents.

However, in the long term, the proven link between housing security and better health, education and economic contribution outcomes for people cannot be overstated. Simply put, Scotland's future economically lives and dies on its ability to properly house its citizens. You cannot get the kind of decent society that we all wish to live in without tackling this issue. Promising five year building programmes isn't enough and will fail miserably. The lack of genuine ambition in social house building is absolutely shocking. To give some context, when Fife Council built 2700 homes for rent between 2012 and 2017 they built more than any other local authority in the UK. Just read that again, record breaking progress best summed up as just over 500 new homes a year for a population of almost 400,000.

All political parties need to put aside any ideological differences they may have and commit to a 30 year social housing plan. Nationalist, unionist, socialist, neo-liberal matters very little. There is literally something in this for everyone.

For our heroes in scrubs, those teetering on the brink and those maybe just about managing, this could be the difference between future prosperity and destitution. There is no time to waste Scotland. Let's get building.

Gavin Yates is the Chief Executive of Homeless Action Scotland. He is a former local councillor, political advisor and BBC journalist.

A good investment for Scotland – and the world – Mark Blyth and Eric Lonergan

Originally posted 13 July 2020

As the recent Reform Scotland policy brief "Investing for Recovery" put it succinctly regarding the economic shock caused by Covid-19, "*if [this]is not a catalyst [for]bold, radical interventions that will transform Scotland's economy, then nothing ever will be.*" This is both true, and sadly, not just a Scottish problem.

Lulled into the false sense of security generated by the actions of central banks to stem the 2008 crisis, policy incrementalism is steeped into the DNA of governments these days. Rather than the problem being just a lack of fresh ideas, the deeper issue seems to be a lack of political courage to try anything new. Even self-proclaimed populists fall back on tired old solutions such as tax cuts and tariffs in the face of these new challenges. We must do better.

In their paper, rather than arguing for more taxes as being the only game in town or a reducing debt to free up fiscal space, Alan McFarlane and Andrew Wilson focus on the asset side of the state's ledger, something that has been badly neglected for 40 years.

States used to have public capital in the form of stakes in companies, and the ownership of assets such as public housing or utilities. The great privatisation spree of 1980-2000 passed most of that public wealth into private ownership. While the effects of this shift on inequality are well noted, the effects on the state's balance sheet are not.

Public assets generate public income. Without such income, deficits become inevitable, stretching budgets, especially in an environment of tax cuts and rising inequality. So rebuilding public assets seems a good place to start. Some smaller governments similar to Scotland (except that they have greater degrees of monetary autonomy) such as New Zealand and Ireland recognise that rebuilding the public housing stock is necessary. "Investing for Recovery" takes another angle on this question, one that we share.

Governments everywhere have, despite Covid-19, received a windfall in the form of structurally low interest rates and a distinct lack of inflationary pressures. The reasons behind this shift are multiple, ranging from changing demography to the effects of QE, but the fact of this environment for funding is not. Most 'A rated' sovereigns can at this point issue debt over a 10-15 year horizon at a negative real rate, which means investors are paying the sovereign. Given the general level of uncertainty facing investors, there is no shortage of demand for such "safe assets" despite the negative payoff. As such, even discounting Covid's effects, there has never been a better time to undertake long-term public investments.

In our new book *Angrynomics*, and in a recent IPPR paper 'Beyond Bailouts,' we take this insight further and argue for the establishment of a Citizen's Wealth Fund (CWF). Modeled after the sovereign wealth funds of smaller states such as Singapore and Norway, we argue that a CWF can be a new and important tool to combat inequality. Buying a broad swathe of equities in moments of crisis when the government's cost of

capital goes negative as investors dump equities and buy bonds, a CWF can hold these assets for the long term on behalf of the public, picking up the equity premium and banking those equities as publicly-held wealth. These returns can then be redistributed to the bottom 80 percent of society and/or used for transformative investments such as decarbonisation.

We were happy to note that the Reform Scotland piece referenced our work in their call for the creation of two entities, *Scottish Government Investments* (SGI) and *Equiscot*, that have broadly the same remit as our CWF proposal. In what follows we discuss these proposals and suggest how to strengthen them, while noting some of the limitations of attempting to build such institutions in an environment of devolution and monetary non-sovereignty.

Scottish Government Investments (SGI)

Scotland, it seems, has a multiplicity of public and quasi-public asset managers ranging from Public Corporations, investments by a variety of government bodies, impact investments of various kinds and infrastructure assets. "Investing for Recovery" views this moment as an opportunity to rationalise these holdings, while taking a longer view of the portfolio of assets as a whole. That is, how can one part of the portfolio – for example, investment in a public utility – offset the costs of a socially necessary connective enterprise, such as island ferries.

To get there "Investing for Recovery" envisages SGI as a dedicated public investment fund that actively manages these assets with a view to cross subsidise and grow the overall portfolio.

The first question that arises is 'should the government do this?'

Our answer is that the government is already doing this, but doing it with less strategic vision and no core strategy. We can do better.

An analogy can usefully be made with private equity (PE). Whereas a PE firm would set up funding pools to buy these assets, add the cost of the purchase to the balance sheets of these assets, and then run high revenues through them with a view to selling them on the public markets, a public equity fund, which is what SGI really is, can take a different approach.

Already owning the assets, such a public fund could use the income streams in place to strengthen the overall portfolio and its returns. This would help rebuild Scotland's much-diminished public assets while giving a positive income stream to the Scottish Government (SG). It would also supply, over time, high quality ESG-compliant assets that the SG could choose to sell to the private sector, in whole or in part, *but only with a view to refreshing the overall portfolio of assets.* Such a fund would thereby provide an incubator for future potentially high-growth investments in new technological areas. A kind of 'angel investor' scheme that is self-financing.

The Scottish National Investment Bank (SNIB)

A second set of questions arising is 'OK, if the government does this, and gets the right people to manage it, and the politicians are kept away from it, it might just work. But surely there will be pressure to buy distressed assets and politically important firms? Do we really want a new form of nationalsation a la the 1970s, even if it's done through passive equity ownership?"
Our answer is that there is such a risk, but it can be obviated, and it can't be avoided.

Covid-19 creates a massive problem for capital re-allocation across all economies. We simply do not know how the experience of this pandemic will impact sectors over the long term. Will we trust public transport and air travel again? What about soft-touch services? For example, what happens to 'intimate' restaurants and traditional Scottish bar culture? So in one way, Scotland cannot avoid the problem of how to cushion the structural changes that Covid-19 will force upon its economy.

This is where the least developed part of the proposal, for a Scottish National Investment Bank (SNIB), becomes important. Such a Bank, by definition, will have two roles.

First, to pick, if not winners, then survivors. What are the key sectors of the Scottish economy that Scotland needs to succeed post-Covid? How can a public Bank take equity stakes in such ventures to ensure that temporary (albeit long-term by recent standards) liquidity problems do not become long-term solvency problems? To gain from the upside of such liquidity provision, the "price" for assistance should come in the form of five-year warrants that grant the government the right to buy equity in the supported businesses, up to an additional 10 per cent, at the same price at which it has injected the equity, at any point in the next five years.

Its second role is to triage the losers. To act as a "bad bank" to ensure the liquidation and reallocation of Covid-impaired assets is done with a view to minimising displacements. SNIB could in that regard work with a partner institution that focuses on the labor market displacement (perhaps called Scotworks?) to ensure that labour is retrained and reallocated to Covid-resilient sectors. Some entity has to make these calls, which seem different in kind from the mission of SGI. SNIB seems to be that institution.

Equiscot
This division of labor would then free up the proposed portfolio company modelled on Temasek (Singapore's sovereign weath fund) called Equiscot. "Investing for Recovery" argues that Equiscot should be "free to invest for value and returns anywhere, but in ways that could also enhance existing capabilities [as]an effective asset-manager arm of the SNIB.

We again agree, but would go further. Implicit in "Investing for Recovery" is a temporal dimension. Covid is the immediate shock. Short-term SGI centralises, rationalises, and focuses on growing the public asset stock in response. Medium term, the SNIB performs both triage and liquidity functions for critical firms and sectors.

Then, longer-term, Equiscot comes into its own. First, as the fully independent asset management company focused on long term growth of the type of CWF we argue for in *Angrynomics*. The borrowing environment makes this an almost free option, and the

capital base for it could come from local authority pension schemes and similar, as "Investing for Recovery" recognises.

Second, Equiscot and SNIB could work together to provide the bridging capital needed for the private sector to aggressively move forward with investments in decarbonisation at scale. It seems to be the case that small states with good governance and higher levels of public trust are the only ones that can move forward aggressively with decarbonisation – Denmark, New Zealand and Sweden spring to mind.

Given that global financial markets are waking up to the shortage of ESG assets, the need for "green" financing, and the real possibility of massive losses on so-called 'stranded' carbon assets, small states investing at the frontier of such areas – in hydrolysers, in water sequestration and export (as the south of England dries out the new Scottish oil may well be Scottish water), and in exportable wind power – will reap high returns.

The problem with all of this is of course how to fund it. While we are not Modern Monetary Theorists, it is undeniable that having one's own currency matters. After all, the Scottish government cannot issue its own sovereign debt, nor can it settle accounts in its own currency. As such, our preferred funding vehicle – to issue debt when the government's cost of capital goes negative – is not possible in the Scottish context. Nor is the environment for greater fiscal independence likely to expand over the course of the current parliament. But perhaps there are work arounds?

Scotland could, by setting up these institutions, act as a "pilot program" for the feasibility of such institutions for the UK as a whole. If cooperation with the Bank of England and the Treasury was foregrounded with such ambition, then the funds needed to get them up and running could be forthcoming. There are more "off balance sheet" ways of proceeding, such as setting these entities up as special investment vehicles and the like. But such opaque moves are likely to be reasonably opposed.

As such, we think that the next part of this conversation should focus on how to fund these entities under the existing devolution settlement. If Scotland can get them to work it will be value added, not just for Scotland, but for the wider world.

Mark Blyth and Eric Lonergan are the authors of Angrynomics (*https://www.amazon.co.uk/Angrynomics-Eric-Lonergan/dp/1788212797*). Lonergan is a macro hedge-fund manager in London. Blyth is the William R. Rhodes '57 Professor of International Economics at Brown University, Rhode Island.

What does the NHS in Scotland look like after the pandemic?
– Miles Briggs MSP

Originally posted 14 July 2020

We all know better than to start talking yet about life after the coronavirus: until it dies out or there's a vaccine, we'll be managing it. This is going to be a long haul.

But we are coming out of lockdown. The first peak has passed. People can start to process what's happened. Politicians now have a bit more time and space to start thinking about what life now looks like.

What could the future hold? Reflecting on the past few months, what should come next? We should start with two fundamental areas: funding, and staff.

Right now, it's impossible to put a number on the NHS' funding needs – we just don't yet know how it will emerge from the crisis, or indeed the wider shape of government finances. But it's clear that not only will the public expect services to be properly funded, we will also have to return to the long-standing challenges of ageing and health inflation, too. A care backlog has built up, that will put pressure on the NHS this winter. The direction is clear: we will have to put health and care on a sustainable footing.

On staff, it's not surprising that people took to the streets to clap for front-line professionals. They have always been the beating heart of the NHS, and families will long remember the dedication and compassion shown to their loved ones. It's also telling that part of the message to the public was to 'protect the NHS' – it is an institution that we all want to do our bit to sustain.

But all the scandals that dogged NHS Scotland before Covid19 – the Edinburgh Sick Kids, the QEUH, bullying at NHS Highland, preventable deaths at Crosshouses – have the same theme, which is that front-line staff are often let down by the wider systems in which they have to work. So often, the pattern is that professionals have their vocational drive gradually worn down by poor management, political drift, and relentless workload.

There are three big things we could do to turn that around. There are some basic improvements we could make, such as a range of mental health, working conditions and workplace support that the Scottish Conservatives set out in our 'care for our carers' publication last year. That support feels even more urgent in light of the pandemic.

Second, we can make clinical leadership the norm. Jason Leitch has become a household name because of his ability to communicate with clarity and authority as a doctor and leader. But as a rule, in the NHS, the top roles tend to be taken by non-clinical managers. That's not to slight them – we need good managers, too. There's a balance, though, and at the moment, often the clinicians best-placed to lead the NHS can't call the shots,

particularly at the level of hospitals and Boards. Making clinical leadership the norm across the NHS would change that.

Third, Scotland should focus on redoubling its reputation as a centre for medical education. It looks likely that global movement of healthcare staff will take at least a short-term hit. We don't yet know, but this could even be a permanent change. So rooting our NHS in teaching and research not only plays to our existing strengths, it is also part of a long-term solution to chronic staffing needs. The Scottish Conservatives have previously proposed a new medical school in Inverness, and we should start thinking about creating new routes into the NHS, too, like specific career-change programmes for people coming from other backgrounds.

Funding and staff are the first steps. But we've also seen how the systems that support the front-line can improve, too.

We've been talking about e-medicine, virtual consultations and telephone triage for GPs for years. Suddenly, it actually happened, because of the all-important need to identify patients with Covid-19.

But at the same time, the SNP's record on testing is utterly woeful. PPE supplies took far too long to get up and running, as procurement systems were complex and inefficient at tapping up manufacturers.

The lesson of both these successes and failures is that we should think about how to make the NHS better at adopting new ideas and technologies. Scotland has an impressive biosciences and medical engineering sector. We have world-class universities. We have a budding tech scene. If we can create a much greater culture of collaboration between these institutions and the NHS, we can make the NHS smarter, more adaptive and faster.

Even within the health and care system, we need better coordination. Care homes were the central scandal of the pandemic. They often felt like second-class citizens, falling between the cracks of the NHS, central government, and local authorities. We're supposed to have integrated health and care system in Scotland, but the crisis exposed that too often, the different bits of the system didn't join up. Fixing that has to be a priority.

So, too, is better leadership from the top. The pandemic made the whole system face a single challenge, with the full backing of other parts of government, and with massive public support. But that only showed up the lack of political grip in recent years: isn't it obvious now that the SNP lacked a sense of direction before?

We have to avoid the days of drift coming back. We need a sense of overall mission.

That means a big decision about the virus itself – and what kind of care we think is the new normal.

Pandemics were on the radar in Scotland, but most policy and political attention was based on a completely different set of priorities. The central challenge was considered to be ageing, lifestyle conditions and chronic care. So since about 2005, the rough direction of travel was to reduce beds and put them in fewer, bigger hospitals, push care out into the community, and try and get GPs, pharmacists and social care linked up to relieve the pressure on acute hospitals. It lost momentum in recent years, and really the SNP were running on policy ideas developed a decade ago. But this type of thinking was still predominant.

It was all based on a particular type of medical challenge – chronic, relatively predictable, often best addressed out of hospital, and which could be treated (if not prevented) largely by the health and social care system.

The coronavirus is the opposite: it was a new, unpredictable virus, requiring hospital care, at short notice, with a massive wider economic and social effort to avoid overwhelming the NHS.

These are very different styles of care. So perhaps the single biggest question now is how to balance them.

The answer will likely be picking up the threads of pre-virus care, but with the ability to quickly ramp up the system to tackle big, sudden challenges. We can learn the lessons of this pandemic and if we retain the institutional memory, know what to do next time. But in the meantime, we have to build on the ideas of getting patients into the right kind of setting, with stronger community care, GP care restored, and increased focus on chronic care.

We might, after the peak of the pandemic, never think about our health in the same way again. Thousands of people have had their lives changed forever. We've seen the very best of health and care staff these past few weeks. If we can tap their energy and give them the resources they need, build a more nimble and responsive system around them, then we can build an NHS which can steer us through an uncertain world.

This might not be the last pandemic to hit us. It's also not going to change big, long-term demographic trends. Let's not miss the moment to prepare for both.

Miles Briggs is a Conservative MSP for the Lothians and the Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Health & Sport.

Increasing participation in local democracy – Angus Tulloch

Originally posted 20 July 2020

Most democrats will agree that increased popular involvement in the political process would strengthen the credibility, direction and execution of governing institutions. This applies to every layer of government. However, given the closer geographical proximity of local authorities to those whom they govern, it should be much easier to allow for greater public participation here than at the national level. I believe this could be done by making the local political process less partisan, more democratic, more effective and less time consuming. As a result, many more people might be prepared to become involved in local administration on a 'pro bono' basis, leading to a significant improvement in the quality of oversight. Here are some suggestions for how this could be achieved.

- To make local politics less partisan, candidates should not stand with party labels against their name. There should be more co-opting of specialists and other potentially useful contributors on council committees. For example, a couple of teachers on a council education committee should lead to much better-informed decisions.
- To make local politics more democratic, compulsory voting (as in Australia) should be introduced for elections. Those who did not like any of the candidates would be at liberty to spoil their ballot papers. This would hopefully incentivise councils to be more responsive to the local electorate. No council would want to be highlighted as having one of the highest percentages of spoilt ballot papers in the country.
- To make local politics more effective, councils would employ an ombudsman (reporting to a directly elected Provost) to deal, in the first instance at least, with routine complaints such as council house/road repairs, refuse collection, and the state of public lavatories. This would allow local councillors time to focus on broad policy issues rather than on the mundane.
- To make local politics less time consuming, fewer council meetings would take place and, when held, would be at times in the week that the vast majority of councillors could make. Their role would mirror that of a non-executive director on a company board — providing an interface with shareholders (the local public in this case) as well as strategic vision, but above all ensuring day to day administration was in competent hands.

As such a role would be much more interesting, status enhancing and compatible with their day jobs, there would be plenty of candidates keen to participate even if, as is proposed, the vast majority of them would not be paid but only receive expenses. A small minority of councillors, elected by secret ballot of their peers, would be remunerated and at higher rates than at present. These would be responsible for chairing council committees, as well as coordinating relationships with the council executives, the local ombudsman, other councils and organisations. The considerable savings, resulting from not paying most local councillors, would be used to fund the ombudsman's office. Furthermore, pro bono councillors are likely to act much more independently than if paid.

As well as improving the quality of local authority democracy and governance, such a change to the political process would provide a natural career path into national politics. Councillors would normally have their public service credentials tested through a stint as an elected but unpaid public representative, before being elected to a paid post. Paid councillors would gain substantial administrative oversight experience while in this role, and hopefully learn the benefits of a less partisan approach to politics too. Few will probably want to become MPs or MSPs, but those that did might well be able to contribute more, and much more quickly, than the average prospective candidate for Holyrood and Westminster.

There will of course be considerable opposition from vested interests to these proposals. Those councillors, previously remunerated but not voted into paid posts, may well not wish to continue in public service and some compensation might be in order here. Council executives may well prefer the cosy relationships they have developed with local party leaders to the less predictable oversight of more independent- minded councillors. However, if these changes produce more open and vibrant local government, as I believe they would, the public at large would be much better off in the quality and value of services provided.

Angus Tulloch is former Joint-Managing Partner of Stewart Investors

The health & environmental benefits of NHS Near Me – Maimie Thompson

Originally posted 24 July 2020

If the year 2019 is to be remembered for anything, other than it being the year before Covid-19 struck, I guess it might well be because it was when, at long last, it felt like the climate change emergency truly entered the public consciousness. I for one was delighted that campaigner Greta Thunberg and our other young people through mass school strikes over climate change were rarely out of the headlines.

And then came the coronavirus. Suddenly the world faced a public health emergency, and the environmental catastrophe we are careering towards worryingly became yesterday's news.

However, there must always surely be hope. I can see a future, post-Covid-19, when it will re-enter the public consciousness again as the No. 1 crisis facing humanity. And when that happens I like to think that many of the lessons the pandemic is teaching us will help steer a course towards creating a planet that is far healthier and a society that is much fairer than it is now.

To illustrate, I would like to consider one very small example of collective efforts making a positive contribution: video consulting for health and care – an aspect of public health policy and engagement on which I have been again working on.

In early February I tweeted: "*I would have thought #coronavirus should prompt as many appointments as possible to be provided by @NHSNearMe. Reduce risks of people coming into health care facilities and support strategic management #commonsense*", and this is indeed is what has happened.

As I wrote in my blog published by the Melting Pot in May 2020 the pandemic had prompted a sudden acceleration in the use of video consulting by health and care professionals. NHS Scotland's video consulting platform of choice, Near Me, quickly became established. Originally seen as being particularly useful in the north of Scotland where the distance between patients and clinicians can be problematic, Near Me has since enabled services to continue to be provided without potential exposure to Covid-19. In doing so it has significantly reduced the number of people going into health and social care premises. And, in doing so has made an important contribution to reducing the risk of the infection spreading, alongside all the other benefits.

Just a few weeks ago I read this quote by a senior manager in one of Scotland's health and social care partnerships: "Near Me video consulting has been life changing and life enhancing for many people."

But more than that, the manager went on to give a striking example of a key benefit of Near Me. Using video consultations for obstetric appointments meant that some patients no longer had to make 200-mile round trips to see an expert. No fewer than 1,000 such journeys had been saved because of Near Me.

Prior to March 2020, when the coronavirus lockdown began in Scotland, there were around 300 appointments each week using the Near Me system; by June, there were over 17,000 every week, with now more than 200,000 in total. Quite remarkable.

Given the huge increase in use the Scottish Government produced a vision that, where appropriate, all health and care consultations are offered by Near Me. The Scottish Government's Technology Enabled Care team launched a public engagement exercise to seek views on the vision (see www.nearme.scot/views). One aspect is an on-line survey for the public and that includes inviting views on the environmental aspects; another is seeking views from the professionals and partner organisations. It is set to gain a high number of responses which will help to shape the future and better understand the benefits and any barriers.

Alongside this at the end of every Near Me appointment patients are invited to take a survey. When I last checked, 68 per cent of people said that if they had not had a video consultation, they would have travelled by private car or motorbike to an appointment. The average one-way distance would have been 13 miles. Incidentally, 0.7 per cent would have travelled by aeroplane and a similar percentage by ferry. This was based on a sample of 15,000 people who responded to the question on travel.

In more in-depth studies a recently published academic paper also considered the economic and environmental impact of video consulting for new colorectal referrals in part of the country. It found that in the period studied video consultation appointments saved 50 patients no fewer than 6,685 miles travelled, 148 hours travelling time and £1,767 cost. Carbon emissions saved equated to 4,659 C02e lbs (carbon dioxide equivalent pounds). Another study looked at the use of video consulting for gastroenterology patients in another Scottish health board area. It calculated that these patients travelled more than 826,000 miles per annum for around 21,700 appointments. Doing so resulted in a significant carbon footprint: 242 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide. By using remote consulting more than 12,700 patient miles were saved. When you scale it up the various gains through use of Near Me are considerable including around 15 million miles travelled per year saved, let alone the reduction in travelling time, missed appointments, greater choice, and convenience.

Covid-19 has caused strange things to happen throughout the world. Lockdowns have resulted in some significant and, I hope, permanent changes to our travel habits. More than 150 cities throughout the world are providing additional dedicated walking and cycling infrastructure in anticipation of continuing demand for them post-pandemic.

These measures might make it easier for some of the positive behaviours brought about by the pandemic to become permanent. And they are positive not only from an environmental point of view. It has been reckoned that if every person in London walked or cycled for 20 minutes a day, an astonishing £1.7 billion could be saved in health treatment costs over 25 years. It has also been claimed that if every car driver switched to cycling for a daily 5km commute, the health benefit from physical activity would be worth over £1,000 every year.

Coronavirus has impacted on most aspects of our lives and some of the measures we are taking to control its spread can have positive untended consequences. Preventing carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere might not mean very much to some people but it does impact on polar bears. Directly or indirectly that should matter to us all. Some experts suggest that by the end of the century these magnificent animals could become nearly extinct because of shrinking sea ice if climate change continues at its present pace.

Let's not lose sight of the fact that and remind our NHS Scotland chief executives, who made a commitment, that NHS Scotland would by 2045 be what is termed a "net-zero" service, meaning that its reported carbon emissions would be either zero or offset by an appropriate mechanism. The two are connected. As things stand, patient, staff and visitor travel are not measured in determining emissions, largely because it is difficult to do so accurately and consistently. However, it is accepted that they do carry a significant environmental impact that would undoubtedly be lessened by greater use of video consulting. If we are to take this seriously perhaps the matter of measurement needs to be remedied.

As one consultant psychologist who responded to the public and staff engagement put it "I *don't understand why any treatment modality which will save the health service thousands of pounds, and will be better for the environment is even a point of debate.*"

The planet is going through a major public health crisis. Perhaps in learning to deal with it we will also address some of the environmental concerns that caused our children to miss school for a few hours last year. We surely owe it to them to try our very best to make wise use of our resources, change our habits and save our polar bears.

Maimie Thompson is a former Head of PR and Engagement for NHS Highland

Should we be worried about the frequency of school inspections?
– Keir Bloomer
Originally posted 31 July 2020

Earlier in the week, the Press carried a number of stories with headlines such as "No inspections carried out at 33 Glasgow primary schools in last decade"; not exactly snappy but the implication is clear. Readers are obviously expected to deplore this failing on the part of the government or the Inspectorate. The reason for this reaction reflects a view of the purpose of school inspection which is not, however, made explicit. It assumes the existence of a consensus about the purpose of inspection, which does not exist. Instead, there is merely an unconsidered view that it must be a good thing. If random members of the public were to be asked their opinion about why schools are inspected, the most common answer would certainly be about information for parents. Parents with children at a particular school will be reassured to know that inspectors think it is doing a good job. Those who take a more market-oriented view will believe that inspection reports provide information that is useful in choosing a school.

The current inspection regime does little to meet either of these expectations. Schools can change quite quickly. The arrival of a new headteacher, for example, can make a significant difference, for good or ill, over a short period. In the case of a small primary school, the impact will be almost immediate. Even in large schools, differences will become visible quite quickly. A report that is even five years old is likely to say nothing of value from a parent's perspective. In many cases, even a two-year-old report will be seriously out of date.

In other words, if the purpose of inspection is to provide information for parents, all schools would need to be inspected at intervals of not greater than three years. At the present time, there is no target for the frequency of inspections. Traditionally, however, there has been a loose target of inspection on a 'generational' basis; that is within the period that a pupil would be likely to remain in the school – seven years in primary and six in secondary. This target has never been achieved in recent times. To meet a three-year target, the rate of inspection would have to be roughly trebled. Even disregarding the disruptive effect, how many parents would see taking some two hundred and fifty more excellent teachers out of school as a sound way of improving the system?

Improvement is, of course, the other often-cited reason for inspection. Apparently, a fair number of parents and members of the public think that the process of inspection automatically brings about improvement. From the frequency with which politicians react to criticism of school education by promising more frequent and more rigorous inspection, many of them must believe this too. The idea that the act of examination will of itself do good is, of course, very much like the idea that it is possible to fatten a pig by weighing it.

The notion that inspection brings improvement is eminently testable. Schools that have been recently inspected will show faster improvement than those which have not. Is there evidence to that effect? Has research been conducted which would support this

hypothesis (or not)? Many years ago, the Society of Education Officers in England conducted surveys which suggested that the evidence of inspection having a positive effect on the school was lacking. So far as I am aware, no research has taken place in Scotland. Given the cost of inspection and the impact that it has – similar in many ways to the downsides of 'high stakes' testing – that is perhaps surprising.

This is not to deny that schools can profit from inspection. Teachers can undoubtedly benefit from constructive criticism and access to external knowledge and expertise. However, improvement is not automatic. It is the result of the efforts the school makes on the basis of the feedback it has received.

Inspection is a perfectly legitimate part of a quality assurance strategy. That, however, does not require that every school be inspected within a given time frame. An approach based on sampling will work just as well as one based on supposedly universal coverage – and at much lower cost. If the aim is to monitor performance of the system as a whole, it is of not the slightest importance whether a particular Glasgow primary school was last inspected 15 years ago.

The notion that inspection diagnoses the health of the system has been interpreted and put into practice in a way that deserves closer scrutiny than it generally receives. Schools are now subject to greater pressures for change than was the case in the past. The system is more policy-driven than before. The thematic inspections that are periodically carried out are a reflection of this. However, the Inspectorate's main effort is not devoted to such activities. The greatest part of inspectors' time is used in the inspection of schools. In other words, there is an oversight of how policy is implemented at classroom level but very much less examination of the effects or merits of the policies themselves. An unconscious corollary is that shortcomings are seen as failures of implementation rather than failures of policy. This is a dangerous assumption.

In conclusion, it might be reasonable to deplore the infrequency of school inspections if there were a common understanding of what the process is for. However, there is not. Currently, it is merely part of a top-down system of quality assurance which too easily falls into the assumption that centrally-generated policy is wisely conceived while implementation by schools can often be flawed. Inspectors usually have considerable expertise. It could be better used.

Keir Bloomer is chair of the Commission on School Reform

It's time to properly support bereaved employees – Claire McCartney

Originally posted 10 August 2020

Last month the CIPD launched its new guidance for employers on compassionate and comprehensive bereavement support. We are accompanying our guidance launch, with a call to Government to introduce the right to bereavement leave and pay to *all* employees experiencing a close family bereavement.

Suffering the loss of a close family member or dependent can often be a devastating experience and bereaved employees should be treated with utmost compassion and support in the workplace. Grief is not linear and does not have predictable stages. Employees will react differently to their experiences of bereavement and this should be understood and respected.

Research from the CIPD found that just over half (54%) of employees said that they were aware of their employer having a policy or support in place for employees experiencing bereavement, while many were not. Bereavement can have a significant impact on a person's mental health and wellbeing and organisations risk adding work-related stress to what is already a difficult situation if they do not make it clear to employees the bereavement policies that are in place and the support services available to them.

Sadly, in the UK to date, tens of thousands of people have died as a result of COVID-19. The ongoing impact of the pandemic means that employees will have lost family members, partners and friends. Some employees might also have experienced the loss of co-workers. Much of this loss will be unexpected and shocking. Bereaved employees will need time to come to terms with what has happened and will be highly unlikely to be able to perform well at work if they are forced to return too quickly.

This makes it more important than ever to properly support those experiencing loss and grief through introducing a new right to bereavement leave and pay.

At the CIPD we are calling on the Government, alongside Lucy Herd to build on the work of Jack's Law and parental bereavement leave and pay (introduced on the 6th April 2020), to create a new legal right to bereavement leave and pay for *all* employees experiencing a bereavement of a close family member or dependent. That is the right to two weeks' leave or paid leave, if the recipient is classed as an employee. Our call is also being supported by Cruse Bereavement Care, BereavementUK and Affinity Coaching who, alongside other organisations have also provided invaluable feedback into our new workplace guidance.

The CIPD's new guidance for employers on compassionate and comprehensive bereavement support encourages employers to develop a bereavement policy, to empower managers to support employees, put in place flexible working practices to best support employee needs, and provide information to employees on workplace support

for bereavement. A separate line manager guide is also available and focuses on how to manage and support a member of your team who has suffered a bereavement.

Below I've included key things for organisations to consider in providing compassionate bereavement support for employees.

Bereavement policy
It's a good idea for your workplace to have a policy that covers bereavement absence and pay, to keep things clear. A policy can also help clarify anything offered at work that's more than what's legally required.

Acknowledge the bereavement
Acknowledge the bereavement that the employee has experienced. They may or may not want to talk about the situation in detail, but acknowledging that it has happened is important.

Discuss what they would like communicated
By law, an employee has the right to keep their bereavement private from work colleagues. It can be a good idea for the employer to ask their employee what, if anything, they would like their work colleagues to know about the bereavement.

Build supportive cultures
Train your line managers to have open and sensitive conversations and to explore what extra support would be helpful to affected employees. Different cultures respond to death in significantly different ways. Line managers should check whether the employee's religion or culture requires them to observe any particular practices or make special arrangements

Flexibility is key
In particular, it might be helpful to support bereaved employees through the provision of a phased return to work and flexible working provisions.

Signpost to supportive services, organisations and charities
Many businesses will have counselling, occupational health and employee assistance programmes available to support their people, and they should highlight these to those experiencing bereavement. They should also signpost to relevant organisations and charities that can support bereaved employees; this will be particularly important for smaller businesses with limited resources.

You can view CIPD's full guidance with support links at https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/guide-to-bereavement-support_tcm18-81624.pdf.

Claire McCartney is Senior Policy Adviser, Resourcing & Inclusion at CIPD, the professional body for HR and people development

It's time for Scotland to embrace an inclusive Digital Enlightenment – Adam Lang

Originally posted 11 August 2020

The social upheaval caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is a chance for Scotland to set bold new ambitions. The pandemic has highlighted the ubiquity of technology in the way we live our lives and the necessity of utilising it to improve our society.

We have an opportunity now to embrace the possibilities offered by technology and strive for a tech-driven future which everyone can be involved in shaping; an inclusive Digital Enlightenment for Scotland.

As well as a global public health crisis, we are currently living through the fourth industrial revolution – the fourth period of intense technological advancement that humans have experienced. Driven by technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, cloud computing, robotics, 3D printing and the internet of things, this revolution is already dramatically shaping our personal and professional lives. And it has the potential to define the future of our society, economy and public services in the years ahead.

Despite the scale and impact of this tech revolution, to date little has been done to really understand the views, concerns, aspirations and opinions of people in Scotland towards the technologies that are driving it. This is why last week Nesta in Scotland published a major new report, Shift+Ctrl: The Scottish public and the tech revolution, looking in detail at Scottish public attitudes towards these technologies.

The report highlights that, despite increased use of digital tech as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown, the Scottish public continues to mistrust some of the technologies that are increasingly shaping our world and are particularly concerned about their impact on jobs.

The findings show that technological developments are often seen as elitist and out of reach for many – particularly for those on a lower income and for women.

Social inequality is at the forefront of people's minds in relation to how these technologies will be used in Scotland. Many are worried that the benefits they might bring will not be evenly spread across the population and instead will exacerbate existing inequalities. As such, there is a desire for a proactive approach from government and other agencies in Scotland to address these potential imbalances.

The research, conducted by Mark Diffley Consultancy both prior to and throughout lockdown, makes the case for improved access to learning and skills development as well as a more active role for the public in shaping how new technologies are used.

The report reveals that as people's knowledge and understanding of technology increases, so does their positivity towards it. This is a crucial point. We cannot pretend

that these technologies are not already significantly shaping our world or that they are not here to stay. Their potential to disrupt is profound but so too is their potential to help improve society. It is up to us to now decide how we engage with these technologies and whether we harness their vast potential for social good, or whether we allow mistrust to fester and stifle social innovation and development.

The Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century was characterised by thinkers, activists and industrialists that challenged conventions and championed concepts such as human reason and societal benefit. If we want to ensure that the technological revolution we are all living through now does not worsen existing inequalities we must again embrace a spirit of challenge, change, innovation and learning. And we must do so with a focus on fostering trust through open, inclusive, ethical and transparent processes.

We must work to shift control and better engage and empower the public in shaping the technologies that are, in turn, shaping our world.

Previous industrial revolutions have undoubtedly advanced society forward in significant leaps, but they have almost always come with a considerable initial human cost. In Scotland, we can learn lessons from our past and act now to prioritise equality, access and empowerment as part of an inclusive Digital Enlightenment that harnesses the current tech revolution to the benefit of us all.

Adam Lang is Head of Nesta in Scotland

Time for big changes and a revolution in responsibility – Gillian Bell

Originally posted 12 August 2020

As schools start to return in Scotland today, perhaps it's a time for some reflection. What will it take for society to recognise, celebrate and support neurodiversity?

To say that we personally have been through the mill in trying to navigate a hugely complicated system is an understatement.

It has taken 5 years to get a consultant appointment for my daughter still not to be 'formally' diagnosed as Aspergers. Five years of fighting a system that seems set up to make the situation worse. Five years of asking, writing, phoning, begging for help across health, education and social care. This is a problem not confined to Scotland – we'd been fighting to get help for two years prior in Wales.

My daughter has not been in school since February 2018, despite us trying absolutely everything to get help, we're still waiting. I've met with MSPs, MPs and countless professionals. She has no place at school for August and we've not heard from the school she is registered at since March. She's 14.

It feels like we've fallen through a wormhole into a parallel universe. One where thousands of parents and children are screaming for help, yet their cries are falling on deaf ears. A universe where no one takes responsibility: "It's not my job", "I'll refer you", "You're on the waiting list", "It's above my pay scale". These are some of the responses we have had from teachers, doctors, social workers, education support workers.

Great policies may be talked about, however, in reality often their implementation is an utter failure. It goes across local and national government, across sectors, and frankly it is unacceptable.

Prior to Covid we were experiencing a national crisis in mental health and provision of care. Adequate support to those who are deemed on the spectrum or having Special Educational Needs, simply doesn't exist. That crosses from those who are non-verbal, or severely physically impaired, to those who are highly intelligent and articulate with huge potential.

Research and statistics show that upwards of 25% of children in the UK do not fit into the current education system.

GPs, psychologists, medics of all sorts don't seem to be able to deliver the health care required by society. A child being taken to A&E for a mental health crisis, might not even be seen by a doctor. They may have been taken in by the police. The child will be sent home, with no support and put on a waiting list for CAMHS. They then may have to wait 18 months to get a letter for an initial appointment. When they finally get to the top of that list – their assessment will go to another team, to be assessed and put on

another waiting list. Or worse, they might turn up an hour late for a home appointment, then leave after 15 minutes saying they can't help, your child's problem is behavioural. The system is driving children and their families to despair, those working within the systems seem utterly powerless to change anything. They know there are problems, however, nobody seems to be able to take responsibility and make things better.

We have monumental problems and it is the responsibility of all of us to fix it. From my own experience of having had to struggle through the system for my daughter, I think the following changes are required:

1. We all need to recognise that the problems are significant, they are structural and cultural. Put aside blame and work together to support – children and their families and those working within the system.
2. The NHS needs to radically overhaul it's communication strategy and delivery mechanism – a simple CRM system with appointment booking management – nothing complicated and not expensive to implement – tech has moved on.
3. Training on systems and impacts of tone of voice and urgency of communications is also desperately needed. This goes from the GP and receptionist training through to CAMHS inability to manage appointments and the physical paper pushing that is going on in departments across the land. Paediatric consultants would like to support children, before they are in crisis, early intervention is essential.
4. Education needs to support children and families rather than referring to other agencies or charities that don't have the resources, nor capacity to help. There are lots of folks all ready in schools, empower them to actually make a real difference instead of banging their heads against closed doors. Educators also need to recognise that all children have gifts – just because they are being difficult – you shouldn't shun them – help kids find their gifts and build confidence. Children shouldn't come out of the education system broken.
5. Those working within Local Authorities need to take responsibility for their actions – or inaction – cut out the bureaucracy and help people – saying an issue is above one's pay scale is simply unacceptable.
6. Every GP surgery should have mental health support on site, with therapists available on a daily basis, be that in person or online appointments. Having to wait 6, 8, 12 months or more for help amounts to cruelty. How many people take their own lives, have family break-ups or become homeless during the waiting time?
7. There needs to be accountability – not policing – but measurable and achievable working practices and targets that ensure departments and budgets are working together – not against each other – making problems far worse.
8. Maybe it's time to get a big blank piece of paper and reimagine a system that really does work and joins thinking and action together. Start at a local level and build up.
9. What best practice learnings can we take from around the world – France in healthcare, Scandinavia in Education?
10. Diet is essential in maintaining a healthy body and mind. Access to healthy nutritious food, whether in the home, at schools or in hospitals. Every school should have a kitchen garden, where kids learn how to grow food and look after the soil, learn to cook and have fun whilst doing it. Our connections to the soil and

biodiversity are going to be essential if we are to help mitigate the coming challenges of climate change.

The horror of what has unfolded during Covid, should be a wakeup call to all of us. It's time for monumental change.

Gillian Bell FRSA is the founder and director of Caim Communications. She is also a Board Director and Trustee at The Larder West Lothian and a Fellow of the Institute of Digital and Direct Marketing.

Vocational education needs general education – Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 17 August 2020

You'd be forgiven for failing to notice in the first week of August that the OECD has just produced a significant report on Scottish vocational education, *Strengthening Skills in Scotland*. Swamped by the controversies over the Scottish exam results, it seems to have attracted no media coverage whatsoever.

You might also wonder, though, whether it would have been much noticed even in normal circumstances. Scotland does not have a good record of thinking about vocational education. Training is usually seen as an afterthought. Vocational modules at school have often been used to fill in the timetable of pupils who can't manage a mainstream academic course, although this has been improving. HND and HNC courses at further education college are the poor relation of Scottish higher education. There is no consensus on what employers want from schools and colleges anyway – specific training, or a grounding in general skills. A report commissioned by the Scottish government in 2014 from the industrialist Sir Ian Wood said that training and links with employers should be embedded in the school curriculum. The Wood report now forms the basis of Scottish policy. The OECD suggests that general skills matter more.

Matters have, it is true, been slowly changing. The OECD reports that around 31,000 people start a Modern Apprenticeship each year, the most common being in construction, health and social care, hospitality or information technology. This compares well with the approximately 50,000 students who enter university degree courses each year recently (as reported by the Scottish Funding Council). Indeed, about one third of the apprenticeships are themselves at higher-education level. The OECD report analyses the economic and demographic trends that are pushing towards increasing the number of apprenticeships. Work requiring what it calls middle-level skills is being automated – secretarial and craft jobs, and jobs operating machinery. The population is ageing, which is creating more work in health and social care. The quality of the services that are offered to tourists is improving, and tourism is of growing importance to the Scottish economy (as this disastrous year has shown all too plainly). The growth of part-time and, especially, temporary work has reduced the willingness of employers to invest in training, passing the responsibility to public authorities.

All of this analysis is useful, and the recent better establishment of apprenticeships is welcome. But the debate in Scotland almost completely misses an important point. Vocational education needs general education. And that needs space in the timetable. The OECD does includes some valuable comparisons with other countries. One rather shocking summary shows the typical length of apprenticeships in various places. In Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland and the USA the minimum length is usually two years. In France a half of apprenticeships last longer than two years. In England a recent stipulation imposed the rather meagre minimum of one year. Scotland loosely requires that the length be on average one year, which, as the report notes, means that many will be less than that. Reasonably long routes in construction and engineering (2-3 years) sit alongside average lengths of less

than a year in food production and retail. The reason for length is not only that it gives more time to cover necessary educational ground. It also leaves enough room for what the OECD calls 'alternation', moving between sustained periods in work and in the classroom.

That point about space to study is the crucial one. There is a tendency in debates in the UK about apprenticeship to imagine them as a form of glorified work experience. That is fundamentally wrong. Apprenticeship is about structured learning. The same might be said more generally about all kinds of vocational education that is intended to be truly educational. In Scotland, there has never recently been any attention to what must be included in that educational core.

The OECD only gets to this point very far on in its report, and then only in one brief page. It notes that general education is seen as part of vocational education in all countries where vocational education is treated as important. But it provides no details, and also tends to conflate general education with general skills (which is a narrower concept). For a better understanding, we have to turn to the excellent report which Professor Alison Wolf wrote for the UK government in 2011, and which remains influential on policy in England. Wolf explains carefully why the image of the German so-called 'dual system' which prevails in UK discussions is misleading. 'Dual' does not mean relegating those students who are not destined for university to a kind of residual low-level training. It means a properly designed vocational programme which is underpinned by general education.

The typical curriculum of 16-year-old students in the German vocational schools consists of German, mathematics, English, natural sciences, geography, history, aesthetic subjects, and sport. As Wolf says, this is 'far more traditional, general and "academic" than would be the case for the vast majority of English schools at present', to which we can add that the comparison with Scotland would be even more acute. Vocational courses are postponed, partly to keep students' options open.

This is true of almost all developed societies. No matter what the eventual likely destination, vocational specialisation is postponed until after the end of compulsory schooling. It is then the responsibility of employers, not of schools or colleges, but even when in apprenticeships there is what Wolf describes as 'a substantial amount of off-the-job general education'. The UK, by contrast, specifies almost nothing about continuing general education for apprentices.

The reason to give attention to general education is then not only that it keeps options open for eventual progression to higher education. And it's not only that general education is a good preparation to be a democratic citizen. General education also appears to be a more lasting form of vocationally relevant education than anything more explicitly labelled as such.

A review of this by Eric Hanushek and others (from Stanford University in California) found that vocational education for adolescents did improve their immediate employment prospects. Other research has found, similarly, that vocational training enables low-attaining school leavers to avoid unemployment. But these advantages

don’t last. General education eventually improves the chances of employment, the average income in employment, and the opportunities to receive training on the job. As Hanushek et al. say, these advantages may come from the greater flexibility which general education encourages.

Scotland has debated none of this. The Wood report of 2014 pays no attention to general education. Curriculum for Excellence policy documents, for all their aim to make school learning relevant to life, contain no discussion of the relationship between general and vocational learning. They prefer to scatter vocational examples throughout the guidance, with no developed indications of how teachers might relate general ideas to vocational practice.
Nevertheless, although the recent OECD report on Scottish vocational education almost entirely neglects general education, it does at least mention it. Perhaps that small window of opportunity might begin to stimulate some new thinking.

Lindsay Paterson is Professor of Education Policy at Edinburgh University and a member of the Commission on School Reform

Scotland's Feminist Foreign Policy Can Lead the Way – Caron E. Gentry

Originally posted 18 August 2020

In April, much vaunted headlines circulated amongst my policy-oriented and feminist friends: states with leaders who are women, such as New Zealand, Germany, Iceland, and Finland, are faring better with Covid. These leaders were swifter and more decisive in their actions (attributes often more associated with leaders who are men; see this interesting Forbes article). Given Scotland's own success with Covid is owed, many think, to First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's decisive leadership, perhaps Scotland should also be on that list of relatively successful countries.

The success that women have had in steering their states/countries through Covid brings to the forefront the notion of a feminist foreign policy (FFP). Although a feminist foreign policy is not dependent upon having a leader who is a woman, this is still a striking moment in time, where for once women-as-leaders are finally receiving some of the recognition long owed to them. Therefore, as a feminist International Relations scholar living in Scotland, it raises for me whether Scotland already pursues an internal unspoken *feminist* policy agenda, thereby leading quite naturally to a feminist foreign policy as well.

Some may fear, though, the word and the language of feminism; yet feminism is not a dirty word. Feminism interrogates power —- who holds the power; who is harmed by the power; why it harms them in particular; and what the effect of those harms are. Feminists understand gender as a social construction meaning the differences between the sexes is neither natural nor immutable. Instead, society determines what characteristics pertain to masculinity and femininity, and thereby men and women respectively. Masculinity is often associated with assertiveness (swift and decisive leadership would fall here), autonomy, an affinity towards violence, and rationality and logical thought. Given masculinity/femininity are dichotomous, femininity is the opposite: indeterminate, peaceable, and emotional, which thus means an inability to access rationality and logic. Because of these *constructed* gendered characteristics, men are associated with governance, justice, intelligence, and all the attributes needed to lead. It is these very same gendered constructions that make the world resistant to women-as-leaders.

Feminists contest this inflexible and archaic construction of gender, recognising that men and women — and those that do not identify within this binary — do not rigidly adhere to such characteristics. Patriarchal societies have prioritised masculinity, making masculine characteristics the norm and the desired way of being, such as accepting war and/or the threat of violence as a solution or prioritising competition and self-sufficiency in the neo-liberal economic order. In contrast, feminism emphasises a different approach, one that seeks to dismantle power structures, reducing socio-economic, gendered, and racialised harms, amongst others, via empathy, cooperation, dialogue, and diplomacy.

This is where a feminist foreign policy enters the scene and does so in a context of rising support for women's rights and recognition of the insecurities they face across the globe. Beginning in 2000 with the adoption of UNSC 1325, which focuses on mainstreaming women and gender into all areas of the UN, other steps include the launch of Foreign Secretary William Hague's initiative to end rape and sexual violence in war, for which he was famously joined by Angelina Jolie. On the other side of the Atlantic, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton articulated her own Clinton Doctrine that argued for humanitarian intervention on the grounds of women's insecurity. Yet, FFP really came into force in 2015, when the Swedish Social Democratic Party and the Green Party formed a coalition government, declaring it to be a feminist government with a feminist foreign policy. Accordingly, the Swedish government's feminist foreign policy was "to become the strongest voice for gender equality and full employment of human rights for all women and girls." They included in their "toolbox" an emphasis on women's representation in governments and places of power, human rights for women, and reallocation, or equitable distribution, of global income and natural resources.

Still, there can be more to FFP than just 'adding women and stirring'. Instead, a FFP interested in upending current (masculine) power structures by redistributing power to more, if not all people, will lift all people, not just women. Thus, scholars of FFP, particularly Annika Bergman-Rosamund, Karin Aggestam, and Annika Kronsell[1], believe that FFP should "explicitly seek to renegotiate and challenge power hierarchies and gendered institutions." Therefore, FFP does not just addresses women's material positions around the world but embraces a "reorientation" of foreign policy based upon cosmopolitan ideals of justice, peace, and pragmatic security. A feminist foreign policy listens to marginalised voices and aims to remove gender, racial, sexual, and socio-economic boundaries, amongst others. It is empathetic, sensitive, caring, and relational. And this is where Scotland enters the picture. Contemporary Scottish politics are inherently feminist. They may not be known as such — perhaps the word feminism is too scary or off-putting. With devolution and the parties that have held the most power in Holyrood, Scottish voters have noted their interest in politics and policies that emphasise equality of all kinds, parity, justice and fairness. Scottish policies aim to create a society that removes barriers rather than foster them. Policies like these will, eventually, inherently upend masculinist power structures. The combined strength of the SNP, Labour, Greens, and Liberal Democrats in Scotland demonstrates a population interested in social, economic, and climate justice. As a nation moves its political agenda beyond its borders it does so only based upon the issues and politics that are cared about internally. The Scottish vote to remain in the EU demonstrates the population's desire to be part of cosmopolitan inter-governmental organisations. Scotland's request for special consideration in the Brexit negotiations, maintaining an office in Brussels, alongside six other international offices, indicates that Scotland already has a foreign policy. Arguably, it is a feminist one.

While the Covid-centred headlines about women's success as leaders is important, it is equally important to recognise that all leaders can adopt policies that prioritise the health and safety of people over the health and safety of the economy. Feminist policy — foreign or domestic — can be enacted by men, women, and non-binary folk as feminist foreign policy is about relationships, care, empathy and equality. To embrace these is to embrace a paradigm shift, to move away from a focus on hard security and neo-liberal

capitalism. In a post-Covid (should that day arrive) world that is also cognisant of how misogynistic, racial, and socio-economic barriers work, people living in places with feminist policies might see a better future for everyone, not just some. It is this holistic vision — of all people being better off together — that makes me believe in the future of Scotland and believe that this future is a feminist one in spirit if not name.

Caron E. Gentry is Senior Lecturer in the School of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews

---

[1] Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamund. 2016. "Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy in the Making: Ethics, Politics, and Gender," *Ethics and International Affairs*, 30(3), 323-334; Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamund, and Annica Kronsell. 2019. "Theorising Feminist Foreign Policy," *International Relations*, 33(1): 29-39; Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman Rosamund. 2018. "Re-Politicising the Gender-Security Nexus: Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy," *European Review of International Studies*, 5(3), 30-48.

Where is the information about why we have the statues we do?
– Keir Bloomer
Originally posted 27 August 2020

After the toppling of the Colston statue in Bristol, the monument to Henry Dundas, Viscount Melville, in St. Andrews Square in Edinburgh became the subject of criticism. The city council decided to place an explanatory plaque at the monument, providing information about Dundas's life. This was a good decision. The temporary notice now in place seems to have satisfied public expectations.

The new notice also fills an information gap. On the back of the monument, there is a small plaque that tells of the role of Robert Stephenson, the lighthouse engineer, in erecting the huge column but otherwise no information is provided, not even Dundas's name and the dates of his birth and death. How many modern passers-by have any idea of who he was or how he comes to have the most conspicuous monument in Edinburgh apart from Sir Walter Scott? Wouldn't it be a good thing if every statue had such an explanatory notice?

Having looked at the Dundas column, a pedestrian might set off along George Street. Almost immediately he/she would encounter the recent statue of James Clerk Maxwell. Some smartphone users with the app installed will use the QR code to access information about Maxwell's role in modern physics. More erudite passers-by can learn from Maxwell's equations reproduced on a nearby plaque.

The next statue, at the intersection with Hanover Street, is much less informative. It tells us only that the figure is George IV and that he visited the city in 1822. Why was it thought remarkable that the king should come to one of his capital cities? Our pedestrian might be surprised to be told that no Scottish king visited Scotland since the reign of Charles II, 150 years earlier. He/she might be entertained by the thought of the obese George touring Edinburgh in the pink tights designed by Scott as part of an extraordinary version of Highland dress.

At the Castle Street junction stands Thomas Chalmers. How many people nowadays even know who he was? Yet he was one of the most important – and admirable – figures in Victorian Scotland. He was an economist, academic and social reformer. However, his principal work was as a voice for democracy in the established church and as the founder of the Free Church. In an era when the church and its history are deemed uninteresting, he is forgotten.

This walk could be repeated in other parts of Edinburgh or in many other places. In Glasgow, for example, George Square contains thirteen monuments, including the cenotaph. Some such as Queen Victoria, James Watt and Robert Burns are well known. Others are now very obscure. The plinths generally carry only minimal information.

There is an opportunity to create a scheme which would not only be educational but also would enhance many people's interest and pleasure while walking around our towns and cities. Furthermore, the scheme could be extended beyond public statues to, for example, buildings or parks. Glasgow University has buildings called after Adam Smith, John Boyd Orr, Joseph Black and Lord Wolfson among others. Why?

Any scheme of this kind would have to be managed in a manner that was sound educationally, historically and ethically. It should stimulate debate both during the process of agreeing wording and after the plaque was in place. However, the plaques should be accurate and free from bias.

I was in St. Andrews Square a few days ago and read the new notice for the first time. It is attractively presented. The text is of the right length; long enough to give a brief overview of Dundas's life and work but short enough to hold the attention of a casual reader.

The content, however, raises more concern. It contains not a single positive statement. At the very least, it should mention that, as a lawyer, Dundas represented a man named Knight who had been brought to Scotland as a slave. He not only secured the man's freedom but also elicited a clear statement from the Court of Session that the law of Scotland did not recognise slavery. Historians as diverse in their political views as Michael Fry and Tom Devine take a very positive view of his role in the abolition of the slave trade – very different from the wording of the notice which holds him responsible for delaying abolition and for the enslavement and transportation of half a million Africans across the Atlantic.

All this raises important questions. Who was commissioned by the city council to write the text? What efforts were made to check its accuracy and objectivity?

It is not the purpose of this article to make a case for or against Dundas but to argue for setting up plaques, that are genuinely informative. It would be essential that the contents were approved by a reputable body, using a panel which featured both historical expertise and a balance of points of view.

The oldest broadly analogous scheme in the world is the blue plaque scheme in London. It was established in 1866 and was originally administered in an impartial fashion by the Royal Society of Arts. Might the RSA be prepared to oversee a scheme for Scotland's statues? Alternatively, is this something that the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland's National Academy, might be prepared to take on?

Keir Bloomer is chair of the Commission on School Reform

No Future for Residential Outdoor Learning – Dave Spence

Originally posted 15 September 2020

It is hard to reconcile that we are on the brink of losing most, if not all residential outdoor centres in Scotland. To accept that we are writing off an effective developmental and educational pedagogy for young people and a major contributor to the Scottish Education system seems incredible. It will diminish school life and it will impoverish childhood.

After meetings with the Scottish Government who fully understand the enormous benefits of using specialist outdoor educators to support teachers and get young people active outdoors, it is bizarre that those who do most of this work, the Third Sector residential providers, are being cut loose to sink.

Failure of Mixed Economy

There were structural problems in the sector before the pandemic, caused in part by the imbalance in the mixed economy of council and Third Sector residential providers. That imbalance persists as central government opts to channel money to councils at the expense of the Third Sector.

The council and Third Sector models are very different. Money directed to councils is time limited, beyond which the result will be demands to the Scottish Government for more of the same. Ten years of austerity nearly put paid to local authority residential provision. As we contemplate repaying the astronomical costs of COVID measures, strategic decision-making must consider what the next 5-10 years of austerity will do to local authority residential and youth work provision.

Third Sector Model

My own organisation – SOEC – is a charity and social enterprise. We generate £1,400,000 per annum and 95% of that is derived from parents or organisations that support young people. We support schools and deliver outcomes related to CfE, Health and Wellbeing, Youth, Sustainability and other government policy priorities. The activity costs the Scottish Government nothing.

#

We contribute to the Scottish economy. As a not-for-profit social enterprise, £1.4m is channelled into the Scottish economy in supplies (food, fuel etc.) and in wages. Third Sector providers like SOEC have to be the most cost efficient, best value and sustainable option for the delivery of outdoor learning.

We also add value to the Scottish economy. A Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis by independent consultants determined that SOEC generates over £11 of environmental and social benefits for every £1 spent. On this basis, SOEC contributes over £15m to Scotland annually.

Why are we Successful?

Specialist outdoor educators engage young people in activities that develop skills (teamwork, communication etc.) and qualities ('can do' growth mind-set, resilience etc.). Getting young people into novel environments and asking they them to stretch willingly beyond their comfort zone requires great skill and judgement but it is extremely effective. Do this in one activity and it is fun; do it 20 times over several days and we change the young person; their self-perception and self-belief, their optimism and confidence. It is more than just a fun experience; it is vital to the education and development of young people.

In a country where research shows that young people lack confidence and are pessimistic for their future, and for a generation who must contend with major challenges such as climate change, post-COVID unemployment, sustainability, and globalisation, these qualities and skills are essential.

Several organisations in Scotland have produced lists of essential qualities and skills. Few organisations actually work to inspire and empower young people to develop them as effectively as SOEC and other Third Sector organisations.

SOEC and the Wider Third Sector Group

SOEC Headline Figures: in each of the 10 years since the economic downturn, we have worked on average with 15,000 young people, provided over 100,000 outdoor learning days (school days equivalent,) sustained 50 'green jobs'; worked with 1,500 secondary and primary schools and 440 additional needs groups. Teachers return regularly because what we offer is fun and delivers the outcomes they want to see.

It is easier to provide figures for my own charity but we are not alone. Our successful approach is mirrored by other Third Sector organisations such as Outward Bound, Scouts Scotland, Ocean Youth Trust, Scripture Union and Field Studies Council, and until Netherurd House was closed recently, by Girl Guides Scotland.

We all start with a child-centred approach. We collaborate with teachers and young people for the best results. We maximise learning and development outcomes to deliver qualities and skills, based on firm foundations of strong relationships with young people. We have different emphases but our approach and economics are very similar; we survive by trading and giving people what they want.

Accurate data are notoriously difficult to collate in this profession. However, recently gathered data by the Association of Heads of Outdoor Centres in Scotland (AHOEC) and Third Sector Outdoor Learning Group (TSOLG) suggest:

TSOLG organisations (under the auspices of Youthlink) have around 2,000 beds. Other Third Sector organisations, (either in AHOEC or not affiliated to AHOEC and Youthlink) have just under 1,000. Council-run centre bed-spaces number 400. Therefore, the total number of bed spaces in Scotland is around 3,300 [figures have been rounded]. Those in Third Sector organisations have over 80% of the total residential bed spaces in Scotland. SOEC provide approximately 20% of the Third Sector resource so a very broad evaluation might multiply SOECs figures by 5.

It is even more difficult to estimate the number of closures as providers desperately hope the Government changes its mind before it is too late. Perhaps half the bed spaces will be gone by Christmas. By the time of the Election next year, there will be far fewer bed spaces. Centres provide hundreds of thousands of learning days in the outdoors and as centres close, no organisation will be able to fill this gap.

Now

Though sustainable over decades, Centres are not immune from the impact of the pandemic. While the Government encourages others to return to work, and to get young people outdoors, where the risk of transmission is vanishingly small, residential Centres must remain in lock-down. Trading income for 2020 has been wiped out. After 6 months of dialogue, as Third Sector providers sought to use their teams to support schools and keep teams viable until Centres can reopen, the Scottish Government has decided it will not support residential providers.

The result will inevitably be the permanent and irrevocable closure of Centres. For SOEC, after 80 years of providing for young people, our charity will be wound-up. Once closed, we are unlikely to have the money to reopen Centres. A relatively small amount of financial support now, to keep their teams active and enable Centres to bounce back perhaps next year, would retain these valuable, national assets.

The Government had previously stated that, *"progressive outdoor learning experiences are best delivered through a combination of school-based outdoor learning and residential programmes"* and that *"the outdoor environment offers motivating, exciting, different, relevant and easily accessible activities from pre-school years through to college."*

More recently, the Deputy First Minister said that he was *"keen to ensure that "residential outdoor learning experiences remain part of school curriculum for Excellence."* The Scottish Government has put a great deal of effort and support into early years to get young people outdoors.

I do not wish to overemphasise our plight when families are experiencing tragedies. Nor do I envy the decisions that the Government faces. However, the loss of outdoor centres will have serious ramifications for young people. A vital aspect of the school experience – residentials – will disappear. Alternative cannot replace it. A residential experience is a significant milestone for pupils that should be protected.

Major investment has been directed to Early Years and training staff in outdoor settings to provide enriched learning experiences; to provide learning experiences that enable the children to take risks, problem solve, communicate, co-operate and explore. This learning is then progressed in the Primary sector often culminating in P6 or P7 in the residential.

Teachers work in partnership with tutors and instructors to enable children to take their prior learning experiences and apply skills to new settings, deepening their understanding, skills and abilities further. The residential allows teachers to observe and assess their pupils over a period of days. Seeing children in this new context

provides perspectives and understanding of how they learn and develop which can in turn, be transferred back to the school setting

Many Learning Communities use the residential experience to scaffold the transition to high school. The residential provides a neutral space and is an exciting time for children to meet their peers from other schools with whom they will journey though secondary school. It provides secondary school staff opportunities to observe children in a stimulating, unthreatening context. It forges durable, positive relationships between peers and staff alike. It provides a basis on which staff and pupils build in S1 and beyond. The residential encapsulates CfE key principles of continuity and progression, depth, enjoyment and challenge.

The loss of residential option for schools will result in the loss of activity emblematic of progressive education. Progression, breadth and depth will be diminished. Having invested so much in outdoor learning in early years, to then remove the residential in primary, will not be a neutral effect but a negative in impact.

The residential is an iconic school event and teachers and families will keenly feel its loss. Through flexible bookings and expressions of interests, SOEC is projecting half of our annual income (£700,000) for next year despite uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Teachers and parents want the residential to continue.

The residential offers so many benefits, and Third Sector providers are the most sustainable, innovative, adaptable, cost effective and best value option. Therefore, we must question whether allowing them to go extinct at this time is wise?

And Then

A vision for residential outdoor centres was laid down in the Camps Act of 1939. The Government then, their backs were very much to the wall and under great pressure from competing demands for scarce resources, took time to debate and approve the building of residential educational Centres. Parliamentarians looked beyond the immediate threats and considered that, enabling young people to learn for themselves in the outdoors was a significant as compulsory schooling. It was said they would look back on this *"as one of the best decisions made at this time."*

Generations since have benefitted from this far-sighted vision. It is excruciatingly disappointing that the Scottish Government, while acknowledging the value and importance of the residential for young people, cannot find a mechanism that supports it; that the permanent closure of these fabulous resources will result in impoverished childhoods and a significant setback for Education in Scotland.

Conclusion

Therefore, we have a new vision for young people in Scotland. It has not emerged from a national debate on what is best for young people. It was neither deliberated nor agreed. A major national resource is just going to disappear. It will massively change the Education landscape and by the time of the next Election, there will be few young people attending residential education centres in Scotland.

Young people will not undertake away-from-home residentials. They will not spend time in other parts of Scotland. They will have fewer opportunities to interact meaningfully with the environment. They will not take part in immersive experiences essential to develop qualities and skills that inspire, empower and transform them.

Specialist outdoor educators will not spend time with thousands of young people, honing their skills to engage safely in adventurous activities, or their judgement to engage young people in successful pedagogy for development and learning.

No organisation or group of people will be able to pick up the sheer volume of outdoor activity that currently takes place. Just a few weeks ago, we were focused on extending our reach to other young people; now we are staring at extinction.

Dave Spence is CEO of Scottish Outdoor Education Centres. The petition about outdoor education at #saveyouroutdoorcentres

As the enforcement of the UK's new immigration rules approach, it's time to consider how they will impact Scotland

– Reanna Smith

Originally posted 22 September 2020

Over the past six months, Brexit has taken a back-seat as the COVID-19 pandemic quickly became the country's top concern. But with lessons learnt from this difficult time, and less than six months until the newly proposed immigration rules are set to be put into force, it's time to consider just what they could mean for Scotland. Unfortunately, the answers not good.

In their response to the Immigration Advisory Committee, the Scottish government recently revealed that the new points-based immigration system could be particularly devastating for Scotland's social care sector, which was at the forefront of the country's response to the Coronavirus pandemic, with 45% of COVID deaths in Scotland happening in care homes.

It's clear then that now more than ever, the Scottish social care sector, which supports more than 200,000 people, is absolutely vital to the country. So, a system set to damage this important sector should be of top concern.

The Scottish social care sector is already facing a crisis, with serious understaffing issues. A Scottish Care employer survey from 2018 indicated that 77% of care homes were having recruitment difficulties. The Coronavirus pandemic has only increased this risk, putting more pressure on health and care services. Over the next four years, it's anticipated that demand for health and social care staff will increase with estimates suggesting it could rise by as much as 10,500 more full-time social care staff being required.

The care sector can't afford to lose any more staff, but with 16,000 workers from other European countries employed in health and social care in Scotland, and an additional 1,000 people from other overseas nations, the new immigration system could mean significant losses.

Under the new points-based system, workers must be able to meet a certain salary threshold to be classed as "skilled workers" and be eligible for a Tier 2 Work Visa. Many of Scotland's social care workers would fail to meet the proposed £25,600 salary requirement, with data from the 2018 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) suggesting that less than 10% of those working in caring and personal service occupations in Scotland earn £25,000.

When COVID-19 reached the UK, it was clear that those most important to our society weren't just those earning high wages. The government released a list of "key worker" roles, containing jobs that they recognised as being significant in the fight against the

pandemic. Ironically, many roles on that list didn't come under the minimum salary requirement to be classed as a "skilled worker" by the new points-based system.

After pressure to correct this misjudgement, the government recently launched a new Health and Care Visa, intending to make it easier for foreign workers to work in the UK healthcare sector. This new type of visa is cheaper and faster to obtain than other work visas. However, social care roles are not included on this visa.

Due to this, Ben Macpherson, Minister for Public Finance and Migration has called for the government to add social care roles to the Shortage Occupation List (SOL), he said: "The Scottish Government is clear – we greatly value the skills and contributions of all people who come and settle in Scotland. Inward migration enriches our society for the better and migrants make a net contribution to our economy, our public services, and our public finances. Family migration also contributes positively to our demography, and the sustainability of rural and remote communities."

Adding social care roles to the SOL would allow employers to recruit international workers at a lower salary threshold of £20,480 instead.

The new immigration rules could be disastrous for Scotland in particular because they fail to take the country's individual immigration needs into account. A report from February last year, looking at the impact of the UK Government's Immigration White Paper proposals in Scotland, estimated that migration to Scotland over the next two decades would fall by between 30% and 50%, causing the working-age population to decline by up to 5%. This demographic problem is an issue unique to Scotland, with other areas of the UK not estimated to face a decline in the working-age population.

Although adding social care roles to the SOL would reduce the financial requirements for non-UK nationals to work in the care sector, it still puts a monetary value on something priceless. The work that is done by foreign nationals in the Scottish social care sector, from caring for the elderly to helping those with disabilities, mental health problems, and drug and alcohol problems, is incredibly important.

The impact these workers have on Scottish society greatly outweighs any economic impact they could ever have. The Scottish government must continue to fight for the right for non-UK social care workers to come to Scotland, not only because the country needs them, but because they are owed the continued recognition for their contribution during this unprecedented pandemic.

Reanna Smith writes for the Immigration Advice Service, an organisation of lawyers committed to the goal of accessible and professional immigration and asylum advice for everyone.

Beware the generational backlash – Sarah Atkin

Originally posted 29 September 2020

During lockdown I was listening to a radio phone-in with Dr Jason Leitch, Scotland's national clinical director. A seemingly minor issue was raised in a call which stopped me in my tracks. A young man asked Dr Leitch when he'd be able to see his girlfriend again. A chuckle followed – well…sorry but you're going to have to wait a while yet for that! Oh my god, I thought. Would I have been able to stay away from my significant 'other' when young and in the flowering of a new romance? That's such a big 'ask'. So, was this a 'minor' issue? No. Did it warrant mirth? No. If I were this young man would I have felt a little 'dismissed'? Yes.

The near blind indifference to the young (of all ages) has been similar on almost every front during this pandemic. The Glasgow University student debacle is just the latest example. Policy decisions and pandemic planning has barely factored-in the needs of young people, let alone placed them at the centre of it. Pandemic media coverage has rarely viewed this crisis from a young person's perspective either – especially less privileged young people.

Like many of my generation I spent a great deal of lockdown sifting through old photographs, joining in the multiple Facebook circulars for 'books that influenced you; albums that defined your life; your all-time favourite movies; etc.' Memories, memories. For many it's been a period for reflection and re-evaluation.

For our children and grandchildren, lockdown put an abrupt 'stop' to the creation of memories. We shut them up for months, closed their schools, colleges and universities; kept them away from their peers and other significant relationships; messed up their education and pulled opportunities from under them. Scant regard was paid to the mental health implications of lockdown (even, in some towns and cities closing parks. The only green spaces many families had access to for outdoor leisure and respite.) At the end of all of this they'll move into a world of high unemployment, potential economic collapse and dizzying levels of national debt.

Given what they've given up and what's been screwed up for them so far, from what I've witnessed, the upcoming generations have been mightily impressive during this crisis. They deserve credit for that. However, the sense of a great deal of generational anger brewing has been palpable. Now we have further restrictions on life which will impact the young re: work/jobs. Then the chaos in universities sees students' vilified.

The Glasgow University crisis has brought into sharp focus what students now appear to be: product. Pandemic be damned, we'll bring them in. Take the rental and fee income THEN tell them their courses will be online. Whether intended or not, this is how it looks. When it predictably goes 'pear-shaped' the students are subjected to the most draconian rhetoric and restrictions yet witnessed during this pandemic. Who wouldn't feel angry and used? They must feel like lab rats in an ill-thought through experiment. Add in the stories of students having to sort out their own food deliveries

and flats not even having Wi-Fi, the dereliction of duty by both those running the university and those running education in Scotland is shocking.

Students were encouraged from across the UK and the globe with a promise that, as far as possible there would be a university 'experience'. When did the university know that their academic offer was to be almost entirely online? Was that information communicated?

Filling up Murano Village (at Glasgow University) in one 'big bang' and not expecting partying is the equivalent of putting an alcoholic to work behind a bar and then blaming them if they have a drink. Yes, personal responsibility matters but those in authority – people running universities, government – have a duty to design an environment and put in place a set of measures that mitigate risk. Their job is to plan. To think. To figure it out. Relying on the police to break up parties is not a strategy to prevent the spread of COVID. It's the opposite – a reckless absence of strategy. Also, government 'guidance' that spin its way from one highly paid set of officials to another, eventually finding its way to the door of those running our higher education institutions is not my idea of political leadership.

Beyond the current crisis, how is it going to be sustainable – socially, academically, for mental health and public health – for large numbers of Year 1 students in large residences like Murano, away from campus, if all their learning is online? This arrangement is a greater public health risk than were they to have regular 'face time' with tutors on campus, with structure and where social interactions can be more controlled.

This debacle has all the hallmarks of being a 'moment' far bigger than itself. A tipping point.

We have to do better by the upcoming generations than this. They need to be at the heart of the country's economic and social recovery. To drive it forward. If not, we're in for one hell of a generational backlash in the decade ahead.

Sarah Atkin is a mum and concerned citizen. She works in education.

Do Not Mistake Decency for Weakness – Paul Gray

Originally posted 30 September 2020

Long ago, when I was at school, we were told the first part of a story and asked to suggest an ending. Here is the first part of a story.

In a land far away life was very simple. There were two groups, one called Right and the other called Wrong. Except it wasn't quite as simple as that. Because Wrong thought Right should be called Wicked and Stupid, and Right thought Wrong should be called Stupid and Wicked. So it was really quite confusing.

Whenever an issue arose, the people gathered.

They shouted Right!

They shouted Wrong!

They shouted Stupid!

And they shouted Wicked!

And nobody was quite sure who was what. Everyone believed that they were Right, and other people were Wrong. And quite possibly other people were Stupid and Wicked, or perhaps they were Wicked and Stupid. It was often hard to tell.

And then someone invented something called social media.

Now, class, how does this story end? We all like stories to have a happy ending but I struggle to see how this one could.

It is very hard, perhaps increasingly hard, to change the tone of debate, but stifling debate is not the answer – it is fundamental to competent government to have effective opposition, robust scrutiny and a free press.

It is also hard to get away from the fact that an important part of standing for election is winning (which inevitably means that somebody has to lose). And one way to win is to convince the electorate that your proposals are right (and by extension the other person's are wrong).

But if all we have is the binary choice between winning and losing, and right and wrong, does that really reflect the diversity of the world in which we live? Understanding the areas of disagreement and divergence, and the reasons for these, often provides very useful insights, and in my experience some discussions about contested areas result in the final proposal being better than the original. And understanding the areas of agreement or overlap when considering proposals – whether in manifestos, legislative programmes, policy options, or delivery plans – sometimes leads to the conclusion that

the real divergence is not about what should be achieved, but how. That in itself is useful information, not least in that it provides some common ground for a conversation.

There is also the risk that if every decision is binary, polarisation is very likely to increase – and the safe space in which it is possible to raise concerns or examine competing arguments is likely to shrink until it is invisible.

But nor can we afford to over-correct to a position where it's not acceptable, or impossible, to describe something as wrong: some things are indeed wrong; indeed, some are wicked. Some issues are so important that forensic examination and robust challenge of proposals is not only desirable, but essential. Scrutiny of public bodies, public expenditure and public officials is a core component of accountability. But disagreeing with my point of view doesn't necessarily make you wrong, and it certainly doesn't make you wicked.

And if debate is to be productive, facts matter, accuracy matters, and evidence matters. This risks sounding naïve, given that too much of what passes for debate is focused on diminishing the standing of the individual or group regarded as the opposition, or worse still, characterised as the enemy. But I fear a greater risk than being thought naïve, and that is the risk that more and more issues are decided on the basis of the power and reach of one's voice, and fewer and fewer on the basis of the strength and validity of the argument.

The way we react to debate matters too. The prospect of individuals or groups changing their position on an issue is diminished if every movement is followed by assertions that they have been "forced" to change their minds, or humiliated, when in fact they have responded to new information, or changed their minds in response to a better understanding of the prevailing context. It is also possible to thank someone for listening carefully to arguments, and responding thoughtfully to what they have heard, and if someone gets something wrong and later corrects it, there is an important choice between amplifying the mistake and recognising that it takes courage to own up to making one.

But returning to our original story – can there be a happy ending?

The problem with getting to a happy ending is that somebody would need to change. And one other thing I know about the land far away is that not only is it very hard to distinguish between between Right and Wrong, but almost everyone has the same name – and their name is Somebody Else. And despite the citizenry's largely adversarial approach to everything from climate change to what to have for lunch, there was very strong support for the proposition that Somebody Else had to change. As ever there were some outliers: a small group composed of individuals who were clear that Everybody Else had to change; and another group who just enjoyed being rude. So despite the consensus, nothing much changed.

Is there any cause for hope, or are we on an endless slide into an endless futile battle? I believe there is some cause for hope: I detect a sense that the current quality of debate

risks becoming debased, if it has not become so already, and I detect a general distaste for personal attacks.

Of course, it could be argued that anything less than a robust contribution will be perceived as ineffective, and in any case there is no point in changing unless everyone does it. A lesson I learned from someone whose judgement I trust was this: people should not mistake decency for weakness. And one of the main lessons I learned about improvement is deceptively simple: start where you are, and do what you can.
Is it worth taking the risk, and taking it now? Even if it's only you and me?

Professor Paul Gray is a former Chief Executive of NHS Scotland and Director General for Health and Social Care at the Scottish Government

Empowering young people – Dave Spence

Originally posted 1 October 2020

Many educators acknowledge the need for young people to develop essential qualities. Given the challenges of climate heating, biodiversity loss, globalisation etc. we anticipate a stressful future. Young people will need to be confident, resilient, optimistic and display a growth mind-set if they are to thrive in their world.

Research suggest we are falling short in enabling young people to develop these qualities. Residential Outdoor Learning claims to be one of the best approaches to empowering young people. How do we do this?

Young people stay at an Outdoor Centre and engage in challenging activities (canoeing, climbing, abseiling etc.) alternating with educational activities, and more leisurely games and play. This iteration of 'stress' and 'recovery', similar to that found in sport physiology, develops mental toughness.

Engage in one activity and the young person transitions from apprehension to achievement. Do it 20 times over a sequence of days (like the 5-day residential) and we fundamentally change the young person, their self-perception, self-belief, resilience, optimism and confidence.

Further, through these activities, they become familiar with successful achievement in new contexts. They change from entering a new space and engaging in a novel activity and perceiving it as a threat, to one in which a new contexts are perceived to be exciting opportunities. *"To begin with, mental toughness involves a particular attitude to novel events: a toughened individual welcomes novelty as a challenge, sees it as an opportunity for gain; an untoughened individual dreads it as a threat and sees in it nothing but potential harm."* **(1)**

Of course, it also requires skilled outdoor education specialists, able to judge the right level of challenge in an activity for the group and individuals in the group, and for young people of different ages and abilities, to bring about positive changes. Too much stimulus and panic blocks development; too little and the young person will soon let you know they are bored. Judge it just right, and the experiences are transformative for all young people including those with additional needs. *"I didn't think I'd like being in the outdoors but now I know there are things I enjoy doing in the outdoors… and it's a lot less stressful than the city." (2)*

Our understanding of physical toughness relative to our understanding of mental toughness is more advanced today due to the work of sports scientists. But that does not prevent many of us feeling an urgent need to enable young people to develop qualities that will sustain them in a rapidly changing world that generates so much stress, anxiety, fatigue and mental ill-health.

Residential outdoor centres capture a fairly unique combination of exciting activities, outdoor education specialists, in an immersive residential experience over several days. As a result, it is possible to inspire and motivate a young person to develop these qualities. At SOEC, we believe that these qualities are more than desirable; they are essential for young people in their future.

To this mix, we should add another ingredient – collaboration between teachers and outdoor educators. We know that partnership working may be more challenging but it delivers the best results. Despite premature bans on residential bookings, teachers want residentials for their young people, as provisional bookings and expressions of interest for next year show.

With Centres unable to provide residential experiences because of the pandemic, and with no financial support from the Government, Third Sector organisations, like Scottish Environmental and Outdoor Education Centres (trading as SOEC), will disappear. The pandemic may have initially shut Centres but in failing to support Centre staff from working with young people, the government is driving the sector to extinction.

It is therefore right to ask, if we want young people to develop these qualities, how are we going to achieve that in Scotland without Outdoor Education Centres? In pedagogical approach and in scale, Third Sector residential providers do what few other organisations can. In 2019, over 100,000 young people engaged in over 500,000 learning days in the outdoors through a residential experience. No other group or organisation can provide the sheer volume of work that residential centres do today. As Third Sector organisations are being forced to close Centres permanently, would it be possible to recreate this complex combination of factors to successfully empower young people to develop these qualities? If we chose to do so in the future, how much will it cost?

We have come a long way in 80 years, from character building to emotional intelligences, and to mental toughness and resilience. Residential Centres support teachers and make a positive contribution to young people developing qualities they will need in their future. However, organisations that run residential outdoor learning are being forced to permanently close their Centres. Is there a realistic alternative that could deliver these outcomes so cost effectively and so well? Or should for the Government support outdoor centres as a matter of urgency, and pull them back from the brink of extinction?

If you believe there to be no effective alternative, and what residential centre providers offer teachers and pupils is just too good to lose, please sign the petition #saveyouroutdoorcentres.

Dave Spence is CEO of Scottish Outdoor Education Centres.

1. Jonathon Coates 'The Hour between the Dog and Wolf – Risk-Taking, Gut Feelings and the Biology of Boom and Bust' 2013 Routh Estate publishing.
2. a young person with autistic spectrum diagnoses after participating in an SOEC Transition to Work programme

Examining 'Restore our schools' – Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 5 October 2020

The Scottish Conservatives' recent policy paper on education, *Restore our Schools*, is welcome as a sign that any political party is taking education seriously by concentrating on the details while also thinking about the general direction. Much debate about education in Scotland consists of vague aspirations combined with sound-bite responses to the latest crisis.

Some aspects of the paper can be unequivocally welcomed, such as its recognition of the need for better statistical data on Scottish education and the commitment to rejoin all the major international surveys of pupil attainment. On that, it is true, there has to be thinking on how to deal with the entrenched resistance to objective evidence in the Scottish educational establishment, and what can, sadly, only be described as the innumeracy of far too many senior officials in Scottish government at all levels. But we can only hope that any Conservative influence on government will come with some political determination to insist that elected politicians matter more than bureaucrats.
Nevertheless, the Conservatives' thinking will need to become rather more rigorous if it is to form the basis of practicable policy. Five topics in the paper can illustrate this, along with a sixth that ought to be there but isn't.

Teacher recruitment
The paper proposes 3,000 extra teachers, on the grounds that there are about that many fewer teachers now than in 2007 – just over 52k now compared to around 55k then. But this needs to be analysed more carefully. In fact, the number of primary teachers now (25k) is more than a thousand greater than in 2007, while the secondary-school number has fallen from 26.5k to 23.5k. (There's also been a fall in the number of pre-school teachers.) The number of teachers is largely driven by forecasts of the number of pupils, which are generally accurate and timely. Since 2007, pupil numbers have risen at primary and fallen at secondary. So the average pupil-teacher ratio has remained quite stable – at primary, 15.8 in 2007 and 15.9 now; at secondary, 11.6 and 12.4.

There's nothing wrong with making a case for more teachers – quite the opposite. But the basis needs to be relevant calculations. When the Conservative's paper says that having fewer teachers 'means larger class sizes and individual pupils not being given the attention that they deserve', they are ignoring the changes in pupil numbers.

Science in primary schools
The paper proposed a specialist 'STEM teacher' in each primary school. This is laudable so far as it goes, although there is no published information on how many such teachers there currently are. (For example, the topic is not mentioned in the annual governmental reports of *STEM Strategy for Education and Training in Scotland*.) The problem is the undifferentiated concept of 'Science, technology, engineering and mathematics'. The most recent information we have on primary teachers' knowledge of these topics is more than a decade old, but is probably still relevant because at least about two thirds of current teachers will have been in post then. Teachers were more comfortable with

mathematics than with natural science, and more comfortable with biology than with chemistry or physics. So the question has to be asked, but the Conservatives don't ask it: what kind of science do we want in primary? Curriculum for Excellence's scientific strands for primary are not really a proper basis for science at all, being at best merely encouraging children to ask the questions that are precursors to scientific knowledge. There is hardly any point in placing a science teacher in every school if all they end up doing is organising nature walks. There has to be a proper scientific curriculum, which has to start with scientific knowledge. We come back to this point about knowledge below.

Home tutoring

The Conservative paper is on firmer ground in its imaginative proposal of a national programme of tutors. These would work with children and families to supplement what happens in the classroom while also liaising closely with the class teacher. There is firm evidence that this would be effective, and indeed that is why the government in England has funded the Educational Endowment Foundation to run a National Tutoring Programme as one response to the loss of learning that was caused by the Covid closures. Publicly funded tutors would also help to address the inequity that arises because only quite wealthy families can afford to pay for tutors, whether during the present health emergency or normally. The one element lacking from this proposal is any assessment of where these tutors would come from. In normal circumstance, as distinct from the Covid emergency, they can't all be recruited from the ranks of trainee teachers (who are, after all, training) and supply teachers (whose main role is supply). The Conservatives will also have to face up to the entrenched opposition to any such scheme by the educational establishment (such as the GTC).

Free breakfast

The most eye-catching proposal from the Conservatives is to provide free breakfasts (as well as free lunches) for every child in primary school. This proposal seems to have been borrowed from recent Conservative manifestos in England, but also to have learnt some lessons from these about affordability, taking proper account of uptake, staffing levels, and physical space. The Scottish proposals estimate an annual cost of £20m, which is consistent with the source it cites (an evaluation by the Education Data Lab) if uptake is just 20% of all pupils. But such a low response would barely include every child living in poverty (as estimated by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation), and would not cover the projected quarter or more in poverty by the end of the next session of the Scottish parliament. The proposal also has nothing to say about what happens in the school holidays, and yet there is already a Scottish government scheme to provide free lunch in the summer holiday to children who would normally get free school lunch. Moreover, if only poor children were to receive breakfast in school, free breakfast would become as invidious as free school meals used to be. In any case, children would be likely to want to eat breakfast with groups of friends, some in poverty, some not. None of this is an argument against the proposal for free breakfast, but it does seem that the policy has not yet been fully thought through.

Independent inspectorate

The paper's proposal for a properly independent inspectorate is bold and cogent. But we've been there before. After the previous exams fiasco (of the year 2000, not the most

recent one), separating inspection from policy advice was a core part of how the then Scottish Executive responded, with cross-party agreement in the Scottish parliament's education committee. That lasted for a few years, but the inspectorate wormed its way back into the heart of policy-making when the present Scottish government merged it with the former Learning and Teaching Scotland to create Education Scotland in 2011. From that position of unchallenged power, the inspectors then moulded Curriculum for Excellence and all the attendant changes to examinations and teacher training that have brought Scottish education to its current mediocre state. These points of course reinforce the Conservatives' new ideas about the inspectorate, but they also do indicate that the task will not be easy. School inspectors are not like, say, inspectors of environmental standards. They are at present far more fundamental to policy. Making the inspectorate independent is then not only a matter of getting independent evidence on schools. It's also a matter of keeping the inspectors at arms' length. I'm not convinced that the Conservatives realise what a monumental battle that will be.

Knowledge

Almost everything in the Conservatives' paper assumes that we want our pupils to acquire knowledge, and yet the topic is addressed only in an aside that doesn't even mention knowledge, in the non-committal note that 'academics and professionals have stated that Curriculum for Excellence is a flawed education reform that has led to declining standards across the board for Scottish education'. The paper does not say whether Conservatives agree with that critique. There are many mentions of the fashionable word 'skills', but no recognition that skills depend on knowledge.

On the question of knowledge, the paper is thus not only an inadequate response to the problems of the Scottish curriculum, but also a retreat from the Scottish Conservative's *New Blueprint for the Curriculum for Excellence* where the importance of knowledge was recognised and the failure of Curriculum for Excellence in that respect was accepted. Merely deferring a decision on this, as the paper does, until after the forthcoming OECD review of Scottish education – when the OECD itself has been one of the main sources of the current curriculum – is irresponsible.

In summary, while individual proposals in the new Conservative paper are welcome so far as they go, even though they mostly need more work, the fundamental failure is a grave disappointment that the party seems to be moving away from what was its emerging firm commitment to a properly knowledge-based curriculum. Other parties may take up the challenge, and Reform Scotland will analyse their proposals too, but on curriculum reform the evidence from this paper is that the Conservatives are no longer leading the debate.

Lindsay Paterson is Professor of education policy at Edinburgh University

What Hong Kong can do for Scotland – Roy Leckie

Originally posted 12 November 2020

It is well known that Scotland had a massive influence on the success of Britain's former colony Hong Kong. It is more deeply rooted than just the preponderance of Scottish place names, the businesses with Scottish foundations and the fact that Hong Kong's rugby team play in the blue of Scotland. It was an Edinburgh man, a disciple of Adam Smith called John James Cowperthwaite, who was the brains behind Hong Kong's success. When he assumed the role of Finance Secretary in the colony in the early 1960s, the UK's GDP per capita was about four times that of Hong Kong's. Today, Hong Kong's is substantially greater. Cowperthwaite, aided and abetted by vast numbers of Scots businessmen and administrators, was the architect of this prosperity.

It is time for us to ask the people of Hong Kong to return the favour to Scots and Scotland. Those seeking to escape China's creeping authoritarianism should come and inject some much needed dynamism into Scotland's economy. The Scottish government must capitalise on Westminster's plan to offer a route to UK citizenship to the more than three million people living in Hong Kong who currently have a right to British National (Overseas) (BNO) passports.

From January 2021 holders of BNO status and their immediate families may apply for entry visas, for either two periods of 30 months or a single period of five years. After five years they can apply to settle in the UK, and then obtain full citizenship after a further 12 months.

Scotland has a huge opportunity to benefit from this opening of our borders, by leveraging its historical and current bonds with Hong Kong. I would love to see the devolved government being proactive, positioning Scotland as the UK's most attractive region for Hong Kong's best and brightest to settle in. We should immediately start engaging with all of those Scots who have links to Hong Kong: individuals, businesses and our universities. Plans and policies should be designed and put into action.

Just as the recently launched inward investment strategy seeks to shape Scotland's future economy, at least as much thought and energy should be allocated to the task of encouraging an influx of human capital, the return on which I believe would be considerable. If we can create policies that seek to incentivise companies to come to Scotland, let's do so for Hong Kongers too.

Attracting 100,000 or more well educated, law-abiding, hardworking, enterprising Hong Kongers to Scotland would not just help fuel the eventual post-pandemic recovery. It would go a long way to alleviating some of our most intense structural pressures.

Most worrying among these, if not immediately critical, is our demographic profile. Scotland needs more young, productive tax payers. Our population has barely grown over the last half-century, but it has aged. The ratio of workers to retirees is just over

two, and falling. The fertility rate likewise, is low. It's likely that (the BNO programme aside) constraints around the UK's immigration policies will tighten rather than loosen. So how are we to fund future health, welfare and pension obligations? We have had a long bull market in expectations around welfare provision, but it's been accompanied by a steady decline in our ability to deliver.

HMRC's data starkly highlights the lack of breadth and depth across Scotland's tax base. Too many people pay no income tax at all, and we have only 15,000 additional rate payers. As working from home becomes more the rule than the exception, the Scottish government should be concerned that some higher earners will move to more fiscally conservative (or sunnier?) climes. Indeed, by playing a game of arbitrage with the rest of the UK at the highest marginal tax rate, Scotland could become relatively attractive not just to those coming from Hong Kong, but to many high earning Scots currently living in London or elsewhere.

Hong Kong's population is well known for its entrepreneurial vitality. Despite being devoid of any natural resources, the resilience and adaptability of its labour force has underwritten its success. We have much to learn (or re-learn) about the virtues of self-reliance and productiveness. Not only is Hong Kong wealthy, it is healthy. As far as education goes, Hong Kong ranks higher than Scotland in most international comparisons. In fact one just has to look at the attainment levels across UK by ethnicity. Chinese students are way out in front.

Unlike most other solutions to our country's challenges, an influx of Hong Kongers should be ideologically neutral from a political perspective. That is, there is no reason for any of Holyrood's parties to object on philosophical grounds. This is a win-win proposal, for Scotland and for those who would choose to leave the growing menace of the Chinese state's influence on Hong Kong.

If there is a downside, it is the risk of upsetting China. But my answer to this is that we should 'play the long game'. In time, a substantial Hong Kong Chinese diaspora in Scotland would be of great benefit to our economic ties with the Orient.

So this is a plea to those in Scotland who are in a position to affect this situation. As the Union Jack was lowered for the last time outside Hong Kong's Government House on 30th June 1997, Highland Cathedral was played by the Hong Kong Police Pipe Band. It's time to reacquaint the people of Hong Kong with the country to which they owe so much, and which owes them so much in return.

Roy Leckie is Executive Director – Investment & Client Service at Walter Scott, an Edinburgh-based investment management business.

Defending an Independent Scotland – Richard Marsh

Originally posted 18 November 2020

Our report on defending an independent Scotland, *A' the Blue Bonnets*, *was* published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in 2012. The report remains the only credible costed model of how an independent Scotland could defend itself.

Since then, much has changed in terms of the UK's place in Europe and the demands placed on its armed forces. We have published two updates to the RUSI report refining the makeup of an independent Scotland's defences.

Both updates have revealed that the cost of defending an independent Scotland remains lower than the figures set out in both the Scottish Government's 2013 White Paper (*Scotland's Future*) and the more recent Sustainable Growth Commission report (2018). Our most recent update was published last month and was covered by the *UK Defence Journal* and *The Economist* (*How Scottish independence would threaten Britain's defence, 5 Nov 2020*).

Most responses to our report focused heavily on the UK's nuclear deterrent and the extent to which Scottish independence would either threaten or accommodate the UK's current defence plans.

The more ambitious defence spending plans set out in the White Paper and Sustainable Growth Commission were reflected in the responses from those advocating independence, with defence spending in an independent Scotland expected to match Scandinavian defence budgets.

The thinking is this would make an independent Scotland more like Denmark or Norway. This reveals both woolly thinking and a lack of diversity in the debate over defending an independent Scotland.

It is a deeply flawed approach to start with the ambition of matching the spending plans of other neighbouring countries. At best, this limits debate to off-the-shelf models which may be ill-suited to Scotland's defence needs and replicate rather than complement the defence capacity of Scotland's neighbours.

The most recent Scottish Government data gives an estimate of nearly £3.5 billion in annual defence expenditure allocated to Scotland in 2019-2020 (Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland). Our latest report showed the annual defence budget for an independent Scotland had fallen to between £1.1 and £1.3 billion. This reflects an expectation that an independent Scotland would not want, or need, to become a smaller version of the UK with full-spectrum military capability.

Scotland, instead, would move away from an army-heavy model towards a more balanced requirement. A defence force of this nature would comprise 11,000 personnel in total, with around 50 aircraft and 20 vessels.

The defence budget and potential savings are based on considering the purpose of Scotland's armed forces, estimating the number of service personnel and the type and amount of equipment needed to meet that purpose and (finally) the cost of maintaining that level of personnel and equipment. This suggests significant cost savings could be realised, particularly as some defence costs could be partially offset by leasing military assets to international partners.

Moreover, it would be easier for Scotland to augment an initially modest commitment rather than gradually unwinding itself from grander global commitments. Successive reviews of the UK's defence and security serve as a warning on the difficulties of reverse engineering.

The UK's long-delayed 'Integrated Review' into security, defence, development and foreign policy has already raised questions over the breadth of the UK's military capability. Some of the issues to be tackled by the review echo our findings from the report on defending an independent Scotland; particularly the need for a nimbler military, focused on current and future defence needs.

Arguably, the UK's defence review will provide a better guide for how an independent Scotland should defend itself than the current thinking of simply matching Scandinavian spending plans. Although if Scotland were to become independent the UK would face another defence review (albeit less integrated) before the ink is dry on the current one. Ambitious military plans for an independent Scotland may sound attractive if taken in isolation. But this would mean diverting public spending from areas like health, housing, education and welfare.

The quality of debate around some of these issues on defence and foreign policy could, and should, be lifted by engaging a much wider audience – including those who may not support independence, or even those who oppose it.

Too often in Scotland debate focuses on how to maximise budgets and expenditure rather than achieving outcomes and delivering public services more efficiently. Scotland should consider a wider range of views and first focus on what it would need to defend its interests. Basing future plans on pragmatic consensus, would make Scotland more like Denmark or Norway.

Richard Marsh is Director of economics at 4-consulting, he is an economist specialising in regional economics and economic statistics. Richard contributed to the First Minister's Sustainable Growth Commission, working on the economic value of migration.

Mobile tech providing vital lifeline for prisoners and their families – Humza Yousaf MSP

Originally posted 20 November 2020

The coronavirus (COVID-19) has fundamentally changed life for all of us, threatening the health, wellbeing and lives of people around the world.

In these unprecedented times governments across the UK and internationally have had to take difficult decisions, including within our systems of justice to help combat, curtail, and control the spread of the virus.

In response to COVID-19, in March 2020, the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) suspended in-person visits in all of the country's 15 prisons.

This was a difficult but necessary decision to help reduce spread of the virus in the vulnerable setting of prisons and to protect the health and safety of prison and NHS staff, as well as those in custody.

Nothing will ever replicate physical visits but during these challenging times, phones have become a vital lifeline.

The introduction of mobile phones as well as video-conferencing technology was a key solution, but a very challenging one which has involved much work to overcome legal, logistical and technological barriers.

The public would rightly expect appropriate safeguards be put in place, and they have been, with the same restrictions used for the current prison landline system being implemented for the handsets.

For example, outgoing calls can be recorded and monitored and are only possible to numbers already included on existing prisoner call lists. The phones are not text- or internet-enabled, nor able to receive incoming calls.

It is perhaps apt that focus has turned to in-cell phones in recent days, as we mark Prisoners Week 2020 – with this year's theme being 'Not Alone', to highlight the essential support available both for people in custody and their loved-ones.

The rationale for maintaining family contact and the benefits this brings for those in custody and to their children and families and other close networks is well-known. Strong family networks can help in reducing reoffending and aid resettlement into the community.

As well as family contact, these phones also improve the access that people in our care have to contact a number of support services directly, such as the Samaritans. This is essential at any time but particularly so during a pandemic, given the necessary public health restrictions in prisons.

Calls for an alternative means for family contact to in-person visits are not new and pre-date the pandemic – with Reform Scotland among those highlighting the benefits for inmates, their families and wider society.

Prior to COVID-19, people in prison and their families reported[1] significant difficulties with some of the distances required to travel to prisons and a lack of public transport, cost, accessibility, and scheduling of prison in-person visits.

Last November, following an independent review by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland, I asked the Scottish Prison Service to explore the options for implementing a pilot of in-cell phones at HMP YOI Polmont, with necessary controls in place.

It was clear that facilitating more contact between those in prison and their families could improve an individual's mental health.

Before the pandemic prisoners in Scotland could access telephones in communal areas only at certain times.

In-cell phones have the potential to contribute to prisoners' wellbeing by making family contact significantly easier.

They also have the benefit of improving access to national helpline services and technology can offer the potential to develop tele-health services and other supports for wellbeing in prisons.

Our earlier plans were overtaken by the urgent need to introduce mobile phones and virtual visits across the entire estate as a result of suspending in-person visits.

From June, video-conferencing technology was deployed across every prison while authorised mobile phones were also rolled out in all establishments – with the exception of HMP Kilmarnock which installed its own in-cell telephones – to maintain vital family contact.

More than 7,500 mobile phones have been distributed to those in SPS care and to date there have been more than 532,000 calls made from these devices, alongside around 12,500 virtual visits to stay in touch with children, parents, partners & other loved-ones.

Given the limitations around in-person visits I intend that these methods of communication will continue to be used as an important means of maintaining family contact while the prison service continues to adapt and take appropriate measures in the face of the continuing uncertainty and challenges caused by the virus.

Supplementing in-person visits with phone calls or video visits is consistent with previous recommendations made by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2012 and the Council of Europe in 2018.

Parental imprisonment is recognised as an adverse childhood experience. For those affected children the stigma, psychological distress, economic and social disadvantage, and the widespread disruption to their lives can be profound and lifelong. [2]

The ability to digitally connect with a parent in prison offers vital family contact which can be important for children in terms of their development, including educational attainment, social inclusion and mental health.

We cannot underestimate the value of a parent in prison being able to read their child a story or provide emotional support to their family at these challenging times.

The phased rollout of mobile phones across the prison estate began in June and was completed in early September. A large and complex project, it involved the installation of signal boosting technology, large scale procurement along with technology fixes to ensure the appropriate safety measures would exist on the handsets.

The approximate cost of this initial phase of the mobile phone project – including installing all necessary infrastructure, meeting set-up costs, running costs and the handsets themselves – is around £2.7 million.

While some have commented negatively on this sum, many of those who understand effective penal systems will see this investment in the broader context of the overall costs of maintaining, safe, stable prison regimes – where conditions are conducive to and supportive of successful rehabilitation.

Our long-standing, strategic approach to penal policy in Scotland, not diverted by short-termism or political opportunism, is one that has helped drive down the country's reconviction rate to its lowest level since comparable records began. And of course, less re-offending has contributed to keeping crime down and communities safe. Smart justice, not soft justice. Less crime, fewer victims.

In-cell phones are used elsewhere, of course. Indeed the UK Government announced the roll out of 900 secure phone handsets in March, with Minister of State Lucy Frazer QC stating: "It is therefore right and proportionate that we provide other, controlled ways for them to stay in touch so that they can maintain the close bonds that will ultimately reduce their chances of reoffending when they are released."

The roll out of authorised mobile phones and virtual visits has been welcomed by Scotland's independent HM Inspector of prisons, who in her recent annual report said: "I am delighted to see the introduction of in-cell telephony and virtual visits coming to fruition, which provides much needed alternative family contact capability. This is a step forward in Scotland's enlightened approach to penology."

I am extremely grateful to Scotland's hard working prison staff and management who have worked at pace to ensure the use of mobile phones and virtual visits in prisons is practical and safe – benefiting those in custody, their families, and the wider communities from where they come.

Humza Yousaf MSP is the Cabinet Secretary for Justice

[1] https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/12/Maya-Cohen-Travel-Report.pdf
[2]https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/04/Constructive-Connections-Final-Report-2020-FOR-PRINT.pdf

The time has come for the UK Government to introduce statutory paid bereavement leave – Heidi Travis

Originally posted 30 November 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has not only opened up conversations around grief, it has also cast a spotlight on the urgent need to better support employees who are dealing with a bereavement.

Sue Ryder research has shown that in the last 12 months, 7.9 million people in employment (that's 24% of all employees[2]) have experienced a bereavement. Yet, there is currently no legal requirement for UK employers to grant bereavement leave – except for parents who have lost a child under the age of 18.

That means it's up to employers to decide how much time employees are allowed off work when someone they love dies – if they are given any time at all. Imagine, you've just lost your partner, parent, or sibling – and you might not be able to take a single day off to grieve, without worrying about you the future of your job. It's unthinkable.

Unfortunately, bereavement is a normal part of life that all of us will experience at some point. The grief that follows can be debilitating and additional stressors, such as work, can feel overwhelming.

I've heard too many stories from people who've felt obliged to return to work straight after the death of someone close to them, when they simply weren't ready. As a result, many people who experience a bereavement are forced to take unpaid leave as they come to terms with their loss and start to process their grief.

Furthermore, research shows[3] that low income workers are at higher risk of experiencing persistent grief. This is not only because many are on zero hours contracts and are unable to take the time they need to grieve and face a higher impact of financial losses post-bereavement, but because they face more barriers in accessing appropriate services and information to help them cope with grief.

Sue Ryder believes that introducing a statutory right to two weeks paid bereavement leave would be a significant step forward. This would mean that people who are in the immediate aftermath of a loved one's death do not need to worry about work and are not put under any pressure to return to work.

It would also alleviate some of the immediate financial strain and provide employees with the security of knowing that they are being given paid leave, without concerns of how they are being perceived or possibly penalised.

In addition to ensuring that employees are being supported, research also suggests that introducing paid statutory bereavement leave will have a wider positive impact for society, by addressing some of the financial impacts of unresolved grief, and its cost to the economy.

For instance, extensive research conducted by Sue Ryder found that workplace grief costs the UK economy £23bn a year and HM Treasury nearly £8bn a year[1] through reduced tax revenues and increased use of NHS and social care resources.

While investing in adequate bereavement leave and support may result in initial short-term cost, implementing statutory bereavement leave could in fact lead to a significant saving for the UK economy and the treasury in the long term, through reduced staff absence, higher employee productivity and a lesser reliance on the health and benefits system post-bereavement.

As a national bereavement charity, Sue Ryder believes that everyone in the UK deserves the right to bereavement leave. And we're not alone. In the month since the campaign launched, over 17,000 people across the UK have signed up to show their support, and MPs are now raising the proposal with government.

While bereavement leave will not take away the pain of losing a loved one, we believe working with others to take this campaign forward is vital, as this bereavement leave is fundamental to give people the space they need to start to deal with the impacts of a bereavement, without the added pressure of immediately returning to work. We look forward to continuing to make the case in the coming months.

Heidi Travis is Chief Executive at Sue Ryder

Why universities must be at the heart of the Innovation and Technology Ecosystem – Jarmo Eskelinen

Originally posted 3 December 2020

Few Scottish Government publications have had as much impact as Mark Logan's review of the Scottish Technology Ecosystem. This is perhaps because it is a well written, accurate, and Mr Logan himself carries the authority of success. However, it is also because it presents a tantalising glimpse into one vision for the future of the Scottish economy – a bright future.

A technology ecosystem is the combination of actions and operations that support and nurture technology businesses, from the early start-up phase through to fully scaled maturity. The Logan Review acknowledges that the Scottish tech ecosystem has been growing for years. Growth has been partly organic and partly manufactured, adapting to government policy and priority as much as market demand.

This organic approach has created an ecosystem that already works – it has produced Skyscanner, as well as buzzing start-up communities in several key domains, such as FinTech. Nevertheless, there are obvious constraints. The process of securing large-scale innovation investment can take up to 3 years and is highly complex and challenging. Our Tech ecosystem does not support itself but requires public subsidies – in Logan's words, it is "below the tipping point".

Consequently, Scotland is not universally considered a global destination for innovation. Working together and with the implementation of a whole system approach, we can push our tech ecosystem, over the tipping point, widen the start-up funnel and facilitate hundreds of tech start-ups.

Our universities are an exceptional asset to the Scottish Tech Ecosystem since we have a superb higher education cluster. Scottish Universities are a source of world-class research, intellectual property, and talent. Universities can increase their support to entrepreneurialism, nurturing future founders.

Perhaps the best way of doing that would be for universities to join forces and develop a strategic, nation-wide model to address this challenge, in collaboration between the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council, and the private sector.

The University of Edinburgh has been one of the main contributors to the evolution of the thriving start-up scene of the capital city. Regional and national success are connected – the future of the Edinburgh tech start-up scene depends on the availability of talent from all corners of the nation, and from abroad.

Therefore, as one of the leading contributors to the Scottish Tech Ecosystem, we have been building connections and launching entrepreneurship programmes and platforms,

available across Scotland and beyond, as well as attracting significant investment into the Scottish tech innovation sector.

As such, the University coordinates the Data-Driven Innovation initiative (DDI) of the Edinburgh & South East Scotland City Region Deal. As the largest innovation grant ever won by a University in the UK, DDI can be an exceptional resource to our tech ecosystem.
The five DDI Innovation Hubs (Bayes Centre, Edinburgh Futures Institute, Usher Institute, Roslin Institute, and National Robotarium with Heriot-Watt University) are externally facing innovation centres.

They are connected to the massive-scale data storage and processing capacity of the world-class Edinburgh International Data Facility. Together with an external network of partners, they form an excellent platform for incubating and scaling high-growth tech ventures and connecting them to a robust talent pipeline.

Early results of the DDI Programme are impressive. After the first two years, over 1100 jobs have been created through construction and innovation activities. The industry has invested £61.7m to DDI projects (+100% over target), and 42 new data-driven companies have been launched (+85% over mark).

The University of Edinburgh has already taken action to implement the recommendations of the Scottish Tech Ecosystem review. Building on the ongoing collaboration with the world-class innovation drivers of Edinburgh (incubators, accelerators, and venture funders), the University is deepening the partnership with Codebase to deliver the Tech Scaler in Edinburgh.

The University of Edinburgh is also well placed to support the International Tech Market Square through existing activities, such as the Engage Invest Exploit (EIE) programme, when those are scaled up and funded on the national level.

With support from Scottish Enterprise, the University of Edinburgh has made significant investments in supporting such activities for the benefit of the regional ecosystem. Scaling this up to a national scale, will require further, continued investment from the public and private sectors, but is essential to attracting the levels of inward start-up funding needed to make a step-change.

Lastly, technologies evolve exponentially, and the tech ecosystem of tomorrow will be different from the one of today. We must future-proof our Tech Ecosystem. As educational institutions, universities can be in a vital role in this, ensuring our tech community is diverse and inclusive, combining entrepreneurship with science.

Solving global challenges, such as climate change, will need new technologies and radical innovations – so-called “deep-tech start-ups”. Developing fundamental science to be start-up ready may take up to a decade. We need new, multi-stakeholder funding models and collaboration between the entrepreneurs, universities, the Government, and corporations are to unlock the innovation potential of key enabling technologies.

Scottish Universities are already the intersections of this entrepreneurial, innovative and technologically driven activity. They can play an essential role at the heart of a tech ecosystem fit for the future.

Jarmo Eskelinen is the Executive Director, The City Region Deal, Data-Driven Innovation Initiative

How remote working can rebuild our communities – David Goodwin

Originally posted 4 December 2020

In the early days of 2020 news of an exotic virus emerged from the Far East. We watched the coverage as if it were a disaster montage from a Hollywood blockbuster - the fevered talking heads debating its status as a global killer/invention of a mysterious global elite, fleeting images of caged animals in Wuhan wet markets, futuristic law enforcement clearing the streets, and grainy social media footage of patients strewn in corridors, struggling for breath. Yet it seemed distant and we kept calm and carried on, as we had through previous viral outbreaks.

After all, who of us knew anyone who had succumbed to SARS or Avian flu? These things were as foreign to us as bullet trains and pangolin stew. As it turns out, Covid-19 did not share our haughty indifference and by mid-March we were effectively under house arrest: prisoners in our homes, with allotted exercise times and 'bring your kid to work day' every single day.

Around 250 days later we have some indication of how the great reset will affect our working practices. But little thought has gone into how we can use this opportunity to reshape our communities, improve that elusive work-life balance and create authentic strategies to boost the wellbeing of a nation which was already struggling pre-pandemic.

Some estimates put the number of remote workers in the UK today as high as 50% of the total. For employers there are a number of benefits to this - reduced office costs, increased staff retention, environmental benefits, and a wider talent pool to choose from as geography becomes moot. So far, the limited data emerging from this office 2.0 appears to show higher levels of morale and happiness among employees. This is perhaps borne out in higher productivity among those set free from the grindstone of the contemporary, open-plan, battery-farm office and the drudgery of the standing-room-only train that steals years from your life.

Remote working is not without its problems, though. It removes us from many of the social interactions and relationships that are key to our species and that play an important developmental role in what we call civilisation. The emergence of video conferencing as a panacea may not in fact be the key to future working practices. The thousand yard stare of the Zoom attendee will probably be with us forever now, but without mitigating the psychological effects on employees isolated from human interactions there is a risk we are marching like lemmings towards a mental health cliff usually more familiar to the elderly and disabled.

It may be that on seeing the financial and productivity benefits many employers will vigorously promote remote working as a route to bottom-line growth, but the cost to society will be more difficult to illustrate on a spreadsheet. So why not look for smarter ways of remote working that can bring benefits to both employers and society?

There are a number of advantages advanced by proponents of the work-life balance - shorter commutes, a four-day week, less reliance on childcare, flexible working hours and focus on individual wellbeing. All of these are, on the face of it, entirely reasonable. But what are we doing to rethink and reshape our infrastructure to meet the changes expedited by coronavirus? We're in danger of missing an opportunity to adapt the fabric of our towns and regenerate the stagnant suburbs where we choose to live.

How then do we create the structures which will serve this new workforce, which is reversing the great industrial-age exodus from the rural to the factory, with all of the social and health issues it brought? We may not be facing typhoid or severe overcrowding, but this trend will bring its own problems.

Wander through any provincial town and you'll find a mix of empty commercial properties and charity shops. For many commuters, the imposition of lockdown has properly exposed them to the graveyard of their local community for the first time in years. They have walked those streets bemoaning the disheartening array of bookmakers and pawn shops, as they seek a quinoa salad among the odour of lorne sausage and despair. Until recently, these people would have driven blindly past, stuffing a late breakfast in their face and rushing to drop the kids at school before crawling for an hour at speeds that would shame a horse and cart, glaring at the red lights of their vehicular enemies and seeking a small window to slip one car in front, so shortening their journey by as much as twenty seconds.

The requirements for remote working are fairly basic: you need a desk and access to the internet. These things are within most people's grasp. Beyond making some changes to the home to accommodate this set-up, there is a need for national and local government to devise a strategy which will bring the global world to the defunct local main street. How better to regenerate your town than to encourage workers into it? This age of internet shopping and out-of-town mega-centres will likely mean the traditional high street will never return. But perhaps lockdowns have shown us the value in embracing our locales as more than places to eat and sleep.

Is there a local authority willing to stick out its neck out and provide flexible working spaces for remote workers? This may be a loss leader in the first instance, but business development has long been a strategic investment tool of the state - now, more than ever, they have an opportunity to effect real change. Is it beyond the capabilities of the state to fit out buildings in its ownership to provide a space for individuals to work in?

Imagine having a workplace to which you can cycle or walk after dropping the kids at school in under 15 minutes, where you can undertake the banal social interactions we all take for granted, where you can share ideas with a disparate group of individuals offering expertise in varying fields, where you can glean new, efficient work practices, where you can participate in your community, and where it is frowned upon to sit around in your elasticated leisurewear.

It is surely possible this could generate higher productivity from employees who can reduce their hours a little and work more flexibly in a setting which nourishes their

wellbeing, rather than being stuck in a form of solitary confinement. We could always give it a year or two to find out.

Every empty state-owned property is a drain on income and councils have spent years and millions of pounds trying to increase footfall in their towns and promote local businesses. Making the commute by cycling or walking has long been an objective of the state, but not many are willing to pedal the M8 at 8:15am. It's surely reasonable to predict that more people would choose to ditch the car if their destination was within a few miles. From a health perspective the state is already seeing wellbeing as a priority and what better way to improve it than by promoting economic recovery, exercise and social cohesion?

We have a choice to make, and we have time to implement changes while we await the effects of the vaccination programme. The only question is whether the desire is there to create something that would be better for us and for our communities.

David Goodwin is a development worker in the Scottish voluntary sector. He is writing in a personal capacity

Scottish immigration and the battle for independence – Kieran Isgin

Originally posted 16 December 2020

As support for Scottish independence is on the rise, questions are beginning to be asked about how Scotland would deal with its borders and immigration policies.

A poll carried out by STV news found that support for an independent Scotland has now reached a record high of 58% with only 39% unreservedly opposing it.

Debates over Scotland's immigration policy in relation to the devolved powers have been a major issue in parliament for a long time. This debate has had renewed interest amid talk that the SNP will push another Scottish independence referendum.

First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has already overtly hinted at pushing for another Scottish independence vote, which Boris Johnson rejects on the basis that the 2014 one was supposed to be a "once in a generation vote".

Scottish ministers have already complained about being unable to respond to specific population problems in Scotland. Nicola Sturgeon complained that Scotland is suffering due to a lack of control over immigration, she said on Twitter: "the Tory immigration policy can't be justified – it would have a devastating impact on Scotland & the opposition to it from all sectors tells its own story."

UK Immigration minister Kevin Foster rejected calls for Scotland to have individual power over immigration for their own borders and said: ""We don't think that having different immigration systems in different parts of the United Kingdom, literally putting an economic migration border across this island, would be a way of doing that. It would produce confusion."

When Holyrood demanded more power to control their immigration policies, they were met with accusations of holding an "agenda of separatism".

While Foster made this statement alongside an announcement that the UK will introduce a points-based immigration system which has apparently been organised with Scotland, such claims, however, have evidently failed to consider the concerns of the Scottish public.

Issues with the Scottish working population

The Scottish government openly criticise the UK's "one size fits all" approach to immigration which does little to benefit the economy of Scotland. Currently, Scotland is facing an aging populating at a faster rate than the rest of the UK. Under 15s are now outnumbered by those aged over 65. Scotland's population is only growing thanks to immigration.

This has had a knock on effect on parts of Scotland's working population, such as in Moray, where 60% of jobs are below the so called 'low skilled' salary threshold. The MSP Richard Lochhead stated that there is: "a greater need for a working age population."

Moray, Lochead's constituency, has seen a rise in those claiming Universal Credit with number almost doubling between March and May from 3537 to 6632.

Since 2007, Scotland has relied on migration for population growth more than any other region in the UK. 63% of Scotland's growth has attributed to immigration, compared to 53% of the rest of the UK as a whole.

As a result, Scotland's economic needs are different from the rest of the UK and the Scottish government wants to reintroduce a Post-Study Work Visa scheme that works for Scotland. A policy which was recommended by the Smith Commission and is supported by all Holyrood parties.

The Scottish government claims that such a visa would help boost the Scottish economy by allowing student who have migrated to Scotland to study to be able to stay and put their skills and education to benefit the country.

The Scottish government stresses that a robust screening process is currently in place with communications with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) who are responsible for protecting the rights of refugees.

Regardless of the outcome of another referendum, it could take years for Scotland to become fully independent from the UK. For immigration policy, this would mean great care would have to be taken to streamline the process of Scotland developing its own immigration system.

Because of this, Scotland would likely still have to operate within the UK immigration system for quite some time.

Kieran Isgin writes for immigrationnews.co.uk. This is a media platform that helps to raise awareness about migrant injustices and news around the world.

Supporting the LGBT+ community through homelessness – Caryn Nicolson

Originally posted 17 December 2020

It's a chilling fact that there are far too many people in Scotland who are homeless or at risk of being so. Let me pull out a few uncomfortable numbers from the annual update on homelessness by Scotland's chief statistician, released in August and covering 2019-20:

- There were 36,855 applications for homelessness assistance.
- There were 31,333 households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness – an increase of four per cent on the previous year.
- At 31st March this year there were 11,665 households and 7,280 children in temporary accommodation; respectively six and seven per cent up on the previous year.

These figures are unacceptable. However, as chief executive of a registered charity that works to end homelessness, I'm primarily concerned not with numbers but with individual people and families. Besides, statistics never tell the full story, as we at Frontline Fife found when we commissioned a research study into one group of people who have gone under the radar in terms of housing support: the LGBT+ community.

I had long been concerned that both the scale and needs of these people were being overlooked and misunderstood, leading to some being made homeless. Sadly, that suspicion has been confirmed in what we hope will be an influential report that has shed new light on the isolation, stigma and exclusion experienced by LGBT+ people.

The report, by Dr Briege Nugent, an independent research consultant and honorary research fellow at the University of Salford, underlines that there has been inadequate recognition of LGBT+ as a vulnerable population in relation to accessing housing. Many of these people are quite simply disadvantaged because of their sexual identity.

Why is this so? One sad and simple reason is that LGBT+ people are often rejected by family and partners for 'coming out', leading to them being made homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Consider some of those people Dr Nugent interviewed. Brian was born a female but struggled with his gender identity. When he was 17 he told his parents how he felt; they asked him to leave home. After six months of moving from one friend's sofa to the next, he begged his parents to let him return. They agreed but for six months Brian self-isolated in his bedroom, leaving only to use the bathroom. Feeling low and lonely, he barely ate. Eventually, he saw his GP and he's now in the process of transitioning.

Then there's Neil, a committed father of two who lived with his girlfriend for eight years until he told her he was bisexual. She told him to leave and moved to another part of the country with their children. Neil, whose father also turned against him, initially took to sofa surfing before moving in with a man who became abusive. Neil, who was bi-polar,

became suicidal moved out. At the time he was interviewed for Dr Nugent's research, he was staying with another friend.

Both these cases reflect the fact that 'LGBT+' and 'homeless' are labels that provoke stigma and prejudice. There's clearly a great deal of work to be done to address this. In 2019/20 Frontline Fife gave 3,146 young people across nine schools the opportunity to gain skills to equip them to make informed decisions about leaving home. However, LGBT+ education is available in very few schools. People experience confusion and apprehension when they 'come out' and are confronted by a basic lack of understanding in society at large. Those working in various support services need to recognise that this is fundamental to safeguarding potentially vulnerable people.

Thankfully, our research found that there is among support workers and policy makers an acceptance and welcoming of those with LGBT+ identities. However, the study concluded that staff awareness training was essential at all stages in the delivery and design of homeless support. Formal training would empower frontline workers and LGBT+ people develop meaningful client/worker relationships on an equal footing.

Dr Nugent's research, though thorough, was in no way intended to provide a definitive picture of the scale of this problem. We need to get a handle on that now. There's a clear need for current homelessness data collection to be reviewed as soon as possible to include the opportunity for clients to be identified by gender/sexual identity.

At present, people or those who experience housing crisis as a result of 'coming out' are recorded as having 'Asked to Leave'; it's one of the main reasons cited for homelessness and, as a general term, it is hopelessly inadequate. In Scotland in 2018-19 one-quarter of all homelessness applications cited 'Asked to Leave' as the main reason for becoming homeless. Yet I am certain that in each case dedicated frontline staff would have known why this was the case and what preventative measures could have been put in place to reduce the risk of homelessness in the first place.

Progress has been made in using lived experience and community knowledge to help inform local decision-making. However, I am convinced that the potential for frontline workers to inform long-term, evidence-based strategies for tackling homelessness and be valued as an integral part of the bigger picture remains relatively untapped.

Linked with this, of course, there is also a clear need to expand the assessment of housing needs to meet the particular needs of LGBT+ people.

So let's get to work now to right some wrongs, and a good place to start would be for policy makers, service providers and those who have a lived experience of this issue to get together and start a dialogue on how best to bring about inclusive services which take into account the needs of LBGT+ people.

We cannot allow anyone in our communities to continue to be denied the housing support and provision available to others, simply because of stigma, prejudice and ignorance.

Caryn Nicolson is the Chief Executive Officer of Frontline Fife

Reform Scotland is committed to informing and influencing the public policy debate in Scotland.

The Melting Pot is Reform Scotland's guest blog, where Scotland's thinkers, talkers and writers can indulge in some blue sky thinking. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of Reform Scotland.

www.reformscotland.com/category/melting-pot