

Melting Pot 2021

About Reform Scotland

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Contents

i. Foreword	Page 4
1. The return to home learning	Page 5
- <i>Lindsay Paterson</i>	
2. Bereavement Policy Priorities For The Next Scottish Government	Page 8
- <i>Suzanne Grahame</i>	
3. Proposed Scottish Employment Injuries Advisory Council Bill	Page 11
- <i>Mark Griffin MSP</i>	
4. Still Better Together: How Unionists can beat the SNP again in indyref2	Page 14
- <i>Blair McDougall</i>	
5. Forget being hard or soft on crime – be smart instead	Page 19
- <i>Iain Smith</i>	
6. Less debate, more action – how to accelerate NHS reform	Page 22
- <i>Paul Gray</i>	
7. A Pupil's perspective	Page 26
- <i>Bruce McCall</i>	
8. Local government finance & the need to respect devolution	Page 28
- <i>Paul McLennan</i>	
9. A Vision for Young People 2021-31 Thriving in the Scottish Outdoors	Page 30
- <i>Dave Spence</i>	
10. Time to rewild the Highlands	Page 33
- <i>Ben Goldsmith</i>	
11. The real question a ballot paper on Scottish independence should ask	Page 36
- <i>Paul Jourdan</i>	
12. Hospitality is ready – the Scottish Government should be too	Page 42
- <i>Stephen Montgomery</i>	
13. How to turbo-charge Scotland's economy	Page 44
- <i>Malcolm Offord</i>	
14. The Greening of Energy	Page 48
- <i>Stuart Paton</i>	
15. Feminist Foreign Policy	Page 53
- <i>Emilie-Louise Purdie</i>	
16. Postal Voting	Page 55
- <i>Keir Bloomer</i>	
17. New Age Assessment Rules for Asylum-Seeking Young People	Page 57
- <i>Aaron Gates-Lincoln</i>	
18. Predictions for Holyrood health policy over the next 5 years	Page 60
- <i>Gordon Hector</i>	
19. The pandemic's impact on graduate opportunities in Scotland	Page 64
- <i>Edinburgh University Consulting Club</i>	
20. New Year's Day Shopping Ban is Illiberal & Short-sighted	Page 66
- <i>David Lonsdale</i>	
21. To avoid another lost decade for Scotland's nature, we need	Page 68

legally binding targets for nature's recovery	
- Anne McCall	
22. A curious policy option	Page 71
- Robert Tennent & Keir Bloomer	
23. The Proposed National Care Service	Page 74
- Gordon Hector	
24. Critique of the OECD report into Scotland's school curriculum	Page 77
- Lindsay Paterson	
25. Wider Achievement Opportunities in School	Page 80
- David McClure	
26. Time To Act On Minimum Unit Pricing	Page 83
- Elinor Jayne	
27. Are Exams Reliable?	Page 85
- Melvyn Roffe	
28. A Critical Moment For Health and Care	Page 87
- Paul Gray	
29. Scotland's Framework for Tax	Page 92
- Tom Arthur	
30. Should we be worried about the number of hospital beds?	Page 94
- Gordon Hector	
31. Cambo - Aye or No?	Page 96
- Stuart Paton	
32. We need to focus policy on prevention	Page 99
- Helen Chambers	
33. Building a social care system fit for purpose	Page 101
- Chris Creegan	
34. Nairnshire as a model for Integrated Health and Social Care in Scotland and beyond	Page 105
- Alastair Noble	
35. A chance to reshape our approach to bereavement	Page 107
- Donald Macaskill	

Foreword

It has been another difficult and unconventional year in politics and policy, with the Covid crisis driving all before it. The pandemic has exposed and posed serious questions about the capacity and funding of our health service and our education system, and inflicted significant damage on our economy. Some of the challenges are fresh, while some were pre-existing but have been given added impetus by events.

At Reform Scotland we've spent the past 12 months producing research and hosting events that have explored these issues. But we've also cast our net more widely, and nowhere more so than on our blog. It's been a bumper year for content, with fantastic articles provided by familiar faces and new friends. A fair number of the pieces linked to below ended up in the next day's newspapers and broadcast bulletins.

Whatever your take on the constitution, Blair McDougall's punchy view on how the pro-UK side can win another independence referendum is worth a read. The article by Iain Smith, one of Scotland's most impressive young lawyers, on how to make the justice system more compassionate and effective, turned a number of heads.

Ben Goldsmith took a look at rewilding the Highlands, while Paul Gray, former chief executive of NHS Scotland, produced two expert takes on reforming the health service which went round the sector like wildfire.

Scottish government minister Tom Arthur explored Holyrood's tax framework and where the holes are, while Malcolm Offord - now Conservative minister Lord Offord - made some sharp suggestions about how to turbo-charge Scotland's economy.

Amid much hysteria around climate and Cop26, Stuart Paton provided a sensible and grown-up assessment of our energy needs and progress, while Helen Chambers argued for a greater focus in social policy on prevention as opposed to mopping up afterwards.

A broad range of subjects, then, a broad range of views from intelligent and thoughtful people, and from all wings of political opinion – this is Reform Scotland at its best, a home for those who genuinely care about the nation's future, have something to offer, and want to have a mature debate outside the restrictive, hyper-partisan strictures of party politics. I hope you enjoy our work.

Chris Deerin
Director,
Reform Scotland

The return to home learning – Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 7 January 2021

With schools now closed, pupils and parents again have to make the best of home education. The [experience](#) for most children in Scotland last year was not great. Only about one in seven pupils were spending anything like a full day on school work, and a quarter were probably doing no work at all. Sadly, that was partly because they were not being prodded by schools. Seven out of ten pupils received from their schools on average less than one online lesson per day, and only just over a half received per day even as many as three offline lessons such as worksheets. Teachers marked work regularly for only half of pupils. All of these problems were worse for children living in poverty.

Policy [drifted](#), despite the specious rhetoric of the daily press conferences from the Scottish government. Scottish pupils were lucky to have lost fewer hours of school than elsewhere only because the closures last year happened to coincide to a greater extent with normal school holidays. Scotland was less effective at distributing laptops to poor pupils than any of the UK nations. It is still the case that the 50,000 laptops [funded](#) by the Scottish government would cover only about [7% of pupils](#), which is less than a [third](#) of pupils living in poverty.

In any case, [it turns out](#) that laptops and what schools do explain only at most about a third of the inequality of pupils' time spent on learning during last year's closures. The rest is due to pupils' and parents' engagement, an intractable challenge even at the best of times. So the most important question now is whether Scottish education is better prepared to support families than it was then.

It is worth reiterating, of course, that if half of pupils were not receiving support from their teachers, the other half were. There are no published case studies in Scotland of what went well, but a combination of [surveys](#) of teachers in England and anecdote tends to confirm what might in any case be thought to be obvious. The best teachers and schools were active: in this context, that means lessons taught online, live interaction between the class and the teacher, and also opportunities for individual pupils to have one-to-one conversations with a teacher or a tutor.

All these parents and teachers will be able to do the same again, but with greater weariness and with a growing sense that they have been let down by the official agencies that ought to be supporting them.

The greatest failure is by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. It has done absolutely nothing to prepare for what has now happened. When the school exams were cancelled by Education Secretary John Swinney, the SQA produced what they call [alternative arrangements](#) for assessing pupils. The SQA [denies](#) that these are intended to be used as exams, with the sort of terminological quibbling that is about the only thing it has excelled at since its foundation quarter of a century ago. These are, in all but name, exam papers. Teachers have to download them from the SQA website. The SQA specifies that they should then be used under conditions as close as possible to normal exams.

Since running exams is impossible remotely – despite some naïve [wishful thinking](#) by the SQA – teachers now have nothing to be getting on with. Yet they are still expected to estimate pupils' grades for awards next summer.

The SQA is truly culpable here. They have let down, not only pupils, teachers and parents, but also the Scottish government, who might reasonably have expected a body that is rightly independent of politics to be able to develop viable plans without direct political instruction. However, the scope for political instruction in an emergency exists (in [section 9 of the 1996 Act](#) which set up the SQA). Mr Swinney used that power when he [instructed](#) the SQA last August to abandon the infamous algorithm. So he should use it again to instruct the SQA to create genuinely non-exam assessment. Part of the instruction to the SQA should be to provide clear advice to teachers on how to use the assessment online (or by post or other means), how to mark the pupils' work, and how to ensure that the estimated grades which teachers will then develop will be treated with respect by the SQA, unlike last year.

Almost as deplorable as the SQA's dereliction is the failure on distance learning, the responsibility (like everything else in the curriculum) of Education Scotland. A large part of its tawdry advice amounts to little more than citing websites where other organisations have done the work. Does any parent really need to be told by Education Scotland that the BBC has a channel called CBeebies?

Education Scotland also boasts about its 'e-learning offer'. This is a make-over of the Gaelic website [eSgoil](#), which is now mainly in English. (What Gaelic learners must make of this does not seem to have been assessed.) But this comes nowhere near to the active engagement which is required. In reality, what it amounts to is a few live talks online and a brief opportunity to ask questions. Contrast that with the [Oak Academy](#) in England, which provides lessons that deal specifically with particular aspects of the syllabus, and that can be viewed at any time.

Oak Academy is not interactive, unlike eSgoil (even if minimally), but a much better source of interactive support is available in England: the [National Tutoring Programme](#). It's run by the independent Educational Endowment Foundation, with government funding, and is [reported](#) to have been taken up by a third of schools. It provides tutoring for children in socially disadvantaged circumstances. It's not perfect – some of the funding is uncertain, and it may [reach](#) only about a fifth of pupils in need – but it's enormously better than the mini-lectures provided by eSgoil. The key point about it is that the tutoring is one-to-one, which [research](#) shows to be the best way of providing support to pupils.

When the Commission on School Reform [proposed](#) a programme of such tutoring in Scotland last March, the idea was [derided](#) by the Scottish educational establishment as potentially undermining the professionalism of Scottish teachers and even as a threat to the safety of Scottish pupils. Yet the National Tutoring Programme has also drawn on research which shows that tutoring works best when the tutor is under the general supervision of the class teacher. Thus it is no threat to professionalism, but is, rather, its enhancement. The programme in England has been criticised only for what some claim to be its inadequate funding, not for the principle.

Faced with the disappointing state of Scottish policy, what might be done in the short term to mitigate the damage? Here are three suggestions:

Schools need to be actively and regularly engaged with each pupil. It's not enough to have a few worksheets issued every week, leaving children to get on with it. So one possibility would be that the Scottish government would set minimum entitlements. For example, each pupil should be contacted (preferably by phone, rather than by text or email) at least, say, twice per week. Another minimum would be that each pupil in primary and early secondary should have to submit at least two pieces of written work each week, electronically where possible but, if not, by some other means. This work should be returned, with written feedback, within a week by an appropriate teacher.

The two pieces of written work would not be in every subject, but across all subjects. The aim is simply to keep pupils engaged. So this would be actually quite far below what is required when the schools are open, but it would allow all pupils to make some progress, and would prevent the most vulnerable pupils from dropping out altogether. Second, children need individual support. The easiest way to do this would be for the Scottish government to buy into the National Tutoring Programme. At short notice, it's difficult to see what else could be done to provide this kind of help to families, but building up an alternative Scottish model of tutoring could proceed in parallel with giving Scottish pupils access to the English programme.

Above all, parents need advice that is far better than Education Scotland's patronising homilies. Websites are not enough, nor is indirect advice via material sent by schools directly to pupils. Since the inspectors who make up half of Education Scotland have nothing else to do at the moment, why not get them staffing the phone lines and email links to answer parents' requests?

The First Minister, [announcing](#) the school closures, said that she would not 'insult the intelligence of any parent in relation to childcare'. Good. So let's treat parents as proper partners in their children's schooling, not merely the providers of emergency child-minding that this crisis has yet again imposed on them.

Lindsay Paterson is Professor of Education Policy, Edinburgh University

Bereavement Policy Priorities For The Next Scottish Government – Suzanne Grahame

Originally posted 11 January 2021

In any given year, almost a quarter of a million Scots experience a new bereavement while a majority (72%) have experienced at least one bereavement in the last five years. Tragically, with more than 6,000 people in Scotland having lost their life to coronavirus, the number of grieving Scots is currently rising. Yet, despite bereavement being something that we will all experience, policymakers often overlook the needs of the bereaved.

Political leadership

Part of the challenge for policymakers in Scotland is the fractured policy landscape, with no single Scottish Government directorate holding overall responsibility for bereavement policy. Instead, this is currently a split responsibility between the directorates for health, social security, justice and communities while, in recent years, responsibility for palliative care has transferred from the NHS to local Health and Social Care Partnerships.

While it's right that different government directorates play their role in supporting bereaved people, without a coordinated, joined-up approach, there is a risk that policymakers will overlook the needs of the bereaved, particularly at the macro level. To remedy this risk, the next Scottish Government should introduce a named minister with responsibility for bereavement support. The named minister would be able to coordinate strategy across government and ensure that policymakers give bereaved people the priority they deserve at every stage of the grief journey.

Evidence-led policymaking

Given that it's been ten years since Scottish Government published its *Shaping Bereavement Care Framework*, one of the first tasks for a named Minister with responsibility for bereavement should be to commission a National Bereavement Review for Scotland, to examine the social and financial impact of bereavement on family life, particularly in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

Following the death of a partner, one in five UK households drops below the official poverty threshold, a quarter experience a substantial decrease in household income, and many more are simply financially worse off. Unemployment can also be a long-term consequence of bereavement. For example, in the UK, bereaved people are significantly less likely to be in work the year following their loss.

Prolonged unemployment is far from the only social consequence of bereavement. People who lose someone close to them are more likely to feel unhappy, even ten years on from their bereavement. Other social consequences can include loneliness, particularly in later life, physical health problems often brought on after prolonged periods of depression and anxiety, and even an increased likelihood of suicide in those bereaved by suicide.

Despite these financial and social hardships, bereaved people in Scotland can find it difficult to access support. While almost a third of bereaved people in Scotland (31%) say they need additional support beyond family and friends, only six per cent go on to access that support. A National Bereavement Review would help policymakers understand the barriers bereaved people face in accessing support and provide policymakers with a vital evidence-base for future policy.

Cultural Change

The financial impact of bereavement can begin immediately after a loss. While Funeral Support Payment (FSP) is available to those in receipt of a qualifying DWP benefit, funeral poverty remains a reality for thousands of people each year, often low-wage workers without entitlement to FSP and blindsided by an unexpected bereavement. Our collective reluctance to talk about death and dying often means that while families will financially plan some unexpected events, planning for death and dying remains almost taboo. Consequently, almost a quarter of people in Scotland (22%) indicate that they would be unable to cover funeral costs after a sudden bereavement while a fifth (19%) report that they would have to take on debt to make funeral arrangements. While the government can't legislate for cultural change, it still has a role to play. The next Scottish Government should consider coordinating a multifaceted public relations campaign encouraging a change in societal culture towards death and dying, from one of reluctance, to open conversation and advanced planning.

A whole-school approach

Using data from the Childhood Bereavement Network, the Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care estimates that five per cent of children under 16-years-old, or around 4,600 children, will experience the death of a parent each year in Scotland, with children living in disadvantaged circumstances most likely to experience multiple losses.

We know that health practitioners recognise bereavement as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that can negatively affect a child's mental health, physical health and social outcomes – including their educational attainment, employment status later in life, and risk of offending. Despite these high stakes, a 2019 Strathclyde University study concluded that schools' ability to support bereaved young people remains 'underdeveloped'.

In November, youth charity Young Scot provided evidence at the Scottish Parliament on the support needs of bereaved young people. The young people expressed the views that there remains a lack of information around death and bereavement for young people and that there should be more opportunities in school for 'general conversations' on death and bereavement at a younger age.

It's crucial that the next Scottish Government listens to the needs of bereaved young people and equips all schools with the necessary resources to respond to the death of a pupil, staff member, or someone important in a pupil's life. Beyond access to formal counselling, this would include teachers that are confident in talking about death, dying

and bereavement, have knowledge of and access to appropriate resources for all age groups, and a coordinated approach between schools, and the community.

Collective responsibility

Supporting the bereaved is a collective societal responsibility and we all having a role to play. But this must start at the top. With the first findings from UK-wide study by Cardiff and Bristol universities indicating that those who lose a loved one to coronavirus typically feel their grief more acutely than other types of grief, bereavement support must be at the heart of the 2021 Holyrood elections.

Suzanne Grahame is CEO of Golden Charter.

Golden Charter is a leading provider of pre-paid funeral plans in Scotland, works with 224 independent funeral directors operating 386 branches in villages, towns, and cities across Scotland.

Proposed Scottish Employment Injuries Advisory Council Bill – Mark Griffin MSP

Originally posted 20 January 2021

In December, as part of my Members' Bill campaign to establish a new Scottish Employment Injuries Advisory Council, I asked the First Minister whether Covid-19 should be classified as an industrial disease.

The response was optimistic – and rightly so. Because the research from the University of Glasgow and Public Health Scotland that I raised with the First Minister confirmed what many keyworkers already know: healthcare workers on the frontline are three times more likely to end up in hospital themselves and their families make up 1 in 6 hospitalised too. Other keyworkers have higher risk as well: social care and transport workers are both twice as likely to have had Covid-19 severely. We know that the more serious disease, the more likely that person will suffer long-Covid, the crippling syndrome with a multitude of symptoms ranging from extreme fatigue and breathlessness, neuralgia and brain fog.

Covid-19 has become and remains one of the most dangerous workplace illnesses we face. It has upturned working life across the globe, with substantial numbers of workers across Scotland contracting the virus while doing their job. But as we learn more about the virus, so too we are learning who is catching it and where. It has divided the workforce in Scotland in the process: while many thousands have been working from home for months, NHS and social care staff have been on the frontline in dealing with the human cost of the pandemic, and so too have shop workers, transport, and logistics workers have been keeping us fed and clothed.

The question I put to the First Minister, is the same question I have posed to trade unions, academics and workers since the start of last summer: should we be using our newly devolved powers over Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (what the Scottish Government will call employment injuries assistance) to make sure that those who are disabled as a result of the disease can have access to the no-fault compensation scheme that has supported industrial workers for much of the past century.

Their feedback has significantly informed my proposal for a Scottish Employment Injuries Advisory Council Bill, and the consultation which has been underway since November. In our discussions, stakeholders agreed: Covid-19 is an industrial disease, and should they suffer disability as a result of a disease they contracted in the workplace, they should have entitlement under the benefit scheme and be compensated. Critically, we explored in greater detail the wider concerns with the current scheme and the UK Industrial Injuries Advisory Council (IIAC) that should be addressed too. How and why many conditions and workplaces, particularly those where women predominate, which have been systematically overlooked by the current scheme, have their roots in the setup of the existing scheme and Council are structured. First, a disease must be prescribed on a closed list. To get to that position IIAC is required to demonstrate there is twice the level of risk of disease or injury in a specified occupation, setting a high bar of proof. Second, the IIAC does not have power to

commission its own research, it can only call in evidence. As a result, whole sectors and diseases go overlooked if the research hasn't been funded or conducted to the level that can meet the evidence requirements IIAC operate under. As one academic put it to me, in the case of women, their work and disease has been "ignored". Third, because the closed system has such high evidence requirements, it has to rely on long term data which is best reflected in the roles that were "jobs for life", so in a world of multiple career changes and breaks, it's easy to see why change might not easily occur.

We do now have powers to correct this in Scotland, of course. In fact, these became fully devolved to Scotland at the same time we were entering the spring lockdown (albeit with delivery outsourced back to the DWP). Broadly maintaining or renaming the current scheme we already have, actively establishing an employment injuries assistance scheme that excludes many women and the illnesses they face, would be a damning failure of Holyrood to use its powers.

So that is why my Bill proposal goes further and looks to lay the framework for new independent, statutory non-departmental public body which could substantially shape industrial injuries to make it fit for the 21st century; it would have substantial authority to put forward shape and remodel industrial injury benefits, aided by new powers to commission research into the hazards and workplaces where data gaps exist, and put workers and their trade unions, whose experience of workplace and injury and disease is substantial, at the centre of the decision making process.

And though I am hopeful that we can recognise Covid-19 is an industrial disease, aim to better reflect modern workplaces, and close the enormously shameful 6:1 gender gap in applications to the scheme, I am cognisant of the fact it will take time to realise change.

Over the past few decades, the world of work has changed drastically. With the collapse of much of the manual and manufacturing industry that sustained the Scottish economy for the 20th century, a new economy, centred on hospitality, services and office work has emerged. Not only have tool belts and shipyards been replaced by laptops and office blocks, but the demographic of the working population has changed too, with women now accounting for nearly half of the workforce.

From the first Labour government of the 1920s through to the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the Labour Party has sought to ensure that workers are protected from industrial injury and that workers who fall ill due through work are properly supported.

The scheme has never been perfect, of course. Scientific research and data gaps have frequently been the cause of the omissions that see few female workers receive the support they need, and there have been perverse results for workers in Scotland. Ship workers with osteoarthritis, care workers with cervical or lumbar spondylosis, or local authority gardeners affected by hand arm vibration syndrome all fail to have their conditions or roles prescribed. IIDB and IIAC still hasn't recognised breast cancer caused by shift work as the top occupational cancer in women, while cleaners and care workers with suffer of respiratory and skin diseases. Even asbestos related ovarian

cancer, the most common gynaecological cancer in UK women, is missing from the scheme.

It is clear these failings must be overcome if we want to provide the people of Scotland with an employment injuries benefit for the 21st century that is dynamic and reflects modern work. I want to ensure that the next century of workers who become injured or ill in the line of work can turn to a no-blame social security scheme that is retained and strengthened.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it has shone a light on all of our working lives, exposing ingrained inequalities and the risks we can face in our workplaces.

The horrific experiences of Covid-19 have been countless. The office worker who contracted the virus and returned to find little has changed in the way of regular cleaning or social distancing in the office, or the careworkers facing dismissal as long-Covid, which they contracted at work, leaves them unable to fulfil their duties caring for our most vulnerable. We have heard of transport and retail workers berated by members of the public and even spat on for doing their job. With the pandemic showing no signs of abating, it is vital Covid-19 is approached as the workplace illness as a starting point for reform, and those suffering from “long Covid” given the support they need.

Risking their own health, keyworkers strived to save the ill and to shield our elderly, keep food on supermarket shelves and deliver the supplies for those fortunate to have the safety of staying at home. They faced risks no-one could have imagined just a year ago. With the arrival of the new powers, we have the opportunity to overhaul the industrial injuries benefit to both meet the challenges posed by the pandemic, and to meet the needs of our changing working patterns and demographics. If we are to ensure the workers who have kept us fed, clothed and safe over the past few months are treated with the respect they deserve, we must bring about a drastic modernisation of the current industrial injuries system. We simply cannot turn a blind eye to inequality in the workplace any more.

Mark Griffin is a Labour MSP for Central Scotland.

Still Better Together: How Unionists can beat the SNP again in indyref2 – Blair McDougall

Originally posted 15 February 2021

Reading events since the 2014 referendum is like a Rorschach test: there's an element of people seeing what they want to see. The nationalist sees their movement on the cusp of historic success. Their opponent instead sees it splintering under the pressure of its own contradictions. We'd all do well to look a bit closer and to recognise that, beneath the media narratives, there's a more complex picture.

I don't think there is the likelihood of another referendum in Scotland in the immediate future, partly because the SNP are simply not ready, intellectually or organisationally, to fight one. It also suits both the SNP and Conservative governments, for a constitutional stalemate to continue. Though both would deny it, they are in political symbiosis. For Boris Johnson and the Tories, prolonging this fight over flags and borders overshadows Scottish Labour's stubborn, and unsuccessful, attempts to make Scottish politics about choosing a more effective devolved government. For the SNP, playing identity politics allows them to stay in power without the political risk of testing independence support which, for reasons discussed below, is likely soft.

It is possible though that expectations are raised so high, or that Nicola Sturgeon's faction loses control of her party to such an extent in their current civil war, that we find ourselves in unexpected territory. However depressing some may find it, Scottish politics is unlikely to centre around education, health or poverty any time soon, so it's worth evaluating how the landscape of the constitutional debate has changed since 2014.

Because of Brexit and the weakness of UK Labour in recent years, analysis of the debate about breaking up Britain often centres around what has changed on the pro-Union side of the ledger. This has meant that developments which cause significant challenges to the nationalist cause have been overlooked.

The most important thing that has happened to the nationalist side since 2014 is that time has passed. All governments have a sell-by date, even those able to distract from their failures as skilfully as the SNP does. Events overtake ministers, parties get tired and complacent, promise is not met, voters become bored. On the backbenches the number of disappointed parliamentarians eventually outnumber those with hope of being appointed. Grudges grow. Fissures form.

With open warfare between the different factions in their civil war, the SNP no longer look like the formidable and disciplined message machine they were in 2014. Unless Alex Salmond succeeds in deposing his protégé, they will still have a skilled communicator at the steering wheel, but behind her an impatient party has wandered all over the political map.

Take the issue of currency, which the nationalists rightly see as a bruise that has not healed. One day Andrew Wilson and adherents to his Growth Commission attempt to

win points for seriousness by warning that we face up to a decade of austerity and the insecurity of using another country's currency. The next, Tim Rideout and the sect peddling Modern Monetary Theory tell us we will move immediately to a new currency, ban compound interest rates and print money to dig ourselves out of our deficit.

As things stand, austerity and sterlingisation versus a new currency and Weimar economics is a hypothetical. In a referendum it becomes a choice that the SNP leadership are forced to make. Whichever faction's position is discarded is unlikely to go quietly. For a campaign opposing the SNP both positions offer endless narratives about economic risk: do you want your boss to change the value of your salary in your contract? Will you be paid in one currency and pay your mortgage in another? Will your business face new transaction costs? In 2014, the SNP understood the potency of these arguments, which is why they were willing to absorb the damage of refusing to say what their plan B was on currency. Now the same personalities who told us that anything less than a shared currency with the rest of the UK would be bad for Scotland have to sell us on what they know is second best.

The currency issue touches on another important change for the nationalist side. The Yes offer was one which attempted to combine change with continuity: get rid of all the things you don't like (the nasty Tories, austerity, etc) but keep the things you do like (your currency, being part of a bigger economy through EU membership, etc). This is where Brexit, which has so far been a tactical gift for the nationalists, becomes a strategic trap. No longer can they use the shared economic frameworks of the EU single market to shrug off the economic impact of disintegrating from the more tightly-woven UK single market. While Brexit negotiations continued, SNP ministers offered a "wait and see" answer to the question of what their harder border with England will look like. It is a question that can no longer be avoided and one that cannot be answered without exposing a deep contradiction: how can building borders be both the problem and the solution for Scotland?

In 2014 the nationalist side were able to use independence as a catch-all solution for every problem. It was pure populism, offering a home for every protest vote. Two developments make that more difficult today.

The first is that the Scottish Parliament has significant tax and welfare powers to collect and redistribute money. Any grievance based on social injustice can be turned against the SNP government. There is simply no need to leave the UK to create a more generous welfare state. So far the SNP have been lucky as Scottish voters are largely unaware of where these decisions are now made, but any campaign to remain in the Union will educate voters on this, in response to any attempt by nationalists to use devolved responsibilities as a reason for leaving.

The second is that the public spending argument has been turned on its head. In 2014, the nationalist campaign seized on an unusually good year's GERS figures to argue not just that Scotland would choose more socially democratic choices than the austerity being pursued by the Tories, but that we could afford them. Today the oil revenues which created the statistical platform for that argument have evaporated and, for all its other faults, the Conservative government is taking a far more liberal approach to

public spending. Combined with the fiscal impact of either of the currency choices the SNP need to decide on, it is now the Yes side who are offering greater austerity. For 'I'm not a nationalist' and "utilitarian nationalist" supporters of leaving the UK, this cognitive dissonance is too much and they often find themselves simply denying basic facts.

Since the 1980s, SNP strategy has combined social democratic principles with populist politics. If economic trends have undermined their ability to make a social democratic offer, political trends make populist politics less attractive. With the implosion of Trumpism, and the SNP now at war with organs of online disinformation they created, smarter party strategists will recognise the risk of being portrayed as post-truth propagandists. Do they really want to fight a referendum denying their own Government Chief Economist's public finance statistics? We saw the risks in this approach to the big economic questions of independence recently when the whole SNP machine went on the attack against a London School of Economics report on the trade costs of Scexit, only for it to emerge that the author of that report did the modelling the First Minister used for her own analysis of the trade costs of Brexit.

The final change for the nationalist side has been the hubris that has infected every corner of their movement as a result of recent opinion polling. There was always a tendency to arrogance, too often bordering on aggression, from nationalists utterly convinced of the inevitability of their cause. Partly this was strategy. The SNP's main message has always been momentum: that Scotland is on an inescapable path to leaving the UK. This has been a strength – a nation supposedly on the march is an interesting story – but it is also a weakness: if you believe your political cause is inevitably going to win, you don't have to do the hard work of creating a detailed case that survives contact with your opponents.

A bump in opinion polling for leaving the UK is doing nothing to discourage this trait. If those who think they hear destiny knocking looked closer, they'd see that of the 22 polls conducted in the past year, fewer than half have the nationalist cause convincing more than half of the electorate (before don't knows are stripped out). It's a creaky lead. In most polls support for leaving the UK is hovering just above the 45% they achieved in 2014. The nationalist side has been flattered by a lack of confidence on the pro-Union side.

For all the reasons set out above, the SNP would be deeply foolish to believe they have earned their current confidence, or that they have a concrete platform for leaving the UK. But if the changes above represent such a challenge for the nationalist cause, why has there been such a dip in confidence in their opponents?

In simple terms, the Union cause has all of the ingredients but almost nobody to cook them.

The pro-UK parties, already battered by a landslide defeat at Holyrood in 2011 followed by an earthquake at Westminster in 2015, have seen their confidence shattered by the victory of Brexit nationalism in 2016.

The Scottish Labour party had already lost a younger generation in 2011, then 2015 saw it lose its elder statespeople too. The trauma of this, and the Pavlovian need to dispatch leadership and staffers, has left the party hollowed out and lacking the confidence to make an argument for what we believe in. Only Gordon Brown remains, still slugging away, but with new leadership both in the UK and Scotland, and righteous anger in the party at how the SNP have governed, there is hope that Labour might be up for the fight again.

The Conservatives appeared to have engineered a post-2014 recovery based on opposition to Scottish nationalism, but then a different stripe of nationalism under Boris Johnson took control of their UK party, their offer disintegrated and their charismatic leader departed. The current Prime Minister lacks the political subtlety of David Cameron. Cameron stubbornly refused to step into traps set by Alex Salmond, stressing that the campaign to remain in the UK was being led from Scotland by Alistair Darling. By contrast, it seems like every week there is a story briefed about some clever Downing Street wheeze which is going to secure Scotland's place in the Union. The pro-UK side is still on balance more likely to win, but it would be in spite of Downing Street's constant stick-a-union-jack-on-it schemes.

Brexit should stand as a cautionary tale about the costs of erecting borders and the risks of following populists who value emotional appeals more than evidence and analysis. It will take a different and more confident pro-Union campaign to make that case. A UK government pursuing Brexit can hardly use their own mistakes as a premise. While individual Conservatives will play an important role, their party is less able to reach the undecided voters in the middle and is better placed to motivate core voters. If spokespeople can be developed, in many ways an argument that brings together both evidence and emotion is easier to make than it was before. The pro-UK side can own the issues of the moment:

Around the world we have seen the cost of following nationalists who appeal to emotions and tell us to ignore experts. Brexit stands as a warning of how creating new borders costs jobs, especially as we know three times as many Scottish jobs rely on trade with the rest of the UK as with the rest of Europe. We should remain in the UK because it means more money for our NHS and more jobs. The last few years have been tough enough without more cuts, costs and chaos. With power in the Scottish Parliament over taxes, benefits, schools, public transport and the NHS, shouldn't we get on with the job of making things better rather than building a new border with England and changing to an unknown currency?

Labour is ideologically well-placed to make the case that this is where the centre ground of the constitutional argument lies: moderate, democratic, liberal, in favour of being inside both Europe and the UK. However, the party's recovery will take time and it cannot make the argument alone. The pro-Union side needs to build it at the same time as creating an organisation that cares more about reaching undecided voters than arguing with nationalists.

There is a practical need for a broad-based campaign in any referendum. Without one you cannot legally spend money in the final few weeks. While in 2012 we saw parties uniting, this time we are more likely to see activists and arguments coming together.

A campaign to remain in the UK will need to equip a cadre of activists to be its organisers and communicators. Politics has changed fundamentally. Campaigns are more distributed, relying far more even than in 2014 on supporters being equipped to communicate within their social networks. Central campaigns are as much content creators as they are competitors trying to get their message out on the mainstream media. Circumstance means that the pro-UK side can't rely on heavy-hitting household names, but on balance, facing an increasingly arrogant SNP machine, it is better to be a creative insurgency.

There's one other intriguing potential change in the debate. When setting up Better Together we came to a realisation that no matter how hard we tried we would never be the most interesting campaign. The break-up of one of the most significant countries in the history of the world was always going to attract more interest than the continuation of the status quo. That may still be the case, but now there is another narrative that is taking hold that is almost as dramatic: the decline and disintegration of the SNP.

Despite all of the above, the most important feature that hasn't changed is that the debate is still dominated by two vocal tribes, with opinions as firmly fixed as the flags on their social media profiles. The campaign that wins is the one that ignores the shouting and is able to have a conversation with the people who aren't as sure as they are. This is where the campaign which is less strident, and which says it is ok to have doubts, still has an advantage over the side which loudly screams "believe!"

Blair McDougall was head strategist for the 2014 Better Together campaign. Subscribe to his weekly newsletter, Notes on Nationalism, here:
<https://notesonnationalism.substack.com>

Forget being hard or soft on crime – be smart instead – Iain Smith

Originally posted 17 February 2021

If we truly want to reduce offending within our communities in Scotland then we must move beyond tokenistic, meaningless terms like being “hard” or “soft” on crime. We need to be cleverer.

‘Smart Justice’ offers a chance to stand back from the crime (the “what”) and focus on the person committing the crime (the “who”). At present the focus on the crime and its punishment leads to a revolving door of imprisonment. This is not only futile, it is expensive. Keeping someone in prison costs on average £35,000 per year.

Scotland not only tops the league table for the highest prison population in Europe but shamefully also boasts one of the highest drug death rates in the world, over three times that of England. In 2019, 1,264 drug-related deaths were recorded in Scotland. While some may think “so what?”, and characterise those in prison or dead as “neds”, “junkies” or “scum”, this othering and stigma belies the true nature of those we choose to marginalise in society.

In March 2018 I had the great opportunity to meet a former policewoman, the late and great Tina Hendry. She was racing around the country with her colleague, Dr Suzanne Zeedyk, the UK’s leading attachment specialist and psychologist, teaching those willing to listen about the science behind adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Examples of such trauma include sexual and physical abuse, neglect and bereavement. Dr Robert Anda & Dr Vincent Felitti produce research findings in 1998 basically setting out the horrific impact childhood trauma has on the developing brain, with numerous poor physical and mental health outcomes, including poor self-regulation, hyper-vigilance, suicidal ideation and depression. Again – so what? What has that got to do with the criminal justice system? Everything.

I have 25 years of experience navigating the courts in a busy criminal law practice where I have met literally thousands of participants in this *justice* system. I previously believed that all my clients chose their paths and that they were rightly held accountable for electing to take part in violence and *enjoying* drugs. What I failed to realise and see was the devastation caused by childhood trauma and the pivotal role it plays in shaping not only a person’s brain but their destiny. For many of my clients their battle for justice begins at birth. Those young people removed from family homes because of the damage being done to them end up floating seamlessly through the care system, to the justice system and on to the prison system.

Education about ACEs may well encourage a reduction in and prevention of harm inflicted on children – a good start. This awareness cannot begin too early for parents and professionals. In the criminal justice setting it may allow those otherwise hell-bent on retribution to see the “who” behind the label of offender and to think creatively in order to halt that revolving door.

As a criminal defence lawyer I meet people daily who *do* bad things but very few who *are* bad or evil. Understanding the damage some people suffer in childhood and how this can affect their ability to self-regulate, how drugs and alcohol become the necessary tools needed to disassociate from a life that feels too painful to live, gives space for empathy, compassion and repair. People cannot be punished out of their addiction, pain or trauma. Rather, let's provide long-term solutions which are neither "soft" nor "hard", but are instead Smart Justice.

Recognising that trauma has an effect on capacity is key. The system currently holds all people who commit crime to be responsible for their actions, but many are not response-able due to toxic stress impeding their development in childhood. A 13-year-old victim of sexual abuse does not make a reasoned choice to consume heroin to self-soothe and disassociate, at least not in the true sense of choice. I recognise it is not always easy to be empathetic, particularly when the offence committed has left another victim in the aftermath. But victimhood runs deeper than what we see on the surface of a crime. Only through compassion, hope and perseverance can we even flirt with the prospect of repair.

As has been said by others, the real test is to be kind to unkind people. By shifting the lens directed towards people caught up in the justice system, we have an opportunity to shift the system from retribution to reparation. Educationalist Stuart Shankar writes "See a Child Differently, See a Different Child". The justice system, with all its wigs, gowns and traditions, is slow to change. But to ignore the impact of childhood trauma is not only ignorant, it is a professional failure to do what is right: morally and financially.

It is understandable that we hate to talk about systemic problems such as childhood sexual abuse, torture and neglect, but we cannot now ignore its effect on those who have suffered it. We have a collective responsibility for failing young people in childhood. Court may provide an opportunity for help rather than punish. Going to the source of the problem may be hard, but ignoring it is expensive and irresponsible.

Not only do we struggle with the causes of crime steeped in trauma, but we also fail on the solutions. There is no magic wand to cure the pain of a traumatised person suffering addiction. All too often we simply replace one illegal opiate, heroin, with a legal one, methadone. I often hear judges refer to my clients' drug or alcohol problem, when in fact that is their solution to their trauma problem. Scratching the surface of someone's life will often reveal their pain – that is often the can of worms the decision-maker fears. It is a complexity that overwhelms judges, social workers and even doctors. Yet we must try to repair and persevere otherwise our crimes will continue to rise along with our prison numbers and drug deaths.

Addressing the causes of crime rather than simply the consequences is smart and will reduce offending. Treating drug addiction as a health issue rather than a criminal justice matter would also be wise. Judges clumsily navigate a drug treatment and testing order, often reverting to futile threats to punish someone when they miss two of their 20 monthly appointments. Einstein recognised the madness of repeating these same mistakes and expecting different results.

Part of the First Minister's command to her new Drugs Minister, Angela Constance, was to "ensure a humane and responsive justice system". Recognition of the impact of trauma is fundamental to achieving such a change. Repair over retribution all day long.

Iain Smith is a criminal defence lawyer and partner with Keegan Smith Defence in West Lothian. He is the co-founder of Trauma Aware Lawyers, a member of Aid & Abet, a mentor with ICAN and a core group member of West Lothian Adverse Childhood Experiences Hub. He speaks regularly at justice events about childhood trauma and justice and hopes to embed trauma training in the education of the next generation of. In 2020 he won Scottish Lawyer of the Year at the Scottish Legal Awards.

Less debate, more action – how to accelerate NHS reform

– Paul Gray

Originally posted 22 February 2021

A couple of days ago I posted a tweet thanking a doctor for showing kindness to my mother-in-law, who is very ill in hospital. Within less than 48 hours, it had been liked over 3,000 times.

Whatever else the future holds for health and care services, it is very clear that people value the core of kindness that runs through these services like lettering in a stick of rock. Whatever blemishes and imperfections we seek to address through future reforms, we must never be so focused on process and numbers that we squeeze out the essence of care.

Care does not happen in a vacuum and kindness is not shown by machines. So as we think about the bold changes which need to be made in order to have health and care services that deal with today's pressures while transforming to meet the needs of tomorrow, we must not forget that care is provided by people. In speaking about workforce, let us remember that the workforce is not an amorphous mass of interchangeable ciphers. It is composed of real people with real lives, real skills, real aspirations, real hopes and fears, and real pressures. It is multifaceted, complex, and not all visible, and by no means all paid or recognised for the care it provides.

One of the answers to some of the workforce pressures is to say that we need more – more of something, or more of everything. There is of course scope to rebalance between or among professions, but there are no doctors on shelves, carers in cupboards, social workers in holding areas, or nurses in warehouses, all waiting to be called. A wife caring for her husband does not have a spare to call on when she is exhausted. The third sector is not a bottomless pit of resources that can be picked up and laid down at will. The answer may lie in increased numbers in some areas; but it may equally lie in different and more flexible configurations of what we already have; and it certainly lies in cutting out duplication and rework, and passing people from one service to another without making joins.

Would it really need to take very long to describe the kind of multidisciplinary teams that would respond variously to the recommendations of The Promise, the Review of Adult Health and Social Care, the compelling need to deal with the backlog of waiting times, and the demography and health status of Scotland in the longer term? Would it make sense to start where we are, and do what we can, rather than having a competition where the loudest voice will probably win?

Two potentially contentious points. One, we need to abandon all hope of a better past; we should learn from the past but we cannot change it. And two, particularly in positions of leadership, the future is determined by the choices you make and the actions you take, not by what you ask for, or what you say you will do.

Two points also occur about the interaction between workforce pressures, and technology. First, how much time would it save if information about a person was available wherever they went, for access by professionals with a legitimate reason to see it? Might that be achieved by giving individuals access to their own health and care records, with appropriate safeguards? And second, the vastly accelerated roll-out of NHS Near Me, giving access to video consultations in response to the restrictions imposed by Covid, has shown that technology can benefit both staff and citizens – what other similar innovations are waiting in the wings, that could make a real difference? For any sake, let's not go back to the attenuated processes of the past for that sort of thing. Time is too short, and resources too precious, and patient care too important to be sacrificed on the altar of multi-layered decision making.

[I wrote a few months ago for Reform Scotland](#) about things that I learned and things that I got wrong while I was chief executive of NHS Scotland. One of the things I learned was that in health and care services there is too much interorganisational and interprofessional protectionism – too many silos. Some of it is learned behaviour, some of it results from accidents of history; it is rarely wilful, and often subconscious. I took some steps to correct this but in retrospect I did not do nearly enough. The language of person-centred services already exists (although it remains possible to spend half an hour debating whether a person, a citizen, a client and a patient are the same thing).

The fundamental shift that would make a real difference would be to move from the language of putting people at the centre, to implementing processes which actually achieve that. This will not involve waiting for new discoveries, or the invention of a hitherto unknown process – it requires a determined commitment to finding the people and organisations that already do this well, and a willingness to learn from them, and to spread that knowledge widely and fast. In many instances, this will involve accepting that the third sector has something to teach the public sector; in other instances it will involve accepting that you can learn from what works in another area. I also counsel against assuming that the public sector cannot learn from the best in the private sector when it comes to customer service; this is by no means a suggestion that services need expensive consultancy to tell them what to do – I am certain that there are plenty of organisations who would be delighted to share their learning as part of their contribution to corporate social responsibility.

Then comes the hard bit – if your organisational design, systems or processes, or your professional boundaries, are favouring the provider rather than the person or community we are here to serve, will you make the changes that are necessary to remove the barriers? The alternative is for everyone to insist that they are unique, and that their unique geography, demography, social context, funding situation and history mean that they can find no way to adopt something that works elsewhere. That leads only to an ever-increasing range of unique ways to remain provider-centric.

None of this says that every service needs to be designed in the same way. Inner cities are not best served by approaches that work well in remote and rural areas. Children are not small adults – they need different approaches to care and treatment. Complex, specialist procedures offer better outcomes when they are delivered from centres of

expertise rather than distributed across a wide range of locations where they are performed infrequently.

But if the basic principle that services are organised and delivered in ways which are responsive to the needs of people and communities drives decision making, the form will follow the function. Structural change is not the starting point: if it is required it should be implemented in response to evidence of population needs, in pursuit of better outcomes, and with genuinely transparent public involvement. Because whatever the NHS may feel like from the inside, from the outside it can look and feel immense, pervasive, and monolithic. At times, trying to get it to listen can feel like shouting at the Sphinx, and trying to get it to move feels about as productive as trying to tow Greenland.

Yet inside that colossus, skill, wisdom, care, insight, and compassion are in abundance. Daily, individuals go above and beyond the call of duty. They perform procedures of incredible delicacy; they care unstintingly for the dying; they comfort the bereaved; they balance risk; they make judgements that are truly life and death. We speak about the doctors and the nurses, but what of the porters, the receptionists, the healthcare support workers, the cooks, the volunteers, the ward clerks, the scientists, the administrators, the pharmacists, the chaplains – and many more – who make the NHS the well-loved institution that it is? They have shown beyond all doubt over the last year or so that they are ready and able to be part of what it could be. They have shown flexibility, willingness to adapt, and a strong commitment to professional care. Their voices matter as we think about what should come next.

There are some difficult things we could consider. At the moment many people are waiting for investigations and procedures which have been delayed because of a focus on coronavirus. These waiting lists will need to be tackled over an extended period. What might we do differently in order to achieve this? Should we think about whether some of the targets that currently exist should remain?

In that context, would there be scope to review the 12-week treatment time guarantee (TTG)? The NHS already stratifies some treatments by clinically assessed need. There are 31- and 62-day targets for cancer diagnosis and treatment, for example. I suggest that these should remain, but that the opportunity be taken to review whether other conditions should be similarly stratified. As we emerge from the pandemic, it will be important that the waiting lists are tackled in a clinically justifiable order, based on a clearly expressed recovery plan which is neither defined nor hindered by territorial boundaries, and I suggest in that context that it would be prudent to take the opportunity to review the TTG.

In making changes, let us not forget what we know. We know that if people are cared for at home, or in a homely setting, they generally have better outcomes. We know that if the Emergency Department of a hospital is over-crowded and the target of seeing and treating 95% of people within 4 hours is regularly breached, that suggests pressure in other parts of the system too, and outcomes are likely to be worse. So, let us not treat every target as something to be endlessly reviewed.

In conclusion then, I suggest a simple framework for testing recovery plans and decisions about change. Such plans are essential and I detect little or no resistance to the proposition that change is needed; there is no time to lose. But testing proposed changes against these questions could help to take the discussion forward to solutions that can be implemented, rather than generating debate among particular interest groups for its own sake.

- Does the public understand what you are doing and why?
- Do the people providing this service understand what is proposed and why?
- What evidence are you using to justify the change you want to make?
- How does your proposal improve access to services, the quality of the service provided or the sustainability of the service overall?
- Does your proposal have an impact on the access, quality or sustainability of another service? (In other words, are you making improvements at someone else's expense?)
- How will you measure the success of the changes you propose?
-

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

A Pupil's perspective – Bruce McCall

Originally posted 26 February 2021

This year's Higher and Advanced Higher exams were cancelled on the 8th of December. Speaking in parliament, Education Secretary John Swinney said the reason for the cancellation was not concern about the risk of spreading Covid-19, but about the impact the virus has had on the consistency of the standard of education across the country.

Many students have had to isolate due to being in contact with or having the virus, and this has led to a significant dip in the quality of their schooling. In some cases, pupils had to isolate for the required two weeks on multiple occasions across the first term of the school year, from August to December. As a result, children across Scotland are at drastically different stages of the same course.

Following the cancellation there was no immediate plan for how pupils would be assessed through the coming months, which meant a period of uncertainty and unease. Students were left without a clear idea of how they would be graded in the absence of exams. No-one was at fault for this – it was unclear to everyone how the system would be able to gauge an accurate grade for pupils. This needed to be worked out.

The further lockdown in January prevented the opportunity to sit prelims in early 2021. Without these, with no final exams planned, and with lockdown meaning there would be a long wait until we got back into school, focus shifted to how schools might gather materials in order to grade pupils as accurately as possible. Courses were continued through online work and home learning during the January lockdown and into February, and examination boards eventually set out the forms of evidence required for grading and confirmed the date when submissions would be needed by. This allowed teachers across the country to begin gathering the work and evidence to ensure their pupils were presented fairly.

Along with the cancellation of exams, another difficulty from the point of view of the student is the sudden changes to courses. Many of the subjects at Higher level have had specific areas cut to aid teachers and pupils whose progression has been halted or slowed due to lockdowns, isolation periods and contracting the virus. Inevitably, this raises the concern that we are not getting the full learning experience and knowledge needed for future years in education.

Coronavirus has affected the education system not only by preventing regular in-school teaching, but also by reducing exposure to the parts of schooling that go beyond learning. This includes the development of opinion, helped by a learning environment in which pupils engage in class discussions that progress their thought processes and force them both to challenge and defend views. This lack of classroom collaboration also denies the chance to learn life skills from teachers or other mentors.

However, this new form of continuous assessment is not all bad news. It has helped to identify possible ways of examining students that go beyond relying wholly on end-of-

year exams. Some Higher courses may be better suited to continuous assessment across the whole year.

From experience over the past 12 months, continuous assessment gives students more opportunity to shape their submissions for grading. The amount of hard work they are willing to put into their coursework can clearly be seen by the assessor. It also allows exam boards to see a pupil's progression through the course of the year. And it also arguably better prepares pupils for eventual progression to the requirements of the workplace.

It would not be correct to make coursework 100% of the final grade, but a new structure for grading that incorporates continual assessment as well as exams would seem to make sense and to offer a more accurate approach.

Having missed just over four months of in-school learning since the first lockdown, it has been a huge challenge for everyone involved in the education system to provide children of all ages with a positive learning experience. As a pupil, the period has not been without its challenges, but in the end, we can only thank teachers and other authorities for their efforts to continue our education through these unprecedented times.

Bruce McCall is a 16-year-old secondary school student in Edinburgh

Local government finance & the need to respect devolution – Paul McLennan

Originally posted 3 March 2021

Scottish Politics at the best time of times can be tribalistic. The recent appearance of Alex Salmond at the Holyrood Parliament Harassment inquiry has seen that reach fever pitch. The short term effects may be a factor in the Scottish Parliament Elections in May this year.

It's the longer term effects that trouble me also.

The media scramble around the Inquiry has predictably seen the Conservative supporting press state that this demonstrates that the cause of independence itself has been damaged beyond repair and Scotland as a country isn't fit to govern itself.

Rising support for independence in the past 9 months has been tempered by a slow decrease in the past few months.

But this increase for support for Independence has seen a new "Union Unit" set up by PM Boris Johnson, and it's not had its problems to seek, sacking its previous Head of Unit, Luke Grahame, ex Conservative MP for Ochil and South Perthshire, the only Scot in the unit.

But what should worry supporters of Independence, and indeed devolution was the recent announcement of the new UK Government Levelling Up Fund by the Tory Scottish Secretary Alastair Jack.

Indeed Aberdeen Conservative Council Leader Douglas Lumsden had raised the prospect of this a few times in the past few months.

£4bn has been set aside to fund "infrastructure projects" in the UK, which would have had Barnett Consequentials of £400m for Scotland.

Projects could have included High Street regeneration, local transport and cultural and heritage projects.

Many local authorities in Scotland are in the process of setting their budgets, with Covid Recovery a major factor in their planning.

Construction led recovery could have been part of the strategic recovery plans required as we exit from the pandemic.

The SNP has called the announcement of the fund as a "power grab" and demanded the monies are passed through Scottish Government as part of the Barnett Consequentials.

Neither the Scottish Government, COSLA, nor individual local authorities will have any input into the spending plans that the UK Government will bring forward.

The plethora of City Region Plans in the past few years has seen a model that has worked well collaboratively between the Scottish Government, UK Government, COSLA, and individual local authorities.

The City Regions plans also have an established structure in place through Regional Growth Frameworks', and with local authorities working well with both Scottish and UK Government's.

Is it surely within the realms of imagination, that even if the UK Government didn't want to hand the monies to the Scottish Government it could have used this funding to either top up or initiate new City Growth Plans.

This led me to the ongoing debate of whether local authorities should have more powers to raise more of their own funds. Scotland, and indeed the UK, have the most centralised control of raising local finance – with 15% being raised by local authorities and 85% being funded by central government.

Turn out in local authority elections is traditionally under 50% , many will say this is because the lack of accountability of raising funds does not promote the interest in local council elections.

Most European countries raise at least 50% of their local expenditure, they use a mix of Land Taxes; Local Income Taxes; and Local Sales taxes.

There have been debates in the past on this issue, indeed a recent commission on local tax reform.

This takes me back to the £400m levelling up Fund proposed by the UK Government. This is a backward step driven by politics in the ongoing constitutional debate.

However my own party the SNP have to grasp the nettle once again after next year's local council elections and look at the issue once again, when the electoral cycle leaves another 5 years to local elections.

Whether all parties have the desire and indeed the maturity to do so time will only tell. The future health of local democracy and local accountability rely on its success.

Paul McLennan is an SNP councillor for Dunbar and an SNP Candidate for East Lothian.

A Vision for Young People 2021-31 Thriving in the Scottish Outdoors – Dave Spence

Originally posted 10 March 2021

In 2020, Residential Outdoor Education experienced a near extinction event. Following a national Campaign – #saveyouroutdoorcentres – the Scottish Government agreed to support organisations to ensure Centres remained viable until June 2021.

The challenge remains to ensure that young people benefit from these experiences both immediately post-pandemic and for decades to come. For that to happen, the residential experience must be put on a sustainable basis.

With this in mind, an initiative was launched last week – the **Vision for Young People 2021-2031**. The Vision emphasises that thought and action for the future must derive first and foremost from that is best for children and young people.

The Vision was produced by Third Sector providers who deliver the vast majority of outdoor learning in Scotland. However it is not just for professional outdoor educators. There are a great many stakeholders in society who will benefit from the implementation of this Vision. As a national vision, the process seeks to reach out to secure the involvement of all stakeholders.

A successful vision is both 'product' and 'process' therefore the intention is that many people contribute to the process in the coming months. Communities and the economy benefit from qualities and skills that young people develop from these experiences therefore contributions from wider society, including business and community leaders must be heard.

The evidence of benefits of residential experiences for young people is irrefutable. Outdoor education combined with the immersive residential experience creates a powerful pedagogy. It creates opportunities and benefits that are life affirming and life changing for children and young people who demonstrate newfound confidence, determination, resilience and compassion while developing new skills. Young people need these experiences regularly and frequently to offset the damage from other experiences that set them back e.g. the bullying and self-doubt that erodes confidence.

This Vision is of Scotland as the place where every single young person has the right to progressive outdoor learning including immersive, residential experiences.

At this time of pandemic, the benefits of being active outdoors are more important than ever. The impact of Covid-19 has been particularly hard on young people. Worries about their families and months spent isolated from their friends have increased mental health issues, stress and loneliness. Some will have lost family members. Lockdown and school closures have expanded the attainment gap.

Emerging from the devastating effects of the pandemic, our children and young people need opportunities to break free from the constraints they have endured. Residential outdoor learning enables young people to leave the pandemic behind by focusing on adventure and challenges while exploring the therapeutic value of meaningful connectedness with nature and the outdoors. For those who bring young people to Centres every year, the reopening of Centres will be a tangible step to normalisation. The Vision aims by 2022, to ensure that every single young person will have the opportunity to experience residential outdoor education and for it to be fully embedded in every young person's journey growing up in Scotland.

By linking the immersive residential experience, along with other frequent outdoor experiences, young people will benefit from continuity and progression. From woodland nurseries, learning in school grounds and taking youth work outdoors, to residential experiences and expeditions in Scotland and abroad, all young people will engage in opportunities to be active outdoors, building on their achievements and learning in new contexts. That these individual experiences exist is not enough; the goal is that they are linked by continuity and progression through a young person's school career.

Specialist outdoor educators create spaces for our children to build stronger relationships, develop resilience and re-imagine society that is stronger and fairer; one that truly values nature and our environment. All learners would be actively engaged in learning for sustainability through progressive, curriculum-led experiences.

As a result, young people and children will be healthier, happier, more confident, and more resilient. They will be better connected to nature, with better team work and communications skills. They will enjoy enhanced self-perception and self-belief, better physical and mental health, wellbeing and optimism. They will achieve and attain more and have improved life chances.

Others will benefit too. Parents and carers will have confidence to embrace the benefits for their children and appreciate the opportunity for their children to spend time with people they trust as important steps toward independence.

Teachers will value the opportunities of young people transferring their school-based learning to other contexts and collaborate with specialist outdoor educators to support young people's learning for attainment and achievement.

Business and Industry Leaders will recognise the potential of the immersive residential experience to develop the skills and qualities sought in the future workforce. They will value the emergent balance of social and environmental responsibility in economic development, as well as an increase in important employability skills and qualities among young people.

The Scottish Government will value residential experiences for the contribution they make in the delivery of educational and development outcomes for young people, as well as its contributions to multiple policy priority areas including health and wellbeing, mental health, sustainability, economic development and the environment.

The Government will create and oversee an architecture in Scotland that forges partnerships and makes full use of the resources available in the private, public and Third sectors to realise this Vision. Confusion over delivery agents and roles will dissipate in favour of commitment of all stakeholders to a shared vision.

There is already a great deal of support for the Vision. As evidenced by the thousands of responses to #saveyouroutdoorcentres campaign, the view of teachers, parents and carers, and many others, is emphatic – they highly value residential and want them to return for young people as soon as it is safe to do so.

This Vision for residential outdoor experiences in Scotland is ambitious for young people. It will be achieved with support from across society and produce lasting, positive changes. Young people will be empowered and motivated, to develop the qualities and skills that they will need to succeed in a scary world of great change.

As we emerge from the pandemic, there is still a lot of uncertainty. Yet one thing is clear – to put residential outdoor learning on a sustainable basis in Scotland, we must do things differently. Collaboration between stakeholders from different backgrounds is a great source of innovation and the Vision process must realise this creative potential to make the Vision reality. Everyone with an interest in the importance and potential of the residential experience for young people will be welcome at the table.

Dave Spence is CEO of Scottish Outdoor Education Centres

Time to rewild the Highlands – Ben Goldsmith

Originally posted 15 March 2021

Last spring I visited Inverness-shire in the fabled and rugged Scottish Highlands. It's as bleak a landscape as you'll find anywhere in Britain, until you arrive at a place called Glenfeshie, where strenuous efforts have been made during the last decade to reduce out-of-control red deer numbers and restore natural balance to the landscape.

Turning off the main road into this remote, beautiful glen after a long drive through the surrounding landscape is like moving from black and white into technicolour. It is as if the hills and valleys here are reawakening after a long sleep. The hillsides are dotted with emergent juniper, hawthorn, dog rose and blackthorn scrub. Little Caledonian pine, rowan, birch and even oak are popping up through the grass everywhere. The Feshie, a tributary of the mighty Spey, fringed with the fresh growth of willow, aspen and alder, cascades along a valley-bottom vivid with wildflowers.

I hear the melancholic call of curlews wheeling overhead, a sound that has all but disappeared from much of Britain. The birdsong from one patch of scrub at Glenfeshie to the next is riotous. The place just teems with life in a way that is quite different to most of upland Britain. Awestruck, I half expected to glimpse a secretive lynx, eradicated from Britain centuries ago, secluded in the branches of one of the few remaining grand old pines which grace the middle reaches of the glen.

In a famous quote, AJP Taylor said that "when we peer into the future we see the past". This magical place offers a glimpse not only of a past steeped in tradition and rich natural abundance, but of a future in which rewilding breathes new life into the ecology and economy of Scotland's remoter landscapes.

Ever since Queen Victoria acquired her Balmoral Estate and her husband Prince Albert donned a Sherlock Holmes hat, deer-stalking has been the fashionable pastime of Highlands landowners. Their huge estates, largely denuded of people and their cattle during the notorious Highland clearances a century earlier, had suffered greatly under the forensic grazing pressure of vast numbers of sheep. With the decline of the wool trade the sheep were replaced by red deer, hordes of them, undersized, artificially fed, shivering on exposed hillsides. Across much of the Highlands hardly a tree remains to shelter these beautiful animals, which are ordinarily accustomed to living in a woodland environment. The few trees that do stand are geriatric survivors from before the arrival of the first sheep, since when any young tree that has popped up through the grass has been eaten immediately. Sheep then deer have literally stripped the land bare. Little or no habitat for wildlife remains, and whole glens have become what some nature-lovers have described as 'green deserts'.

The same is true across much of Britain's upland landscapes. With the exception of small pockets, trees, scrub, wildflowers and birdsong are largely absent. People think of our uplands as great nature reserves, but they are not. Sadly, there is often less wildlife in these parts of the UK than in surrounding areas. Perhaps it is no surprise that not a single one of our upland areas makes the Telegraph's annual [bucket list](#). In any

other country the uplands would be at the top of such a list – but in Britain we have lost our wild places.

One of the consequences is flooding. The [science](#) is crystal clear: if you strip the hills of nature you significantly exacerbate the cycle of flash-flooding and seasonal drought. Bare hills are simply unable to absorb and hold back water after heavy rainfall.

Most people are conscious that the natural fabric of our country has been degraded and depleted over the centuries, but few realise the full extent of the catastrophe that has unfolded around us, particularly in recent decades. Depressingly, the UK now ranks among the most nature-impooverished nations on Earth. Expectations diminish from one generation to the next as we become conditioned to what we know in our own lifetimes, in a process known as “shifting baseline syndrome”. Most of us have no inkling of the extent of our losses.

Countless species have vanished altogether, and those that do remain frequently exist in isolated, often tiny fragments of remnant nature, largely thanks to the care of a handful of dedicated nature-friendly landowners and conservationists. Personal accounts from earlier centuries describe seas teeming with life, meadows and woodland glades carpeted in wildflowers, great forests thronged with songbirds and wildlife. That’s why rewilding has captured the public imagination. It offers a route, for the first time, to meaningful, landscape-scale nature restoration; a way to start reversing the losses.

In the same way that a medieval bridge is supported by several ‘keystones’, without which the bridge collapses, it is understood that the ecological health of our landscapes depends upon the activities of so-called keystone species. In Britain our four keystones are believed to be the [wolf](#), which keeps in check the number of grazing animals on the mountain; the pig (or its ancestor the wild boar), nature’s gardener, turning the soil in its incessant rootling, opening the ground for the benefit of wildflowers and songbirds alike; the [beaver](#), whose damming of streams and small rivers creates invaluable wetland habitat for wildlife of all kinds, whilst reducing flooding and seasonal drought downstream; and finally, the native cattle (or their wild predecessors the aurochs and the bison), whose browsing, grazing and trampling prevents the darkness of the tree canopy from closing over the landscape. The outcome is dynamic wood pasture, complete with scrub and rich in wildflowers, a mosaic of different habitats which teems with life in an abundance that we are unused to seeing in Britain today. The removal of each of these in turn has triggered total ecological collapse across the British uplands – and most notably in the Highlands, probably the most ecologically degraded landscape in all Europe.

Glenfeshie is just one of a number of Highlands estates that are embracing rewilding. Hugh McLeod, Chief of the ancient McLeod clan, has announced that he’ll be [rewilding 40,000 acres](#) on the Isle of Skye, describing the land surrounding Dunvegan Castle as a man-made ‘lunarscape’. Beer company Brewdog has [acquired land](#) for rewilding, with a view to restoring nature, developing nature tourism and sequestering carbon from the atmosphere.

Even more exciting, across some of Scotland's most iconic landscapes landowners of all stripes – public, private and NGO – are banding together to create great mosaics of restored land across millions of acres. [Cairngorms Connect](#) is the most ambitious of these initiatives.

Acknowledging that I am an outsider, it is clear to me that rewilding has the potential to bring not just ecological renewal to the Scottish Highlands, but also economic and social renewal to the communities that live and work in these marvellous, mysterious remote landscapes. Many of the traditional skills associated with rural life are being repurposed for rewilding. For example, in the absence of predators like the wolf, traditional deer stalkers have a vital role in ensuring deer numbers are maintained at a low enough level to ensure young trees can grow. New opportunities also emerge as rewilding takes off. Nature tourism businesses can benefit from the rewilded landscape, as can enterprises that focus on the sustainable use of what the land produces. This can only benefit heavily depopulated upland communities. There is no doubt that as rewilding breathes new life into these landscapes, the jobs that it creates bring new vitality to the communities that live in them.

The Covid lockdowns have given each of us time to reflect upon what really matters in our lives. Many of us have spent more time in nature during the last year than ever before. We are beginning, individually and collectively, to grasp the central importance of healthy, diverse, abundant nature to our physical and our spiritual health. The time has come for us to begin finally the task of restoring the natural glory of our island, whose crown may once again be Scotland's majestic Highlands.

Ben Goldsmith is the co-founder of the Highlands & Islands Environment Foundation

The real question a ballot paper on Scottish independence should ask – Paul Jourdan

Originally posted 23 March 2021

If a second referendum is to be held on whether Scotland should leave the UK, what should the question be, and why does it matter?

Readers will know that a referendum was held in Scotland on 18 September 2014 in which the question put to the voters was “Should Scotland be an independent country?”, to which the possible responses were “Yes” or “No”, in that order. Turnout was high at 84.6%, and “Yes” gained 44.7% of the vote, while “No” won the day with 55.3%. The event was known widely as the indyref. Many readers will by now also have seen that in the draft Referendum Bill published on Monday (22nd March 2021) the Scottish Government has made it known that it wishes to ask exactly the same question as in 2014, with the same choice of answers. This creates some urgency in considering whether this is an appropriate and fair choice of wording.

What not all readers will know is that on 28 May 2019 the Scottish Government introduced the Referendums (Scotland) Bill, an Act which was duly passed into Scots Law on 19 December 2019, and that this piece of legislation, as it was initially drafted, attempted to ensure that a second referendum, so much desired by Scotland’s ruling party, would be able to use the same question and answers as the 2014 referendum without any referral being made to the Electoral Commission. Much of legal commentary on the Bill at the time^[1] concerned itself with the way in which it aimed to establish a framework for the Scottish Parliament to be able to call referendums on any question within its powers. The idea was that a legal challenge could then be mounted at a later date to determine whether a referendum on leaving the UK should be a reserved power belonging to Westminster, requiring a so-called section 30 order (as was granted in 2013 for the 2014 referendum), or whether the Scottish Parliament can act unilaterally in this regard if it is unable to get the requisite agreement from Westminster. Without the Referendums (Scotland) Act, acting unilaterally would be impossible. In addition, the Bill originally sought to allow the Scottish Government to call a referendum via secondary legislation only, without requiring any further votes to be taken in the Scottish Parliament on the matter.

However, the main focus of criticism from all of the opposition parties was on the attempt to avoid the scrutiny of the Electoral Commission over what the question should be, if a re-run of the 2014 referendum is facilitated by the Act (something which they believe is the sole purpose of the Act). The National reported on 19 December 2019 that “Tory constitutional relations spokesman Adam Tomkins and Labour constitution spokesman Alex Rowley both argued the provisions in the Bill around the questions used in referendums were an attempt to ‘rig’ any future vote by the SNP”, later noting that Liberal Democrat MSP Mike Rumbles was of the same view.^[2]

Given the technical nature of the drafting of the Bill, it is best to explain its meaning through the summary given by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) briefing note:

“The result is that where a question has previously been considered by the Electoral Commission, the Commission’s view has neither to be sought again, nor re-communicated to Parliament at the time of laying regulations [by secondary legislation] or, as the case may be, after the introduction of a Bill. There is no similar provision to Subsection 7 in PPERA [the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 which governs the conduct of referendums in the UK], meaning that on each occasion [in the UK] the Electoral Commission is required to report on the referendum question.” [\[3\]](#)

What was the Scottish Government thinking of when drafting this Bill? How could keeping the Electoral Commission away from scrutinising a referendum question possibly be compatible with the assertion by Mike Russell, Cabinet Secretary for Government Business and Constitutional Relations, that “The rules [the Bill] sets out are of the highest standards and will ensure that the results are widely and internationally accepted”[\[4\]](#)? In the context of the unwritten UK constitution, which has at its core the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty, referendums are problematic at the best of times, seeking as they do to bypass or potentially overrule this very thing. The Brexit referendum revealed problems of this sort in abundance, leading to legal disputes at the Supreme Court and causing years of confusion in the aftermath about what exactly the consequences of the referendum should be, given a situation where there was inadequate support in Parliament in favour of it. The best one can say is that this was an opportunistic use of the SNPs domination of the Scottish Parliament to set up a new referendum on departing the UK by fair means or foul.

However, in drafting, any legislation concerning referendums needs great care to be taken both to ensure legitimacy and clarity of process. The Scotland (Referendums) Bill was careless on both fronts, even accepting that its primary purpose is to disrupt the previously accepted consensus on the need for a Section 30 order to be granted by Westminster before a repeat of the 2014 referendum could be held. It was careless both because it sought to bypass the Scottish Parliament by allowing the referendum to be called by secondary legislation, and because it sought to avoid the scrutiny of the Electoral Commission over the question to be asked. Strangely the Bill at no point considers why it might be that a referendum should be held on the same question twice, or seek to put any kind of limitations on how often the same question can be put. There is no recognition of the danger of allowing a determined government to keep asking the same question until it gets the answer it wants, or of the asymmetry of risk in doing so with constitutional matters, where if a change is assented to it can never be undone, but if it is not, the question can simply be re-asked. Rather, the Bill tries to avoid the bother of having to consult the Electoral Commission all over again when the repetition occurs. There is also no consideration given in the Bill to what kind of new safeguards and processes should be put in place as a result of lessons learned from the shambles of the 2016 referendum, which was characterised by a completely new level of voter manipulation via social media using methods from data science.[\[5\]](#) Furthermore, there is no consideration given to whether a pre-legislative referendum, such as those of 2014 and 2016, should necessarily be followed by a confirmatory vote once the legislation is drawn up, to avoid decisions about permanent and hugely significant constitutional change being made while the public are having to guess about what it will mean in practice.[\[6\]](#)

Amendments to the Bill were discussed by the Finance and Constitution Committee of the Scottish Parliament on 27 November 2019.^[7] The Scottish Government had already backed down on its ambition to be able to call referendums via secondary legislation at this point. Adam Tomkins then brought up the topic about scrutiny of the question by the Electoral Commission “for what are, in essence, repeat referendums”. He cited evidence taken from the Electoral Commission itself: “The Commission firmly recommends that it must be required to provide views and advice to the Scottish Parliament on the wording of any referendum question . . . regardless of whether we have previously published our views on the proposed wording.” He proposed an amendment which would require repeat referendums to be subject to fresh scrutiny by the Electoral Commission. Mike Russell, speaking for the Scottish Government, did not accept this, and instead the Act was passed with a compromise that meant the Electoral Commission would only need to be consulted if the question being repeated was put before the start of the prior Parliament, which at the time the Bill was passed would have allowed the 2014 question to escape a second scrutiny, but not if the referendum is called after the May 2021 elections, which we now know is the earliest that this could happen.

So if a repeat of that referendum is called in Scotland after the elections this year, while the draft Referendum Bill makes it clear that it wants the question and format to be identical, it is by no means clear that it will get its way. I believe it is unlikely that the Electoral Commission would recommend that the question from 2014 be allowed to run again unamended, and that this is precisely why the Scottish Government went to such lengths to avoid their scrutiny. The reason for this is that there were some deep flaws in the 2014 question which became apparent from the experience of that referendum, and which are more apparent still following the experience of the 2016 Brexit referendum.

Under PPERA the job of the Electoral Commission (EC) is to comment on the “intelligibility” of referendum questions. In doing so, however, they will comment on their neutrality as well. Their reports make clear that there is an inextricable link between neutrality of the question and legitimacy in a referendum. As well as conducting their own assessment by writing to individuals and organisations, including those representing political parties and campaign groups, the EC also commissions third-party research, which is published in full. This means we can look back at their findings from both the 2014 and 2016 referendums.

The research for the 2014 referendum was carried out in 2012. The question originally proposed was “Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country? Yes / No”. This was criticised by the EC as being a leading question in favour of “Yes”, so they recommended removing the phrase “Do you agree that . . .”, replacing it with “Should . . .”. Their full findings were published in 2013.^[8] This report mentions one of the principal problems of the proposed referendum: “At the time of undertaking our question assessment, it is not yet clear how a vote in favour of independence would be implemented”^[9], adding that in previous recent referendums the question was linked to legislation in Parliament, bringing clarity to what was intended by the question. It would not become clear to the UK public until the debacle following the Brexit Referendum in 2016 what a mess this might lead to, however. In hindsight it

appears that the EC gravely underestimated the potential magnitude of this problem in 2012. However, the report noted that the Scottish Government had promised to define what was meant by “independence” by publishing a White Paper with detailed proposals, a commitment that was honoured, and which meant that the 2014 Referendum was held with greater legitimacy than that of 2016, where there was no equivalent of a White Paper or a Prospectus explaining with clarity what leaving the EU might mean. The opening of the report also notes that feedback from their public opinion research was that neutrality would be increased if “factual information about what independence would mean in practice were made available before polling day”, adding that “there was also an expectation that this would happen.”[\[10\]](#) In practice it was deeply naïve to believe that this could happen because almost everything about “what independence might mean in practice” is speculative and subject to intensely divergent opinion.

IPSOS Mori were hired to conduct the research, and their method was a combination of one-to-one interviews and focus groups with a total of 265 participants in a range of locations across Scotland. In order to test neutrality, they tested three alternative versions of the same question, each with broadly similar wording and the same Yes / No answer. This was not the most rigorous way of doing this, as in all cases they accepted the premise and format of the original question without critique, and without giving their interviewees the opportunity to consider alternatives relating specifically to leaving the UK. The EC would probably argue that this was beyond their remit, however.

The report found that the question was well understood, but that people wanted “more information about what independence would mean in practice”.[\[11\]](#) It found that “Do you agree . . . ” should be removed. It also noted that: “Almost everyone had a clear understanding that ‘independent country’ meant Scotland being separate from the rest of the UK,”[\[12\]](#), although alternative descriptions given initially by people included “separate from England”; “separate from Westminster”; “running our own affairs”; and “Scotland managing on its own”.[\[13\]](#)

Some participants in 2012 felt that the word “independent” in itself was not neutral, believing that in this context “the word is positively associated with ‘freedom’ and images of ‘Braveheart’ and therefore encourages an emotional and less considered response.”[\[14\]](#) A few participants also suggested “that there could be a potential bias towards ‘yes’ as it comes before ‘no’ “, but recognised that “the same could be true if the answers were reversed.”[\[15\]](#)

Reflecting back on the question posed in 2014 from the vantage point of 2021 the following points come to mind. The most obvious one is that the EC report from 2012 tests whether people it interviewed understood the question by whether or not they realised that the consequence of a “Yes” vote would be for Scotland to leave the UK. Most did. But this begs a crucial question: if the vote is about leaving the UK, why not make the question about leaving the UK?

Following the 2016 Brexit referendum certain Brexiteers couched their victory as Independence Day for the UK. Does voting for Scotland to be an independent country

mean that it will not only leave the UK but also that it will not join the EU? “Independence” has become an overused and politically laden term. I believe that many more people would now see it as holding some implicit positive or negative implications than they did in 2012. The reason why the EC recommended moving away from a Yes / No format for the Brexit question was because some people they questioned even saw phrases like “remain” or “remain a member” as being potentially positively or negatively charged. How much more so the word “independence” now?

Most people would concede that countries can be independent to varying degrees, rather than this being a simple binary yes or no test. The Collins English Dictionary, for example, gives the meaning of “independent country” as “independent countries and states are not ruled by other countries but have their own government”.^[16] Well, Scotland has its own government able to rule on most matters which directly impact voters, such as health, education, taxation, benefit allowance and local government, but is in some respects also governed by Westminster. It has more independence now than it did in 2014 as a result of the Smith Commission and its later implementation. This highlights the absurd ambiguity of the 2014 referendum question, which once noticed can’t be overlooked.

This can be interrogated further by two thought experiments. Imagine if the Brexit referendum question had been posed as “Should the UK be an independent country?” This would have met with howls of protest from the Remain side, and would have been rejected by the EC as being unintelligible and biased. But is this really so different from asking the same question about Scotland? With the Brexit referendum the Leave side wanted to be free of a union which gave a distant governmental body superior authority to that of the UK Parliament. For them, this was primarily a matter of being independent.

Second, imagine if the question being put were “Should Scotland be an Independent Country to a significant degree?” Then surely this would be a question that voters in Scotland would say “Yes” to, because Scotland already is an independent country to a significant degree, with its own Government, its own Parliament, its own legal system, its own education system, its own healthcare system and so on. So the question that the SNP would like to put is very close to one that everybody would agree with, whether or not they wish to leave the UK. This creates a certain pressure to assent, whatever one’s views are. The question is relying on voters to understand a fine distinction between being “independent” and being “independent to a significant degree”.

These thoughts, in combination with reading the extensive analysis done by the EC in their recommendations about the EU referendum, and the increase in the politically charged nature of the word “independence”, lead to the very firm conclusion that any further referendum on constitutional change in Scotland should adopt almost identical wording to that of the Brexit. This would mean it would read like the following:

“Should Scotland remain in the United Kingdom or leave the United Kingdom?” With the options being “Remain in the UK” and “Leave the UK”, in that order.

This question would be significantly more neutral because it avoids being coloured by the emotionally charged word “independence” and it avoids any possible Yes / No bias.^[17] It would also be much more precise, allowing no room for misinterpretation around what is meant by “independence” and whether the question had implications about EU membership. There is little doubt that with this question any such referendum would achieve significantly greater legitimacy. If some on the Leave side of the argument would object on the grounds that this might make the referendum more difficult to win, then this simply reinforces all of the arguments being made here. In dealing with this matter, the SNP Government will need to decide whether legitimacy matters more than win-at-any-cost expediency. I for one hope that they will reconsider the wording set out in Monday’s draft Referendum Bill, as I believe it is designed to orient a complex debate about the pros and cons of leaving the UK towards the raw sentiments of nationalism, and in so doing chooses to completely ignore the high level of independence that Scotland already possesses.

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[1] See for example the law firm Brodies LLP commentary at <https://brodies.com/insights/public-law-and-regulation/the-referendums-scotland-bill-what-you-need-to-know>

[2] <https://www.thenational.scot/news/18113493.msps-pass-referendum-bill-paving-way-independence>

[3] Sarah Atherton, Iain Mclver and Iain Thom, 19 June 2019, p. 14 see <https://digitalpublications.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefings/Report/2019/6/19/Referendums-Scotland-Bill>

[4] Statement “Next Steps on Scotland’s Future”, 29 May 2019, reported in the SPICe briefing note, p.9.

[5] This is not conjecture, it was described in detail in [Dominic Cumming’s speech to Nudgestock 2017, “Why Leave Won the Referendum”](#).

[6] The cross party [“Report of the Independent Commission on Referendums”](#) published by UCL in 2018 specifically recommended that “where a pre-legislative referendum is absolutely necessary, it should be preceded by a detailed White Paper (recommendation 19) and provision should be made from the outset for a second referendum if plans diverge from those that it sets out (recommendation 20).” (p. 193). It is reasonable to ask why these serious and important recommendations were ignored in the Bill.

[7] <https://beta.parliament.scot/bills-and-laws/bills/referendums-scotland-bill>

[8] [“Referendum on independence for Scotland: Advice of the Electoral Commission on the proposed referendum question”](#) (Jan 2013).

[9] Ibid., para 2.3, p.6.

[10] Ibid., para 2.16 , p.8

[11] Ibid., para 3.18, p. 12

[12] Ibid., para 3.38, p. 15

[13] Ibid., para 3.39, p. 15

[14] Ibid., para 3.45 p. 16

[15] Ibid., para 3.54 p. 18.

[16] <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/independent-country>

[17] The EC reports do not acknowledge any hint of Yes / No bias, but that doesn’t chime with the experience of many in the 2014 referendum. Some psychologists have written about a strong desire in people to want to say “Yes” rather than “No” to requests for example, see for example [“Why ‘Yes’ Is More Powerful Than ‘No’ “, Association For Psychological Science, 4 May 2016.](#)

Hospitality is ready – the Scottish Government should be too – Stephen Montgomery

Originally posted 29 March 2021

It's impossible for me to get excited about the partial and gradual reopening of the hospitality sector when the industry that I have worked in for over a decade continues to be unfairly targeted by the Scottish Government. Although a path towards normality appears to be taking shape, arbitrary curfews and an illogical stance on alcohol continue this unjustified attack on the industry. The sector was among the first to close to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and now we're expected to be some of the last to reopen completely.

Hospitality played no part in the second wave because it was shut; and there never has been an evidence base for the punitive restrictions on the sector, which St Andrew's House confirmed in a response to a Freedom of Information request that the Scottish Hospitality Group pursued for almost four months.

To quote directly: "Neither the Scottish Government, the Chief Medical Officer's Advisory Group nor SAGE have produced evidence papers on a sectoral basis. Instead, we have used scientific evidence on transmission coupled with the social and economic benefits of particular sectors which Ministers have used to make decisions."

We completely understand that lockdown measures were necessary and that a level of restrictions will remain for a while, especially given that the pandemic is far from over. However, there has always been the chance to work with the industry in a smarter manner: to partner with hospitality so that systems are in place that protect public health, people's jobs and, ultimately boost the economy – something that is essential in these trying times.

We also acknowledge and appreciate that almost every sector of the Scottish economy has been affected by the pandemic. But no industry has been impacted more than hospitality. Even when some premises were able to open, pubs, restaurants and hotels had to follow measures that meant trading was simply not viable.

The Fraser of Allander Institute released their quarterly economic commentary this month, which outlines the disproportionate impact of lockdowns on the hospitality sector. Since June 2020, the share of operating accommodation and food services businesses reporting lower turnovers than usual was around 60% and peaked in August and November last year above 90%.

This trend isn't reversing – more than 70% of businesses in the sector reported lower turnover than usual in the early months of 2021. Comparing this number to the current cross-industry average of 45% shows how the hospitality sector has been disproportionately affected as a result of various lockdowns and restrictions.

A large share of our sector, which Fraser of Allander estimate contributes £4.4bn in direct gross value added to the Scottish economy, remains shut down and a significant number of our workforce are still furloughed.

While Nicola Sturgeon's newly published roadmap may provide some hope for these businesses, the plan needs to go further and acknowledge the entirety of the sector. It is practically impossible for drink-led pubs and nightclubs to gradually reopen, and far more challenging to adapt to unwarranted measures.

Since the beginning, the Scottish Hospitality Group has repeatedly offered the government practical and realistic solutions, both at their request and proactively ourselves, that balance economic and public health interests. Now that we're approaching an easing of restrictions, there is still time for the government to listen to businesses and make sensible and essential changes to the levels system to give us viable trading.

The government is giving cafes the same financial support as the rest of the hospitality sector but is imposing much more lenient restrictions on the former. To redress the imbalance, it would be fairer for pubs, restaurants and hotels to be allowed to trade later as we have requested. Failing that, then allocate the emergency funding more to those businesses that need it the most rather than those that will soon be able to trade virtually as normal.

Our industry's proposed level system would save over 60,000 jobs and contribute more than £1.2bn to the economy in the short term by altering the levels outlined in the Strategic Framework. Research from leading economic consultancy, BiGGAR Economics, shows that under the current Level 3 restrictions, 54% of hospitality businesses could be operating, which generates a turnover of £269 million and supports 21,900 jobs. If government was to open with the proposed Level 3 industry change, 73% of businesses could be operating, generating a turnover of £927 million and supporting 53,300 jobs.

The Scottish Hospitality Group is united with other hospitality trade bodies and suggest that small tweaks, such as extending opening hours indoors to 10:30pm and allowing alcohol generally in Level 3, would allow the sector to meet both public health and economy objectives as strict COVID-19 measures remain in place.

The Scottish Government must help our sector and join us in launching a campaign to rebuild public confidence in well-run and responsible venues which will attract the public back to hospitality. The government must acknowledge the vital role that hospitality plays in the fabric of Scotland's economy and recognise the huge impact that would result if the sector continues to be let down.

People will always find a way to drink and socialise – isn't it better to do so in a safe environment, and help one of our most important economic sectors return back to full fitness itself?

Stephen Montgomery, Group Spokesperson for the Scottish Hospitality Group

How to turbo-charge Scotland's economy – Malcolm Offord

Originally posted 6 April 2021

Scotland's public finances are revealed each year in the publication named GERS (Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland). Most recently published in August 2020, these figures do not make comfortable reading for the SNP, who have been in government in Scotland now for 14 years. In summary, GERS reveals that the British Dividend is more valuable to Scotland than ever before. In fact, it's worth nearly £2,000 for every man, woman and child.

How so? The reality is that Scotland's annual running costs are £81bn and our annual income is £66bn so our annual deficit has grown to £15bn (pre Covid), which equates to 8.6% of GDP. For comparison, the whole UK runs an equivalent deficit three times smaller, at 2.5% of GDP. This discrepancy is driven by public spending in Scotland rising to £81bn (again, pre-Covid), which accounts for 9.2% of total UK public spending despite Scotland contributing 8% of UK tax revenue, in line with our population share. HM Treasury manages central funding of the Union using a mechanism called the "block grant" to the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The block grant is in turn determined by the Barnett Formula. This formula was first introduced ahead of the 1979 general election by the then Labour chief secretary to the Treasury Joel Barnett. It was initially intended as a temporary solution for determining funding allocations between the UK's four component nations, but it has remained in use ever since.

In essence, the Barnett Formula calculates devolved budgets by using the previous year's budget as a starting point, and then adjusts based on increases or decreases in comparable spending per head in England. The main advantages of this formula are (i) it helps to depoliticise the process of setting devolved budgets by removing the need for protracted annual negotiations; (ii) it ensures relative stability and predictability each year; and (iii) the lack of ring-fencing gives the devolved administrations the autonomy to choose their own spending priorities.

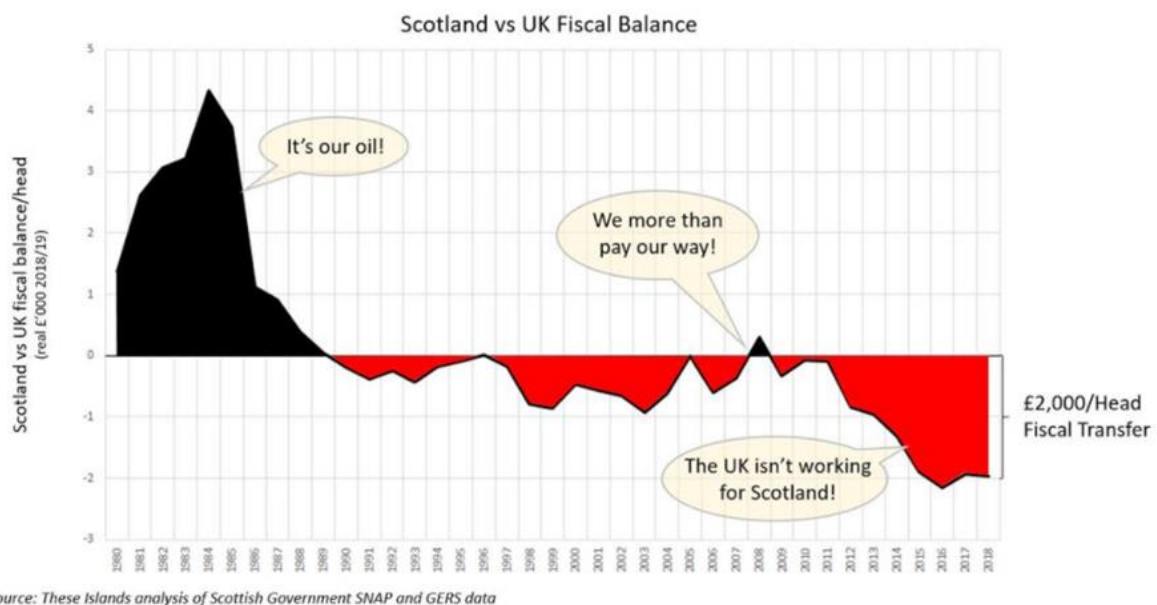
In England the main grievance is that the formula results in significantly higher spending per person in the devolved nations. This is because the formula uses the previous year's devolved budget as a starting point which locks in historic differences, and it is slow to respond to changes in relative population, especially where the population has grown more rapidly in England. The net effect is that spending per head in Scotland today is running at 129% of that in England.

Now, before my friends in the home counties get too grumpy about lazy and subsidised Scots, please consider some hard facts in mitigation:

- of the 12 regions of the UK (nine in England plus the three Celts), Scotland sits in fourth place in terms of GDP per head, behind London, the South East and the South West, ie the best of the rest;
- remember the whole point of the United Kingdom is that her citizens are treated equally wherever they reside. Therefore, the same standard of

public services should be available to UK citizens irrespective of whether they live in Streatham or Stornoway. That Scotland contributes only 8% of the UK population but 33% of the geography means it is simply a fact that it is more expensive to run. This makes the Barnett Formula an equalisation mechanism not a subsidy; and

- there have been times in the past when Scotland sent net surpluses to Westminster. Treasury papers released after the 30 years embargo show how relieved were prime ministers Wilson, Heath and Thatcher to receive North Sea oil receipts as they battled with the unions in the seventies and eighties. The chart below from the pro-Union group These Islands shows graphically how these surpluses and deficits have balanced out over 50 years, making the ultimate case for the Union, and showing how perverse are Nationalist claims that Scotland has been unfairly treated in the UK.



For the historians among us, the geopolitical reality is that not much has changed since the Union was formed between England and Scotland in 1703. England worked out that she could not defend herself without Scotland and that she would benefit economically from the whole being greater than the sum of the parts by being an island united. If that meant a union dividend to Scotland, well so be it, that's just the price of the deal – and, frankly, it's still worth it to England today, which is why David Cameron renewed “the vow” in 2014.

However, that is not to say we Scots should not be running our economy much better. It should be a matter of principle and pride for any Scottish government, Unionist or Nationalist, to reduce the gap between expenditure and revenue in Scotland. I do not want the case for the Union in Scotland to be built on the idea of dependency; I want our Union to be constructed on the idea of mutual benefit and reciprocity where England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all do their best to raise and share resources for the common good. Whether pro-Union or pro-Independence, this is a goal we should all unite around.

In contrast, by every available measure the management of the Scottish economy by the SNP during the past 14 years has been shamefully incompetent and inept. How else can one explain statistics showing that GDP growth has lagged the UK's in every year of their administration? Their record on job creation is woeful (England 15%, Northern Ireland 10%, Wales 8%, Scotland 5%) and productivity measured by business density and revenue per head is running at two thirds that of the West Midlands, which has a similar population. We have only 14,000 additional-rate taxpayers (ARTs) in Scotland; they comprise 0.5% of the population and contribute 16% of income tax. Contrast the UK, where ARTs comprise 1% of the population and contribute 30% of income tax. But more embarrassingly, every business investment the SNP has ever made on behalf of the taxpayer has turned into an eye-watering, loss-making shambles. The sorry roll call of Prestwick Airport, Ferguson Shipbuilders and BiFab sadly demonstrates that business acumen simply does not reside in the DNA of the Scottish National Party.

It does not have to be this way. A competent Scottish government would prioritise post-pandemic economic growth over any independence referendum. Here is a roadmap for how to turbo-charge Scotland's economy in eight clear steps.

1. Restore our education to world-class. The SNP has committed an act of national vandalism in driving down our once-revered education system from outstanding to average in the last 14 years. We should embrace the bespoke academy model which will drive up academic and vocational standards, especially in deprived areas, and we should give our citizens a lifetime voucher for continual educational development;
2. Get our young people into work. It is a national scandal that 20% of our statutory school-leavers are not in employment, further education or training. In this modern 21st century no-one in Scotland should be denied the opportunity to work and we should embrace job schemes for the public good to ensure a lifetime job-guarantee;
3. Make a national plan for prosperity. Under the recent Smith Commission, we can keep our excess tax revenues if we grow them ahead of UK, so let's get a government department focused on that (instead of a vacuous 11-point plan for independence), and with a clear target to reduce Scotland's deficit to 3% by 2030;
4. Improve our infrastructure, both physical and digital. As my local shipbuilder Sir Willie Lithgow recently protested on the crumbling Rest And Be Thankful, it was easier to get around Scotland in 1728 when General Wade was building the roads. Let's get our roads and railways upgraded and electric and commit to full 5G roll-out across Scotland by 2030;
5. Promote immigration. If we had secured our proportionate share of UK immigration in the last 30 years, our population would be one million higher. Our population is ageing and we need more taxpayers. Targeting the three million British Overseas Nationals in Hong Kong would be a great start;
6. Devolve corporation tax. This would allow a pro-business administration to design a bespoke regime of incentives to encourage entrepreneurs,

inward investment, business start-ups and thereby create more higher-rate taxpayers;

7. Promote exports. Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are the heartbeat of the Scottish economy and these jobs only exist because we make world-class products which the rest of the world wants to buy. We need a joined-up and concerted campaign of “made in Scotland, sold abroad”;
8. Create a sovereign wealth fund. Expand the Scottish National Investment Bank into a vehicle which can actively manage investments in strategic industries for the benefit of the taxpayer, on an arms-length basis from the politicians.

Ironically, if the SNP in these last 14 years had focused on the day job of making Scotland more prosperous, they might be within touching distance of the maximum 3% budget deficit demanded by their beloved EU. Instead, Scotland’s deficit of 8.6% is double that of the worst performer in the EU27, which is Romania at 4.3%. Hard reality says there are no circumstances in which the EU will step in to replace the £15bn British Dividend currently funded by the UK and, in the absence of a trusted currency, an independent Scotland will be unable to balance its books for at least a generation. Sterling is the silver bullet of the UK which gives Scotland access to the international capital markets on a scale and at pricing which we could never achieve as an independent country. The loss of Sterling and the Barnett Formula would give Scotland the worst possible start as an independent county. Why choose the austerity of independence when instead we can thrive and prosper within the UK?

Malcolm Offord is chairman of Edinburgh-based investment company Badenoch and Co, and is a candidate on the Lothian list for the Conservatives in May’s Holyrood election

[Our discussion event with Malcolm Offord can be viewed here.](#)

The Greening of Energy – Stuart Paton

Originally posted 26 April 2021

I recently re-watched an episode of *The West Wing* from 2004, entitled 'The Hubbert Peak'. Although we once again have a US administration that operates more like that of Jed Bartlet's fictional presidency, many of the storylines seem incredibly dated. For context, this was before the US shale boom had taken off. America was genuinely concerned about energy supplies and being over reliant on the Middle East, with all the geopolitical ramifications that entailed. Peak Oil was a big issue. In this episode, senior staffer Josh Lyman met with a range of 'alternative energy providers', who when not battling among themselves were proposing supposedly hairbrained ideas such as covering the US with wind farms/solar panels/biofuel farms (delete as applicable). And no mention of climate change.

What a difference 17 years make.

US oil and gas production hugely increased over the following decade on the back of incredible technological advances in fracking, leading to the US being, for a time, the largest oil producer in the world. Production has scaled back somewhat since the oil price drop in 2015 and again, post Covid-19, in early 2020. The economics of this boom, underpinned by debt and poor capital returns, have also been exposed and although oil is now back up to about \$60/barrel we are unlikely to see a significant scaling up of the industry. However the US still produces about 12% of daily worldwide oil production, the industry directly employs c1.5 million people in generally well paid jobs and is of course fundamental to how Americans think about their country and their geopolitical relationships.

The US now has 212GW of installed wind and solar power (for comparison, the UK's total installed capacity of electricity generation is 85GW). Coal now generates just 19% of electricity, largely due to low gas prices driven by fracking. A recent Princeton study, highlighted in an article in the *Economist*, predicts potential wind and solar in the US covering 600,000 square kilometres – seven Scotlands. This would be development way beyond what was envisaged by Josh's alternative energy advocates in 2004.

And in that time, climate change has come to be understood as the greatest threat facing mankind. Almost every scientist and the vast majority of ordinary people now accept the reality of man-made climate change – even if what should be done about it continues to be argued over. The last few months have seen a book on the subject by Bill Gates, Mark Carney devote one of his BBC Reith Lectures to it, the Royal Institute Christmas Lectures focus on the topic, and national treasure Sir David Attenborough spend an increased proportion of his broadcast time on it. There has been a clear change in the visibility of the business response too. The power company Oersted (previously DONG) has become a darling of the Danish stock market with its focus on renewable electricity. Major oil companies like Shell, BP and Total are making huge commitments to the 'Energy Transition' by setting goals for when they will achieve net zero for their own direct emissions plus the emissions from their customers. Even where they are investing in oil and gas, the majors will focus on large, profitable projects with low CO2 emissions.

All of which raises some questions. Which are the key areas of progress? What should be our realistic expectations for the future? And what is happening here in Scotland, as Glasgow prepares to host the global COP26 conference?

The startling progress of technology

First, technology. The key solution to green energy provision is well understood – electrify as much as possible, as quickly as possible, using zero-carbon generation. For many applications electrification using renewable electricity (and carbon capturing the rest) will be sufficient. Where electrification cannot be used, alternative technologies will be required – for example, green hydrogen derived from renewable electricity for heavy goods transport, and finding alternative manufacturing techniques for hard-to-decarbonise sectors, principally steel and cement. Large-scale carbon capture centred at key industrial locations, such as Humberside and Grangemouth and similar sites internationally, will be vital. This is not a ‘get out of jail free’ card for the industry but rather a realisation that we will keep producing CO₂, and that it must be captured and stored over geological timescales.

Let’s consider the specific example of hydrogen (here I declare an interest: I am chair of H2Green, a new company working in this field as part of the Getech Group). Hydrogen is already produced at scale, principally for use in oil refining and for ammonia production for feedstock for fertilisers. There has recently been great excitement about the use of hydrogen as fuel for heavy goods vehicles, for household heating (to replace natural gas), as a high temperature energy source and as a potential energy storage system. Most hydrogen produced today is formed from steam methane regeneration, which produces hydrogen plus CO₂. Continued use of this method (so-called ‘blue hydrogen’) will require sequestration of the CO₂. Although generally more expensive, electrolysis of water to produce hydrogen is carbon-free assuming that the electricity is carbon free, and hence is termed ‘green hydrogen’. So, a combination of green hydrogen and large-scale blue hydrogen with associated carbon capture could be transformational.

If you are not an avid energy watcher, it is likely to be startling how quickly things are changing in Scotland. In the past few months Scotia Gas Networks and the Scottish Government have started a project at Levenmouth in Fife to generate green hydrogen from their own wind turbines, to distribute through the local gas grid. Some minor changes in houses allow them to use hydrogen for heating and cooking. One could apply this same solution to outlying towns not on the grid and in time to the whole grid. A wind farm project in Orkney generates green electricity during the day and stores the energy as hydrogen during the night, which can then be used in fuel cells at times of peak demand. There is significant progress on carbon capture and storage projects, principally that led by Storegga-Pale Blue Dot at Peterhead. The key technical issues appear to have been overcome, with the vital next step being to scale up the technology. Wave power continues to be actively explored, with Scotland at the forefront of these efforts. Even solar has a part to play in Scotland – Fife Council recently approved a 35MW capacity scheme on a former industrial site. And of course the vast drop in costs for offshore wind over the last decade has made huge-scale windfarms feasible and economic.

The essential role of government policy

Second, government policy. The most significant lever is the Scottish and UK governments' world-leading, legally binding commitments to net zero by 2045 and 2050 respectively. Most people in the field think the best way of achieving this commitment is via a global carbon tax. However, as this is challenging to implement and often politically unsavoury, many powerful movers, including the EU, China and California, have forms of emissions trading. As the total volume of allowances has reduced and a broader range of industries are covered, the carbon price has increased – in the case of the EU scheme to \$60 per tonne of CO₂ equivalent. Increasing the cost of carbon is the best way of ensuring that lower-carbon alternatives are implemented and that the focus is on the most economic solutions. Indeed \$60-100 per tonne is around the level that many experts think is required to deliver net zero.

Without the 'simple', elegant carbon tax solution, the UK and Scottish governments, as with many other national governments, apply a range of allowances and support to encourage decarbonisation. The problem with this approach is that government backs specific solutions (often influenced by lobbyists or other policy aims) rather than the most economic solutions determined by the market. However in the real world, without a global carbon tax, this is a vital element in meeting the net zero challenge. The UK government has recently allocated £1 billion to projects to reduce emissions in homes and industry. The Scottish government has committed £100 million to develop the hydrogen economy. And although sectors like wind are now expected to be economically viable on their own (following years of support through higher electricity bills), other allowances such as the Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation – which requires suppliers of transport fuels to demonstrate a proportion comes from renewable sources – are in place. The commitment to stopping sales of new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030 is another very significant nudge to consumers. Sadly, an increase in vehicle fuel duty has not been implemented, nor a response to the impact on government revenues as electric vehicles replace internal combustion engines in the next decade.

In the area of home heating, the focus is on policy and incentives rather than technology. Again, the link is to electrification (to install heat pumps and boilers) or longer term to supplying hydrogen to the grid. Here there are issues around providing long-term support to the industry to re-train gas engineers and to provide certainty to contractors that they will get paid – certainty that has been lacking to date. The conversion of the gas grid to handle a significant proportion of hydrogen blended with natural gas is relatively straightforward and could be a stepping stone to a complete switch to hydrogen.

A final step in policy is dramatic increases in electricity generation capacity and storage capacity, and in improvements in the grid, each of which is being undertaken. We are already seeing huge investments in offshore wind and solar. These two technologies will underpin much of the growth in renewable electricity generation in the UK and internationally. The increased emphasis on storage options, critical for when the wind isn't blowing or the sun isn't shining (which sometimes happens in Scotland), will be part of the solution. However, in the area of providing baseload capacity through nuclear energy there is a clear policy difference between the UK and Scottish

governments. Hinkley Point C, with a nameplate capacity of 3200MWe, is already under construction and is due to start generating in mid 2026 at a cost of a mere £20 billion and a very high strike price of £90/MWhr. This is likely to be followed by at least one more large nuclear plant in England or Wales.

How finance is making green work

And finally, financing. It is important to remember how unbelievably cheap oil is. Therefore, to compete, any other source of fuel has to be cheap and as energy efficient as oil and gas. Thankfully, with regard to electricity generation we are already there. In most parts of the world, wind (even offshore) and solar are already cheaper than gas for electricity generation. Add on the expense of storage and they are cost comparable. In the last year, there has been an increasing emphasis on investors moving away from oil and gas. This will likely continue. As noted above, the major oil and gas companies are largely focusing their efforts away from oil and gas towards renewables.

Given the focus on decarbonisation, what of the role of oil in Scotland? Although production levels have been declining over the past decade, oil and gas remain an important part of the Scottish economy, employing around 100,000 people. Also, most authorities recognise that oil and gas will remain necessary sources of energy even by 2050. Firstly, this is because of the wide range of uses of oil and gas other than for transport or electricity generation (think chemicals, fertilisers, plastics and most other components of modern life). And it is surely better to produce this oil and gas locally and refine it at Grangemouth than importing from the US or Middle East. Secondly, in many countries converting from coal to gas for electricity generation will be an important part of reducing CO₂ emissions even if this does not achieve net zero in the medium term. Another key factor to consider is that decommissioning of oil fields is starting in earnest, after many years being discussed and planned, with employment opportunities, particularly in Scotland and the North-East of England. For example, the Ninian Northern field is being decommissioned in Shetland and Brent Alpha on Teesside. Another significant change in the North Sea is a new range of owners, often backed by private equity, who are becoming the dominant players. These investors will aim to extend the life of oil and gas field but are also at the forefront of improving operations, for example through offshore electrification of platforms and have often set challenging targets for reducing their own emissions.

A landmark agreement between the UK Government and the UK oil and gas industry signed in late March attempts to square the circle of the legal requirement to achieve net zero by 2045 in Scotland and 2050 in the wider UK, the ongoing necessity of affordable and secure energy sources, and the large number of generally well-paid jobs in the industry. The government and industry have committed to unlocking £16 billion over the next decade in low-carbon solutions, principally carbon capture and storage and hydrogen, with a focus on energy hubs including Teesside and Aberdeenshire. This aims to cut CO₂ emissions by 60 million tonnes, reduce reliance on imported oil and gas, support UK jobs and reduce support for exporters developing oil and gas projects overseas. The industry will have a strong emphasis on cutting its own emissions, for example through electrification of platforms and rigs. As might be expected, this agreement has been met with dismay by green lobby groups, who have described it as “a colossal failure in climate leadership in the year of COP26”. However, pragmatically,

given the need for a just transition and the requirements for oil and gas over the next few decades, this is a huge step forward for industry and the governments. And the economic prize is significant, transferring generally well-paid jobs in the oil industry to well-paid, sustainable jobs in the green energy economy.

A sea change that could save the planet

In the 17 years since that episode of *The West Wing* was first aired there have been major changes in the energy landscape. In terms of tackling climate change there has been a sea-change, particularly in the past year. However, there are still huge challenges globally and here in Scotland.

First, and most important, is persuading all of society that this is the greatest issue of our time, that it must be taken seriously, and that we all have a part to play. Government is showing leadership in this regard but must do more. Second, we face huge challenges in Scotland, even in the relatively easy-to-electrify sectors of home heating and cooking. We have relatively old, poor housing stock which largely relies on natural gas for heating and cooking. We need to put in place policies which encourage people, on an ongoing basis and with certainty, to insulate their homes better, to change to heat pumps rather than to automatically install a new gas boiler, and to create a large-scale hydrogen network.

Third, and somewhat controversially, the Scottish government should change its policy on nuclear power. It is difficult to envisage a future Scotland, albeit it with very significant wind energy capacity, that can satisfy huge increases in electricity requirements without baseload nuclear power. A range of international companies are investigating cheaper, smaller reactors. We should be actively participating in this research, given the expertise in Scotland and the UK. Indeed, it was recently announced that Highland Council is considering bidding for Dounreay to be the site for a nuclear fusion project.

In all these new sectors – whether it involves retraining heating engineers to work with ground and air source heat pumps, engineers to find better ways to maintain offshore wind turbines, geologists and reservoir engineers to determine optimal solutions for carbon storage, or financiers to fund the projects – Scotland has the capability and capacity to be a leading player in the delivery of net zero.

The last year has changed our view of the world in many ways, and this seems to include the absolute necessity of addressing climate change. This groundswell has been developing for the past few years, since the Paris Agreement in 2015 and ahead of the forthcoming COP26 in Glasgow, due to the extraordinary impact of Greta Thunberg, and the increasing daily influence on our lives. From a technical, governmental and financial perspective much of the groundwork has been laid. We must now do what is needed to meet our commitments to the planet, to each other, and to future generations.

Stuart Paton is chair of H2Green, chair of Getech & former CEO of Dana Petroleum plc

[Watch our event discussing these issues with Stuart Paton.](#)

Feminist Foreign Policy – Emilie-Louise Purdie

Originally published 3 May 2021

The SNP's [manifesto](#) for the Scottish elections includes a bold vision for building a feminist foreign policy.

Despite the restrictions of devolution, Scotland has been creative in finding ways to contribute to the foreign policy agenda, whether being the first country in the world to call a climate emergency back in 2019 or championing the role of women in conflict resolution.

This latest policy pledge will see Scotland follow in the footsteps of Sweden, Canada, France, Mexico, Hawaii and Spain – promoting gender equality in foreign and development policy.

What is a feminist foreign policy?

Feminist foreign policy is a toolkit for promoting gender equality around the world and building policy through a gender lens. It calls on policy makers to empower women and girls and ensure policies promote gender equality.

Last year we celebrated the 20th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. This has been a catalyst for further action to promote the inclusion of women in peace, security and diplomacy. However, much more work needs to be done – just one in five peace agreements signed between 2015 and 2019 contained gender-sensitive provisions.

Progress is critical because peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are equal partners in prevention of conflict. When women are at the negotiating table, peace agreements are more [likely to last 15 years or longer](#).

By building feminist foreign policy baselines, countries are propelled towards greater equality and stability.

Time for action

The 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing hosted a speech from Hillary Clinton where she famously declared,

*“If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that **human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights**, once and for all.”*

This challenged contemporary foreign and development policy, which needed to better recognize, represent and raise women’s voices.

In March 2021, the UN’s Generation Equality forum kicked off in Mexico City. Bringing together policy makers, NGOs and grassroots organisations, the event was a celebration of progress since the Beijing declaration. Yet, as we gathered over Zooms, new barriers to gender equality around the world dominated discussions.

The climate crisis and COVID-19 pandemic have had devastating consequences for communities around the world, felt most acutely by women and girls. In conflict-affected countries, women's representation in COVID-19 taskforces [stands](#) at just 18%. New data from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) [reveals](#) in 2020, women held just 15% of top jobs as government ministers in environmental sectors.

In the UK, lack of ambition from the UK government will fail to deliver the global leadership needed on gender equality at June's G7 summit in Cornwall.

- A UK government target to increase the number of female personnel in the armed forces to 15% by 2020 has been [missed](#).
- Following the UK government's decision to scrap the 0.7% ODA target, former Foreign Office Minister, Lady Sugg, has [confirmed](#) UK aid for girls' education is being cut by more than 40%.
- Future funding streams look [uncertain](#) as the UK government have still not confirmed continuation of the Women Mediators across the Commonwealth programme.

This is disappointing and risks the UK falling behind on progress towards gender equality in foreign policy. We need to ensure women are represented, empowered and have access to resources.

In adopting a feminist foreign policy, Scotland can show leadership and ambition in the UK by pioneering policy through a gender lens. Let's grasp this opportunity to build a fair and just future for women and girls around the world.

Emilie-Louise Purdie is Head of Research for the SNP Westminster Group

Postal Voting – Keir Bloomer

Originally posted 5 May 2021

“Scotland votes on Thursday” say the news headlines. The reality is rather different. Postal votes could be sent in any time from April 15th onwards. The very early issuing of ballot papers encourages early voting. I can’t be the only voter to cast my vote before it disappeared in the pile of paper on my desk. I voted on April 16th; fully three weeks ahead of ‘polling day’ and well before most election literature was distributed.

In the past a personal appearance at the polling station was virtually a requirement. To qualify for a postal vote, a good reason had to be produced. Until fairly recently, I had voted by post only once. That was at the general election in 1979 and my reason was that I was a candidate in a constituency sufficiently far from home to make a personal journey to the polling station impossible.

I lived in Glasgow but was standing in Ross and Cromarty and, although I was unsuccessful, my postal vote had an unexpected benefit. A few months later I faced the prospect of having to vote for a particularly unpleasant candidate whom my party had put up in a local election. I finally forced myself round to the school about ten minutes before polls closed, only to be turned away. “You have a postal vote; so you can’t vote here”. What a relief. I am sure my hand would have shrivelled as I marked my X.

Today, no explanation is required. Unsurprisingly, the proportion of the electorate opting to vote by post has been steadily rising. At the 2010 general election 15.3% of the electorate had registered for postal votes. By the 2017 election, this had risen to 18%. At the present Holyrood election, the percentage is 23.8.

Furthermore, those registered for postal votes are more likely to use them. At the 2017 general election, the turnout of postal voters was 85.1%, compared with 65.9% of those voting in person. This differential of nearly 20% is very substantial. The pandemic will certainly cause it to grow still further as some voters will wish to avoid close contact in polling stations.

Putting together the rising number of postal votes and the greater likelihood of their being used, it is a safe bet that 1 in 3 of the votes cast in the current Scottish Parliament election will be postal votes. It follows that the election is not taking place on 6th May but over a period in excess of three weeks finishing on that day.

Does this matter? I think it does. The notion of an election campaign is that candidates and parties have a fixed period of time to persuade voters to support them. Manifestos are issued and promises made. The weaknesses in rival arguments are revealed. The voters then reach their conclusions and deliver their verdict. The election represents a snapshot of public opinion on a particular date, influenced by whatever may be the circumstances at that time. That is how democracy has traditionally worked.

Under the present arrangements many voters will implement their decision before the parties have the chance to try to influence them. They are unmoved by arguments put or facts revealed during the campaign. My vote reflects my opinions as they stood in mid-April. It is perfectly possible that events in late April or early May could have changed my mind. This could be an important incident on the world stage, a damaging revelation about the party I supported or a convincing argument put by an opponent. In the case of a tactical voter, it could be more accurate information about likely levels of support for the different parties in the constituency.

Why does the time allowed for postal voting have to be so extended? An explanation sometimes offered is the time taken to check the validity of the votes. However, any postal voter who forgets to put their vote in the post can hand it in at the polling station on election day. Any necessary checking is then carried out quickly, so a much shorter period would clearly be workable.

The proportion of people voting by post is certain to continue to rise. The impact of campaigning and persuasion will continue to fall. It is time that this decline in the effectiveness of democratic activity received some serious attention. A fairly straightforward option would be to allow only, say, one week for the return of postal ballots. A more controversial one would be to delay the start of postal voting until polling day and allow only a brief interval for the return of ballots thereafter. Whether the nerves of candidates would survive the stress of delaying results is perhaps open to question. No doubt, there are other possibilities. Action is needed if our democratic process is to be protected from steady and unintended deterioration.

Keir Bloomer is chair of the Commission on School Reform.

New Age Assessment Rules for Asylum Seeking Young People – Aaron Gates-Lincoln

Originally posted 13 May 2021

New UK government proposals surrounding reforms to age assessments of asylum-seeking individuals are putting children at serious risk of mistakenly being deemed to be adults. Invasive tests will be performed on children arriving in the UK as part of the plans, and may result in many of them being exposed to safeguarding risks and becoming victims of the Home Office's hostile environment policies.

The proposals come from the Home Office's recently published '[New Plan for Immigration](#)'. Age assessments would be undertaken by immigration officials and other staff instead of by social workers, according to proposals. As part of this, the Home Office are also looking into introducing 'scientific methods' to help improve the accuracy of age assessments. However, this directly goes against current [Home Office](#) guidance surrounding assessments, which states that medical methods are not frequently used due to their larger margins for error.

Currently, the policy states that individuals should be treated as an adult if their appearance and demeanour suggest they are 'over 25 years of age'. New policy would change this to 'significantly over 18 years of age'.

A National Age Assessment Board (NAAB) would also be introduced to oversee the changes. The NAAB would 'set out the criteria, process and requirements' for age assessments, and also do assessments of their own when needed. However, the make-up of and involvement of the social work sector in the board is currently unclear. This is worrying, as the involvement of the social work sector ensures that there is always a representative body whose main aim is to ensure the best interests and safety of children. However, if their role were to decrease, age assessments could become more punitive and harsher, even towards children, in order to uphold the 'hostile environment' image that prevails in the UK currently.

In the proposed plans, the Home Office justifies the changes by citing that between 2016 and 2020, 54% of individuals who had their age disputed were found to be adults. Damaging narratives already exist which depict asylum-seeking individuals as being deceptive and untruthful. In reality, it is important to consider that in the few cases of adults posing as children when seeking asylum, this is because children are offered a wider range of support, accommodation and access to public funds than adults are. In addition to this, adults have a much greater risk of being placed in detention centres and those that do have access to adult accommodation are often subject to terrible living conditions.

There have also been many cases in which unaccompanied children have been wrongly deemed as adults. In 2019, Refugee Council undertook an [Age Dispute Project](#). Of the 92 cases of young people assessed as adults, 41 of them were eventually found to be children, with a further 45 of the cases being ongoing. These numbers show the extraordinary margin for error in age assessments, which are putting vulnerable

children at risk of being given little to no support and facing the extremities of detention centres.

In addition to this narrative, the Home Office further justify their plans by emphasising the safeguarding risks if adults are wrongly deemed to be children and are then placed in settings with them. They also highlight that they currently send £46,000 a year to Local Authorities for each unaccompanied asylum-seeking child. They state that if adults are wrongly deemed as children, this money could have been used to provide resources for other children.

However, the Home Office places itself in a precarious position with this justification. Although they are stating that these new measures would be used to improve safeguarding, they choose to ignore the safeguarding risks that age assessments create for children deemed as adults. If wrongly deemed as adults, children could be placed in adult accommodation, which has been [found](#) to create situations in which they are bullied and abused and can impact on their quality of life . By deeming a child to be an adult, the UK government frees itself from many duties of protection and delivery of essential children's rights. This results in many children being placed in vulnerable situations across all walks of life, whether it be financial stability, employment, education and healthcare.

In response to the new plans, Stewart MacLachlan, senior legal at Coram Children's Legal Centre [stated](#), "The new proposals on the framework for assessing age are deeply worrying. They will increase the already real risk to children of being placed in accommodation with adults or held in adult detention centres."

These concerns are mirrored by [Social Workers Without Borders](#) (SWWB), an organisation that supports children and adults through the asylum process. They stated, "We recently worked with a child who had been detained in three different immigration removal centres, and was very nearly removed from the country before he had even had access to adequate legal advice. We have worked with other children who are deeply traumatised and left unsupported and isolated in hotels that have no provisions for safeguarding children."

New proposals over asylum-seeking children and age assessments mean subjecting children to the hostile environment that they have created for migrants in the UK over the past decade. These children already have little access to immigration pathways of achieving [indefinite leave to remain](#) or [citizenship](#), and these policies simply make life harder for them. It appears as so that the Home Office is deliberately forming and upholding dangerous narratives surrounding asylum seekers, to serve as a smokescreen for harsh and punitive immigration policies. The past decade has shown that such narratives are effective for electoral success, despite actual cases of falsely assessed adults being very low. It has become clear that the UK government are building policies such as these, to push these narratives further to ensure that the UK public side with them on their treatment of migrants, especially in times of scrutiny such as recently regarding the housing of migrants in barracks and detention centres in unsafe conditions.

It is imperative that pressure is applied to the government so that the policy changes are reviewed, and the consequences of the changes are considered.

Aaron Gates-Lincoln writes for [Immigration News](#) and [Immigration Advice Service](#), media platforms that are trying to raise awareness of migrant injustices in the UK and around the world.

Predictions for Holyrood health policy over the next 5 years – Gordon Hector

Originally posted 19 May 2021

Now that the dust has settled on the election, we can start making some intelligent guesses about the debates which will shape the 2021-26 parliament. Political predictions are famously easy to make, after all. Here are mine, on how health and care will evolve at over the next 5 years – and which the new Cabinet Secretary for health will have in their in-tray this week when they turn up for day one:

1. There's going to be a big argument over social care

There is a majority, but not a consensus, for creating a national care service: SNP, Green and Labour manifestos were in favour, and Lib Dem and Conservative against. So please get used to the horrendous acronym 'NCS'.

It's great politics, and totally misleading.

It's great politics because social care is patchy, confusing, and expensive – so slapping 'national' on it gives voters the impression it will become a single institution free at the point of use, like the NHS.

It's misleading because this is not what it means. It does not mean nationalising care homes. Instead it's about implementing the [Feeley review](#): setting up stronger forms of accountability, led by the centre, with councils' role reduced. It's not really a national service – more of a nationally regulated system.

It is still a big change, though. Devolution's history is littered with thoughtful reviews which are only half-implemented, and big structural changes which don't work. So we could end up with the care equivalent of the patient safety programme in the NHS – a world-leading culture change policy, using a smart combination of hard and soft power to inspire change from within.

Or, equally likely, it could mean a care version of the Scottish Police Authority or perhaps the education quangos – centralised, unpopular, ineffective.

That in turn makes it a big test for the Scottish Parliament. The politics of creating a 'national care service' could become a one-dimensional arms race to show affection for care. But what will really change lives is the detail: how exactly will new structures work? What kind of relationship will providers have to government? What mechanisms will improve quality? These questions are far less political, but they are also the difference between changing stuff, or just inventing a shiny new organogram.

The test for Holyrood is whether after a constitutional election it is capable of exploring those questions, or not.

2. More cash – but too much is never enough

Every party promised more cash for the NHS. A big Boris Barnett cheque is in the post. So NHS spending is going to go up, presumably in line with the SNP manifesto of £2.5 billion or so by 2026.

That sounds big. But on current structures, with current demand and health inflation projections, the NHS will happily eat that amount and still require more.

In previous budget negotiations, parties tussled over specific bits of the health budget. We might see that again, as all opposition manifestos identified particular priorities. Labour wanted 11% of spending for mental health, the Greens 10%. Staff welfare was a focus for Lib Dems and the Conservatives.

These ideas are both sensible. But again, it probably won't be enough because we are living through a sea-change in understanding of mental health, and post-pandemic will likely return to an ever-more-global market for healthcare staffing. The cost pressures are all relentlessly upwards.

Get used to this central dynamic in health funding: we can spend ever-increasing sums. We probably will. But without anything else changing, it probably won't feel like it for staff or patients.

3. Ramping up NHS services after the pandemic

The manifestos all talked about clearing backlogs of care. The Lib Dems and Greens kept it vague, Labour made it their centrepiece pledge, and the Tories put £600m on it. The SNP promised a '10 % increase on pre-pandemic levels of activity', which is quite weirdly focussed on a particular input.

This is important. But again it's all thinking on pre-pandemic lines. None of the parties really addressed how we both catch up the backlog *and* avoid going back to the way things worked before the pandemic. In the past year, we saw rapid change in remote healthcare, online consultations and breaking down barriers between teams. NHS Near Me has become a familiar – and trusted – system for anyone with wifi and a doctor's appointment.

The great opportunity is to bottle some of that: as Paul Gray [wrote](#), this is the moment to grasp all the issues with culture, structures, technology and staffing that stifle innovation and underpin long-term clinical and financial problems.

In this context, saying 'we'll just do the same as before, but 10% more' is deeply underwhelming. Without something a bit smarter, once the backlog is cleared (or if it is cleared) then 2023-26 are going to spent as a repeat of the years before the pandemic – ever-increasing strain, with no real plan to make the whole system sustainable.

4. Local healthcare

The SNP manifesto proposed a few more elective care centres. 'Centres' is a clever word as it implies a physical place. It isn't: it's more like a team. Few voters will have picked up that 'new elective care centres' is really code for 'a model of care which sees

services concentrated into bigger centralised units while shifting the balance of care to preventative and community services'. Less snappy, I guess. But that is roughly what it means.

There are very good reasons for this model. Concentrating care is financially and clinically more effective. Many countries are going through the same process.

It comes at the price of gradually downsizing smaller units and represents a new bargain for patients: better care, on average, but often on the other side of the country. No-one has ever really explained that to them, but there might yet be votes over the next 5 years in pointing it out. Which is why the Conservatives proposed a local healthcare guarantee. The Lib Dems said something similar. Labour suggest every major hospital has an elective care site.

All of this means we could have another 5 years of political debate framed around local vs centralised medicine. But in policy terms, that's not quite the right strategic choice facing the country.

Across Scotland, rationalising elective and specialist care is either happening, or happened. That's it. Done. There's no going back.

But just as remote working has changed many companies' assumptions over how concentrated you need your workforce to be, the challenges of small-hospital, rural and remote medicine in Scotland could, with a bit of imagination, have a fresh approach too. You might still have to put most specialist services in the central belt, but you could, for example, balance that out by building Inverness into a bigger research and teaching site. Telecare like Near Me has immense potential to rethink where staff need to be located. There might be a future model for GPs which blends traditional primary care, specialist triage for some clinical specialities, and virtual care.

This is less about local vs central, and more about how things can be re-thought, in the context of a broadly already-centralised system with under-pressure primary care, and in light of big advances in technology. What we really need is a post-pandemic [Kerr report](#) for the 2020s – or something on that kind of wide canvas to explore these questions. A big, meaty speech from whoever is health secretary would do. Or indeed an opposition party setting out its stall, now we're out of the heat of an election.

If we don't get that then I think that by 2026, this could feel like a wasted moment.

Conclusion: nothing has changed

In short, care could be really changed, but health is staying familiar. Even expecting manifestos to be safety-first, and even reflecting the political importance of paying homage to the NHS after the past year, it just doesn't get anywhere near to recognising just how challenging the next decade is going to be. Nor does it live up to the opportunity of post-pandemic recovery.

It's more of the same. But the world is utterly changed.

Perhaps reassuring, depending on your perspective – or perhaps a bit depressing. Either way, it will be as the slogan goes: five more years.

Gordon Hector is a policy consultant and former Director of Policy and Strategy for the Scottish Conservatives.

The pandemic's impact on graduate opportunities in Scotland – Edinburgh University Consulting Club

Originally posted 22 June 2021

Reform Scotland has been delighted to once again mentor a team of students from the University of Edinburgh. This is the third year of our collaboration, with this year's team looking at employment opportunities for graduates in Scotland. A summary of the final report is outlined below. The full report can be downloaded [here](#).

The authors are:

Shreya Piplani, Virender Pratap Singh, Angus Smith, Rikke Vessia

In the UK alone we have witnessed a large change to working life with the majority of companies employing a work from home policy or having to shut completely (High-street retail, hospitality etc.) to obey the national lockdowns imposed by the government. This has resulted in over 11.5 million employees being placed on furlough in the UK by May 2021 with the under 24-year-olds making up the highest proportion of this.

It goes without saying that the pandemic has had devastating effects on many walks of life including the job market with firms having less funds to recruit new staff than in usual times. Our analysis has particularly highlighted how job postings in Scotland have decreased dramatically in comparison to the same months in 2019 with a 54% decrease being seen in April alone. Furthermore, in the UK, graduate opportunities were down by 10.8% in 2020 as compared to 2019. This could be devastating in the long run for Scotland who already struggle with a large skills gap, ageing population and a struggle to retain graduate students.

The importance of graduates to an economy isn't often advertised by a country, but coming out of a pandemic, an increase in graduate recruitment could provide a cheaper alternative to getting the economy back on track. Graduates often serve as a willing, adaptable employee with a grasp for the latest technology and therefore provide an attractive employment strategy that can be recruited at a lower cost than a more experienced applicant. They also have a track record of increasing productivity as was seen between 1994-2005 where UK graduates attributed a one-third increase in labour productivity.

Therefore, it is paramount that the government gives consideration to some of the recommendations to increase graduate employment detailed in the report, to help limit the impact of the pandemic and provide the opportunity for the economy to make an accelerated return to 2019 levels.

The comparison of how the pandemic has affected Scotland compared to 6 other selected countries namely, Belgium, Canada, Finland, New Zealand, Poland, and Sweden has provided useful insights into how the pandemic has globally affected the job market as well as how these countries have adapted their policies in attempt to cope with the changes the pandemic has inevitably caused. Lessons can be taken from

each of these countries who are all experiencing a revival in the job market at different rates. New Zealand, who are renowned for how they dealt with the pandemic, were seen to create a Targeted Training and Apprenticeship Fund in which qualifications and tuition for certain qualifications can be financially subsidised by the government in an attempt to encourage young adults to gain skills in specific areas. Our recommendations have not only incorporated schemes that have been seen to work well within these countries, but also areas in which we have identified Scotland to require a particular focus on.

Improvements to the Youth Guarantee Scheme (£60 million investment) which guarantees that adults aged 16-24 will have the opportunity to either work, gain education or enrol in training, is one of the recommendations on how Scotland could better the outlook for graduates in the post pandemic era. A particular focus on helping graduates find work after finishing their degrees is an extra area which could be incorporated into this scheme. Other suggestions include a Covid Challenge Investment Fund which would provide financial incentives to SMEs to employ graduates and this could be funded utilising the Universities Innovation Fund. Additionally, globally recognised firms who currently don't have offices in Scotland could be encouraged to develop in Scotland. We have identified companies such as Monzo, eBay and Etsy to name a few, who we believe would be a great addition to Scotland and would allow the potential for many graduates to be hired at these firms. The revival of the graduate job market should be one of the priorities of the Scottish Government as we come out the other side of the pandemic. If these changes are introduced and further large companies are encouraged to develop offices in Scotland, the graduate job market should be able to make a strong revival and give Scotland the stepping stone it needs to exit the pandemic in a positive manner.

New Year's Day Shopping Ban is Illiberal & Short-sighted – David Lonsdale

Originally posted 20 July 2021

It has been sixteen enormously difficult and tumultuous months since Scotland entered the first Covid lockdown.

The retail industry has faced some of the toughest restrictions. The majority of Scotland's shops have been compelled to close twice – for at least 220 days – to aid the national effort against Covid. For those stores in west central Scotland or located in shopping centres and malls the figure is even higher, given local lockdown restrictions imposed last November and December and the lengthier lockdown for shopping malls last summer.

Even now, with stores permitted to open, shopper footfall is down by almost a third and shop vacancies are at a six-year high and climbing. Overall, the Scottish Retail Consortium (SRC) estimates that shops in Scotland have lost out on £4.5 billion of retail sales since the onset of the pandemic.

The situation is improving; however, shops remain unable to trade at capacity due to physical distancing constraints, and the lack of footfall remains particularly acute in our city centres.

Given this backdrop, it is extraordinary and frankly bewildering that Scottish Ministers could even countenance the introduction of a permanent prohibition on shops opening to customers on New Year's Day. However, that is exactly what is happening with the publication in June of the devolved government's consultation paper on banning New Year's Day trading.

Most people I've talked to within the industry and business community more generally are flummoxed as to why government is progressing this. Unfortunately, it may be the thin end of the wedge. Those agitating for the trading ban are elsewhere in the UK also seeking the closure of shops on Boxing Day, as well as fresh legislative curbs on trading hours on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. How long would it be before other sectors of the economy are in their sights?

For SRC it boils down to this – where there is demand from customers and the availability of staff then shops ought to be free to choose to open on New Year's Day if they so wish.

Banning trading permanently on New Year's Day is illiberal and short-sighted, especially considering customers can already shop online whenever they choose. Indeed, if ever a government proposal epitomised an outdated analogue solution in a digital age this is it.

It is strange shops are being uniquely singled out whilst other consumer-facing businesses such as hotels, restaurants, pubs, petrol stations, and cinemas can carry on.

Why is retail being treated differently to these other consumer-facing sectors, or for that matter our public services?

A permanent prohibition on trading also flies in the face of the strenuous efforts that have made over recent years – prior to Covid – to promote Scotland as a visitor destination at New Year. Are we seriously going to invite the world to come to Scotland for Hogmanay, but then prevent revellers spending their money in our stores the next day?

The economic legacy of Covid will be with us for a considerable period. It will take time for the sector to recover, to repay the various government Covid loan schemes, and to pay down the rent arrears and other debts incurred whilst trading has been halted or curbed. The recovery needs to be helped, not hobbled.

What is needed is a holistic approach from government policy making towards Scotland's largest private sector employer, not a piecemeal approach exemplified by this proposed trading ban. Ministers have shown admirable support for the sector during the crisis, especially on the business rates waiver and grants. The focus now should be entirely on kick-starting recovery, not closing shops.

David Lonsdale, Director, Scottish Retail Consortium

To avoid another lost decade for Scotland's nature, we need legally binding targets for nature's recovery – Anne McCall

Originally posted 27 July 2021

Mass extinction

We are living through a mass extinction. Since 1970, we've seen a drop of almost 70 per cent in average populations of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish, and over a quarter of assessed species are now threatened by extinction.

It's undeniable that developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have suffered first and worst, but for countries like Scotland, wealth isn't a shield. Nature is crucial to Scotland's life, wellbeing and identity. But it's in crisis here, too.

Wealth is no shield

The State of Nature Report revealed half of all our species are in decline, with 1 in 9 at risk of national extinction^[1]. At the same time, a new global analysis, ranking 250 countries and territories worldwide by the scale at which human activity has damaged their ecosystems, places Scotland near last^[2].

This summer, RSPB Scotland presented the First Minister's office with a basket of goods from our pop-up *InConvenience Store* in central Edinburgh, to communicate the imminent risk to Scotland's people if our nature continues to decline. Products on display included sandbags, clean air and unpolluted drinking water – everyday essentials in a world where nature has collapsed, our skies have fallen silent, and nature is no longer helping us combat problems like pollution and flooding. The *InConvenience Store* offered a glimpse into a dystopian future, but, if we act fast, we can avoid this devastation. Recognising the narrowing window of opportunity to revive our world, growing numbers of people and institutions, across Scotland, the UK, and the world, are adding their voice to the calls for urgent and focused action.

Time for action

In June, Scotland's Climate Assembly published its report on how Scotland should tackle the climate emergency effectively and fairly. The panel of over 100 ordinary citizens from across Scotland recognised that the climate and nature emergencies are inextricably linked and noted that, to tackle the twin emergencies, we must '*connect people with nature, rebuild depleted natural resources and increase biodiversity*'^[3].

In July, IPPR's Environmental Justice Commission – made up of trade unionists, economists, and academics – acknowledged that the nature crisis is often treated as a 'poorer cousin' compared to the climate emergency, '*receiving significantly less attention and therefore fewer policy commitments, targets and less investment*'. The disparity, the Commission noted, is particularly concerning given that the four home nations that make up the UK are among '*the most nature depleted countries in the world*'. In response to these concerns, the Commission calls for an urgent step change in policymakers' worldview from 'climate alone' to 'climate and nature together'^[4].

Both the Assembly and the Commission understand that Scotland must address the nature and climate emergencies in tandem if Scotland's climate, nature and people are to thrive in the years ahead.

Scotland cannot be left behind

In July, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) published the first draft of its post-2020 global biodiversity framework. The targets within the draft framework, which governments will scrutinise at a crucial summit in the Chinese city of Kunming in early 2022, have been designed to galvanise urgent and transformative action worldwide. The UN believes that the framework offers a roadmap towards humanity 'living in harmony with nature by 2050' but cautions member states that, first, they must halt and reverse the ecological destruction of Earth by the end of this decade by adopting target-driven strategies for nature's recovery[\[5\]](#).

This year, at the beginning of the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration, the UK Government[\[6\]](#), the Welsh Government[\[7\]](#) and the EU Commission are already on course to set legally binding Nature Recovery Targets for England, Wales and the European Union, respectively. Scotland cannot be left behind. We need our own statutory nature recovery targets, committing our government to revive Scotland's species and habitats, with communities, businesses, local authorities, and government agencies all playing their part.

A natural starting point

The Scottish Government already measures progress against agreed targets on issues as diverse as child poverty, social housing, and climate change. This makes sense – when we want to achieve something, whether in our personal lives, business or government, setting a target is a natural starting point. Targets help governments clarify objectives, be transparent about progress, and remain accountable to the public. As with the Net Zero targets, statutory nature recovery targets would allow us to monitor our rate of improvement across sectors and against clear objectives. As we work towards a nature positive Scotland, with improvements to the quality, extent and connectivity of habitats, species distribution, and species abundance, targets would make it easier for us to adjust our approach accordingly to stay on goal.

Emerging consensus

The SNP manifesto makes a welcome commitment to introduce a new Biodiversity Strategy for Scotland within a year of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. However, the ultimate success of that strategy will depend heavily on whether the government adopts legally binding targets for nature recovery. While the SNP manifesto makes no public commitment to statutory targets, the Scottish Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green manifestos back legally binding targets. With cross-party support already evident, this is the ideal opportunity for the new government to demonstrate real commitment to delivering for Scotland's nature by agreeing to statutory targets.

An idea whose time has come

If we want to restore nature in Scotland, adopting legally binding nature recovery targets is a logical first step. Statutory targets would ensure that Scotland keeps pace

with the rest of the UK. It would minimise Scotland's policy divergence from the EU. It would provide Scotland with a roadmap for reviving nature at home, while making an essential contribution to global restoration. Statutory nature recovery targets is an idea whose time has come.

Anne McCall is the Director of RSPB Scotland.

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A curious policy option – Robert Tennent & Keir Bloomer

Originally posted 10 August 2021

The recent report by the OECD on Scottish education commented on the amount of their working week that teachers can be expected to be in contact with classes. “Scotland is among the only OECD education systems.... in which teachers spend at least 50% of their statutory working time teaching.” Unsurprisingly, the EIS has seized on this statement in order to intensify its campaign for a reduction in the hours of class contact. At the same time, SNP manifesto commitments suggest that the Scottish Government will be prepared to go a considerable distance to meet this demand. It is apparently willing to reduce contact hours from the present 22.5 per week to 21. The EIS seeks a larger reduction to 20 although over a fairly extended timescale and in combination with a reduction in class sizes to 20.

The government party seems to accept without question that a case has been convincingly made for the reduction in teaching hours. Yet, the OECD makes out no such case. It notes that Scottish teachers spend a larger proportion of their working week teaching classes than most other OECD member states. No conclusion is drawn from this. OECD may believe that Scotland’s approach is misguided but, if so, it does not say so. No evidence is produced to suggest that the educational experience of Scottish young people would be improved if the contact hours of teachers were to be shortened. Interestingly, the only other comment the report offers on this subject – that Scotland is unusual in having the same number of non-contact hours at all stages of education rather than fewer in secondary than primary – has been ignored both by government and the EIS. In this case it is not taken for granted that anything the OECD sees as exceptional must necessarily be bad.

The function of the EIS is to advance its members’ interest as it sees them. Normally, for obvious reasons, it will seek to maintain that teachers’ interests and those of pupils coincide. However, it is not incumbent on the EIS to demonstrate value for money or calculate the implications of meetings its proposals. The obligations of government are, of course, rather different. However, there is no indication that, before supporting a reduction in contact hours, the SNP carried out the kind of costings and policy option appraisals that might be expected of their government.

The position in the primary sector is relatively straightforward. Currently, pupils are taught for 25 hours a week but teachers are in contact with classes for 22.5 hours. 2.5 hours of class time are provided by promoted staff or the use of additional, normally part-time, staff. In simple terms, slightly more than 11 teachers are required to cover 10 classes. Assuming that it is only contact hours of teachers and not those of children that are to be reduced, that would rise to just under 12 if the government’s proposals were to be implemented. This represents an increase in staffing of just under 8%. To meet the EIS demands, the increase would be just under 14%.

The secondary situation is more complex because timetabling the delivery of a subject-based curriculum with some level of pupil choice necessarily entails some inefficiencies in the use of staff. Ignoring many of the complications, the increase in staffing required would be around 8.7% for the Scottish Government proposals or 15.3% for the EIS version.

In recent decades much work has been done on timetabling to make most effective use of the precious resource of teacher time. Both sets proposals would require significant change to existing good practice. This could entail additional costs or sub-optimal educational approaches. While it is incumbent on government to explore these implications in detail, for the purposes of this paper, the figures given above are used.

In round terms the two sets of proposals would require an increase of 4250 and 7500 teachers respectively. It is important to stress that these additional teachers would be required solely in order to reduce the time in which teachers are in contact with classes and not for any other purpose which might be thought desirable by parents such as reducing class sizes.

Setting aside the question of where these additional teachers might be found, there is the matter of cost. Applying the average cost of an unpromoted teacher and allowing for on-costs such as National Insurance and employers' superannuation costs, the figures come out at nearly £200m and over £300m for the two proposals.

An important question concerns how these amounts might be funded. It is to be hoped that they would be met in their entirety by the Scottish Government. Precedent suggests, however, that there would be some new money with the balance being met from hard-pressed local authority budgets which would be skewed in order to fund a priority that councils might well not share.

Indeed, the question of priorities is of paramount importance. If there is really, say, £200m available to increase spending on schools, the key issue is not whether reducing teacher contact hours might do some good but whether it is the best possible use of the available money. Another question, running in parallel, is who is best placed to make that decision.

OECD did not recommend a reduction in contact hours. If they favour such a course of action, their reasons are unknown. How would the additional non-contact time be used? The recent history of Scottish education suggests the bulk of the time might well be consumed with bureaucracy, compliance with yet more accountability mechanisms and so forth. Before substantial quantities of scarce resources were committed to such a policy, the public would be entitled to a careful explanation of how genuine educational benefit would be realised.

If the decision on the use of additional resources is made by the Scottish Government, the inevitable outcome will be that the priority will be the same in every school. There may be schools where more non-contact time for teachers might be the best way of improving pupils' learning. However, if headteachers were asked for their views, a wide range of possible priorities would emerge. This is entirely appropriate. The circumstances of schools vary widely. Therefore, so too will their priorities for improvement.

It is worth noting that schools already have some discretion over how they use their resources – not as much as they should but still quite significant. If there are schools which believe that their highest priority is the reduction of class-contact hours, there is nothing to stop them taking steps in that direction. Schools deploy their resources in

a wide range of ways; class teaching, management time, support staff of various kinds, increasing the number of teaching sections through curriculum choice (secondary), purchase of materials and many more. It would be perfectly possible to increase the share devoted to non-contact time by reducing the share allocated to one or more of these other purposes. To take the obvious example, a fairly modest increase in class sizes would provide the funding needed. Would teachers see this as a good trade-off? Would parents? If nobody sees the possible trade-offs as beneficial, how much value do they really attach to the proposed increase in non-contact time?

The OECD team made a number observations on ways in which Scotland's educational approaches are, or are not, in line with typical practice elsewhere. For instance, they indicate that "Compared to many other countries, Scottish teachers seem to rely much less on textbooks produced by educational publishers." Unlike their reference to non-contact time, this observation is accompanied by comment. [The practice] "raises some questions about efficiency as developing high-quality instructional materials requires a lot of expertise, time and energy...." Nobody has researched whether the substitution of teacher-produced materials for commercially and centrally produced ones is educationally beneficial nor whether it is cost-effective to use expensive teacher time to resource a huge over-production of duplicate materials. A time when an extension of non-class-contact time is under discussion, might be the appropriate moment for such research.

Another possible use of extra non-contact time is in connection with assessment. Many people would question whether an excessive amount of teacher time and effort is not already devoted to this purpose. However, the EIS certainly (and possibly also the government) favours a reduction in the use of examinations and greater reliance on continuous assessment and teacher judgement. Here is another possible motive for reducing class contact.

The truth is that we are not told the uses to which extra time might be devoted. And yet, this is surely central to the justification of such a policy?

Finally, the timing is odd, if not perverse. The educational establishment in Scotland has chosen to ignore or even deny the need for educational catch-up after the pandemic. Most people, however, see the priority as being for young people to have more contact with teachers. How strange, therefore, that we might instead devote a large, but uncalculated, sum of money to the pursuit of a policy which has not been seriously examined, for purposes which have not been explained but which will certainly reduce the amount of time that teachers spend teaching.

Robert Tennent played a major role in the early development of computing in schools. As Quality Improvement Manager in East Renfrew, promoted improvement through the analysis of Performance data, school organisation & curriculum delivery.

Keir Bloomer is a former director of education & chair of the Commission on School Reform.

The Proposed National Care Service – Gordon Hector

Originally posted 18 August 2021

Exactly ten years ago, the UK Government was trying to reorganise the NHS in England. It was a massive, complex set of changes, and a senior mandarin warned that it was ‘the only change management system you can actually see from space – it is that large’.

This year in Scotland, we are about to witness an equally massive bit of policymaking: a National Care Service, or NCS. Last week, the Scottish Government launched a consultation on creating the new service.

The consultation confirms that the label of ‘NCS’ perhaps overstates the radicalism. This not another NHS, but a new central body to set standards and oversee care. There is even one function for the NCS proposed which is ‘market oversight’, making it plain that we will still have a care home market.

And in some ways, the Scottish Government has actually pulled back from the Feeley review which began this process. That plan suggested the NCS take on not just standard-setting and quality improvement, but inspection and scrutiny functions, too. The risk is obvious: that a single organisation is conflicted over which mode of operation it prioritises. Ministers are about to de-merge education inspection from improvement work, for exactly this reason. But the paper rejects the idea of the NCS being a single super-body, and the Care Inspectorate and the Scottish Social Services Council will continue to exist. On the face of it this looks like a clearer, more robust delineation of responsibilities.

Feeley also suggested changing the way that funding works, ending all non-residential charges for care. The consultation uses quite careful language. It implies other alternatives could be explored, like changing the means-testing process, and only promises ‘fairness’ for self-funders. There’s enough wriggle-room there to leave this for future years. This is astute, given uncertainty over the public finances and on how much this could cost.

In other words, the core architecture of the NCS itself has some pretty pragmatic choices. Kevin Stewart, the minister in charge, might well feel the hand of history on his shoulder because the NCS itself feels quite expensive and quite extensive, is dripping in the language of values and human rights – but also feels like a fundamentally technocratic exercise about better managing a market. This is not Bevanite: it is Blairite.

But that might not matter. Because the consultation also proposes, quite casually, that entire swathes of wider community and public health services are wrapped into the NCS.

Drugs and alcohol, for starters: there is no detail, just a suggestion it could ‘become part of the NCS’.

Similarly mental health: 'appropriate elements' should be merged.

There is so little detail here that it's possible this is a red herring, set up to concede later so other controversies look sensible.

If not, then this is massive change. And there are other less eye-catching changes which are equally significant.

Children's social work and social care are proposed to be 'located within' the NCS. The difficulty here is that places have different mixes of health, justice and families services carried out by combinations of councils and the existing Integrated Joint Boards (IJBs, which unite councils, the NHS and other organisations to guide community and care services). Some people would call this status quo incoherent; others would say this reflects local realities. Either way, changing it means elbowing out councils in favour of national organisation of some of the most sensitive, complex public services. This is not something to do lightly. It is a bit like doing Named Persons and centralising the police service at the same time.

Then the IJBs themselves will become new Community Health and Social Care Boards. IJBs are a funny bunch. They rest on a myth that goes deep in Scottish public life: that different organisations collaborate simply because you create a structure which says they should collaborate. That is not how organisations work. In the real world, some places have IJBs with combinations of brilliant people, easy geography and traditions of close work between health and care – and really are leading change. But other IJBs just remain cobbled-together collages of different organisations who can still barely organise themselves, let alone govern collectively: a board, maybe, but neither integrated nor joint.

Something has to happen to IJBs. The system envisaged by the consultation is that they get beefed up to become 'delivery' organisations, responsible for buying and organising services in their patch, accountable to the NCS. They will have new powers, too, over things like GP contracts.

If the accountability relationship between the NCS and the new community boards is too strong and directive, then this will just be a centralised system. But if it's too weak, they will just be IJBs with a new logo. In between these extremes is the giddy prospect of something effective – but also the prospect of a uniquely awful outcome where we retain the ineffectiveness of some IJBs, but with new pressures to deliver, and new-found ability to dodge responsibility and pass the buck up to the NCS. What probably makes the difference is likely not structure, but culture and leadership. The role of a central body in shaping those things is difficult and requires expert calibration: the challenge is that such sophistication has to be executed alongside all the other massive institutional changes. It's a big ask.

If those new powers over GPs turn out to be more significant than they appear at face value – well, it's a brave politician who starts fights with GPs.

And that's the curious thing about the politics of this. Social care is a patchy system, and it really hurts people when it doesn't work. My hunch is that creating an NCS purely for adult social care would be a battle, but fundamentally opposition attacks about centralisation would never quite land. By massively increasing the scope of the NCS, that could shift. I might be wrong on this but I reckon the public back an NCS: it's not obvious to me they back this NCS.

Not least as the plan has to go through a parliamentary mincer where no party has a majority.

All of this raises the stakes for the Scottish Government – and ultimately people who need good care services. Getting adult care right is a difficult job of political and policy stewardship. It's one hell of a risk to expand that process to a complete redrawing of all community and care services.

Thinking back to a decade ago down south, the temptation to do everything in one super-bill in a parliament of minorities is what did for the UK Government's approach. It passed, but it was a mess. It all but ended the Health Secretary's career, was in trouble as soon as it was implemented, and is now being undone. It is the peerless case-study of how not to reform public services.

That plan may have been visible from space. This one has similarly extra-terrestrial potential.

Gordon Hector is a policy consultant and former Director of Policy and Strategy for the Scottish Conservatives

Critique of the OECD report into Scotland's school curriculum – Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 22 August 2021

The report on Scotland's school curriculum by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is likely to shape Scottish education policy for several years. Much delayed because of Covid, its eventual publication in June was acclaimed by almost all commentators. The Scottish government were satisfied with the OECD's praise of 'Curriculum for Excellence', the policy that has been shaping the school curriculum for a decade and a half. The other political parties commended the report's calls for greater clarity of purpose, for better evidence, and for less complicated relationships between the schools and the myriad of national and regional agencies through which curriculum policy is governed. The teachers' trade unions were pleased with the report's recognition that teachers have been drowning in an avalanche of centrally imposed instructions. Most of the news media welcomed the recommendation for clearer lines of accountability.

Yet the report itself is superficial, badly presented, based on questionable evidence, and uninformed by the most up-to-date psychological and neuro-scientific research on how children learn. [An analysis published by Reform Scotland](#) goes through these weaknesses in detail. This blog picks out the main points of the critique.

Partial evidence

The report says that the authors spoke to 'representatives of over 40 organisations, education researchers and stakeholder committees'. They did. But these interlocutors all had to be approved by the Scottish government's gatekeeper. Thus the result is not an independent report. It is largely a distillation of how the existing governing agencies see the problems. Almost all the people and organisations that the OECD consulted are insiders, in the sense that they sit on Scottish government committees, or are responsible for administering Scottish government grants. A majority of them in fact sit on the committee which manages Curriculum for Excellence itself.

The OECD was right to meet these people and organisations, and right to listen carefully to their views. These are all experts, with admirable experience of education and its management. The problem is, rather, with the omission of almost all points of view that might have provided the OECD with a more critical perspective. Dissenting opinions were barely present, an omission that has given the misleading impression in the OECD's report that Curriculum for Excellence commands universal support.

One source of different views was schools. The OECD did visit (online) six schools, and consulted teachers and head-teachers in about a dozen others. Again, though, the problem is not in the schools that were consulted, but in those that were absent. The schools seem not to have been chosen in any scientifically representative way. There were no Catholic schools, and no independent schools. The schools under-represented the experience of poverty except in Glasgow, which is regrettable even though looking at Glasgow is indeed important. There was very little from the rest of central Scotland, and hardly anything on poverty in towns and cities outside that area. The quite

different experience of rural poverty was almost entirely absent. Understanding how to close the poverty-related attainment gap is hardly possible on such a limited basis.

Partial reporting

So the report's basis of evidence was limited. In one respect, this was the OECD's fault: it should have insisted to the Scottish government on getting a greater diversity of points of view. But in another sense the gaps are not its fault at all, because normally an inquiry of this kind could have relied on statistical surveys conducted by the system itself. Yet successive Scottish governments since devolution have abolished almost all reliable sources of survey evidence on Scottish education. The report makes no comment on the loss. Its authors also seem unaware that the statistics with which it was provided by the Scottish government are of dubious quality. For example, the measurement of poverty used by the Scottish government is very inadequate. The evidence on whether the attainment gap is closing is based on opinions, not facts about pupils' attainment.

The report's authors don't help clarity by tendentious presentation of data from the triennial Programme for International Student Achievement, which in Scotland is now the only remaining high-quality survey of schools. The report presents Scottish test results in a way that exaggerates recent small improvements in reading, and underplays the probable continuing decline in mathematics and science. The report fails to explain that the lower-than-average social inequality of attainment in Scotland is not due to any great success by children living in poverty, but rather to poorer-than-average attainment by children from wealthy families.

The report also systematically misinterprets the results of this same survey which investigated students' awareness of global issues, for example world poverty and health. Scottish students do have above-average ethical commitment on these topics, but there is no reason to attribute this to anything which the school curriculum does. If anything, the evidence suggests that schools in Scotland are less effective than schools elsewhere in providing the knowledge that students would require to back up their ethical ideas. The report's claim to the contrary is mere rhetoric, citing no evidence whatsoever.

Partial knowledge

The most serious of the report's failings is in its superficial understanding of the place of knowledge in the curriculum. The report does mention this, but tritely. It does not pay any attention to the extensive recent research by psychologists and neuroscientists on the importance of children acquiring knowledge.

Too much time in primary schools is spent on fragmented topics or projects, neglecting the over-arching disciplinary structures that would connect them together. Too much of the time in secondary schools is spent on rote-learning facts and text that are to be regurgitated in exams, and then forgotten. The reason to learn facts is as the best means to learning concepts. That's what knowledge is: not facts themselves, but the concepts that unify facts, or what the psychologists call schemas for understanding.

A schema is a mental structure that connects facts together, enabling learning to be meaningful. For example, rote learning facts about how different plants grow is less effective than subsuming their variety into general botanical concepts.

The skill of a teacher lies in selecting the factual examples that will best illustrate these concepts. The facts are important pedagogically, because most of us find it easier to understand concepts through examples than as direct philosophical exposition. But the purpose is acquiring the concepts, not listing the facts.

The concepts then link together to form a discipline. There is no educational point in pursuing inter-disciplinary projects until the distinct characteristics of each contributing discipline have been grasped.

None of this is even hinted at by the OECD's report. Proper understanding of the place of knowledge has had no influence on Curriculum for Excellence. Debate about that understanding is never encountered in the normal public deliberations of Scotland's curricular bodies – Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority. So the Scottish government's decision to abolish the latter and modify the former will make no difference. The philistine landscape of Scottish educational governance will continue unchecked.

This OECD report was a seriously missed opportunity, but it will have a baleful legacy because it will shape Scottish education policy for the foreseeable future. It will encourage the belief that Curriculum for Excellence is essentially fine, that the problems can be addressed by minor tinkering with the institutional structures, and that the leadership class of Scottish education know what they're doing. They don't, the structures are irrelevant, and the curriculum is an empty shell. So we are stuck with at least five more years of this stasis, till the next parliamentary elections. Another quarter of a million young people will leave school under-educated, under-achieving by proper international standards, and under-prepared for the real challenges of a very uncertain future.

Lindsay Paterson, Professor of Education Policy, Edinburgh University

Wider Achievement Opportunities in School – David McClure

Originally posted 24 August 2021

In the current debate relating to the rigour of exams and their place in assessment, it is universally recognised that pupil achievement comes from a wider range of activities than simply SQA accreditation for academic (and practical based) study.

For within the school curriculum there is scope for pupils to achieve accreditation from a wider range of external providers as well as recognition from school based internal activities. Indeed, there are many pupils for whom this recognition may be the only awards that they are likely to gain.

I know from my own time as Rector of Madras College (in St Andrews) the senior school curriculum supported the delivery of a wide range of such activities, for example:

- First aid in the workplace (delivered by an external group) which then led to those pupil participants delivering Heartstart to S1 pupils;
- An introduction to TEFL (Teach English as a Foreign Language) course delivered by St Andrews University;
- A range of College based FAs;
- Certificates of attendance and participation for our programme;
- Higher Psychology delivered by college;
- A resilience/leadership programme (evaluated by the presentation (in small groups) of a new phone App concept to an audience) delivered and evaluated by CAPOD* of St Andrews University;
- Duke of Edinburgh programmes;
- Work experience;
- Youth achievement awards certificated by SQA;
- Science, Language and Sport Scotland ambassadors for S6 pupils to support our link primary school leadership experience;
- A range of school competitions such as Maths Challenge, Top of the Bench (Chemistry), Donald Dewar debating;
- Rotary involvement such as the Burns club awards for singing and recital;

Many of the above also contribute to a SALTIRE award.

It is of course the case that every school can tell a similar story of participation and accreditation beyond the “traditional” range of SQA examination awards, and this will, to an extent, rely on the school’s size, internal community and external surroundings; but it will also rely on the school’s commitment – and its ability – to build a curriculum model which will deliver a suitable range of activities. That school leaders have this commitment and ability is fundamental to the quality of awards which the young people will experience, and equally important, will value. As well as addressing the question of commitment and ability, school leaders need to address three other questions: Range of activities, Equity, and Assessment (which is distinct to the current debate concerning whether accreditation should be based on external examination).

In considering the question of having the commitment and ability to build a suitable curriculum model incorporating wider achievement, the most important element to be agreed is that wider accreditation and recognition should not be implemented as a “bolt on” element.

I must admit that in the past I have been guilty of doing this initially but I have then gone back and redrafted the design of the senior school curriculum for the next session so that timetabling has this element built into the school week, which includes room allocation, staff allocation (involving recruitment and surplus) and number of period allocation; as well as consortium arrangements, consultation, knowledge of local links and researching pupil voice and need. All the aforementioned are crucial parts of the thinking process around this element of the curriculum design and if addressed at the early stages (which I always felt was the December to March time frame) ensured that the school could offer a balanced range of wider accreditation and/or recognition to all pupils. It should be noted that distinct to this, the SQA subject choice offer needed to be ready in detail by March. The wider accreditation choice could have its core detail ready simultaneously but there was always scope for change to some elements after March – which on occasion was also true of the SQA choice frame. It becomes self-evident that to deliver a quality range of wider outcomes for pupils, a commitment and creative ability on the part of the school management (and partners) is essential.

As stated, the range and levels of wider achievement will be influenced by the availability of partners and staff and by pupil choice; all of which will in part depend on where a school is sited.

I would argue that it is within the range and levels question that there is opportunity to deliver a balanced range, not just of accredited qualification but also of experience and/or recognition. This is where school ambassadors, choirs, debaters, charity volunteers, school competition involvement, etc can be encouraged not only through short course options (up to 4 per year for example) but also through lunchtime or after school options to secure experience and/or recognition.

The challenge is to create a choice of accreditation and recognition ranging from participation in a school activity to attending a college-based Foundation Apprentice course, and to do this within an organised and supported timetabled framework which is an integrated part of the overall school timetabled framework.

If a balanced range of choice can be achieved then the offer of wider achievements will support all pupils from the most academically able to the least able, from the most practical skilled to the least skilled – offering something suitable for all.

In considering the question of equity on wider achievement, I would argue that equity is not about lowering or raising expectations, it is about fairness, which is giving everyone fair opportunity to be recognised in the pathway of their choice. It is not every pupil who wants to go on to further academic study (from HNC to degree) and it is not every pupil who wants to end their studies on leaving school.

It is, however, in my experience, that every pupil wants to leave school with the

security of progression to the next stage of their life. In supporting this need, the wider achievement agenda can deliver recognised qualification, recognised practical/work experience and/or a recognition of participation, thus not just offering possible further attainment, but more importantly offering a recognition of character and commitment. If done well this can give an essential outcome which will be relevant to all in their progression beyond school. In addition, I would add that for wider achievement to deliver in full, the school must not only value all wider achievements on offer, but also ensure that this value is made clear to all. In my experience that means much more than giving a token recognition of achievement through an awards (or equivalent) ceremony, it means that the Head Teacher and other senior managers demonstrate their recognition of value on an almost daily basis by visiting the wider achievement classes/activities and engaging pupils in genuinely interested conversation about their work – in their place of study. Indeed, all of that will require time, but what better use of HT time is there, than openly and regularly demonstrating what they value – especially to those who need their reassurance most.

On the ultimate question of assessment of wider achievement, the range of assessment is large and varied. For some courses the assessment will be no more than a reference of participation, attendance and effort, for some others it will be ongoing course work. For other activities such as the Burns singing competitions it will be a performance against other participants and where a course is of a serious academic nature it may be coursework and a final exam. I do not believe that assessment of wider achievement could have a single, “one size fits all”, or that all achievement requires to be assessed through an exam; rather I believe that each assessment tool should be appropriate to the nature of the activity or course undertaken. Unfortunately, the current situation with these important awards is that the extent of recognition they receive is very much dependent on the “eye of the beholder” – which in this instance is any potential employer or admissions officer. It would be a great pity if this imbalance of recognition were to be lost in the current “exams” debate, at a time when effort and debate could also be promoting that wider achievement awards be universally recognised as an accepted and meaningful standard of accreditation by all partners.

*Centre for Academic, Professional and Organisational Development.

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Time To Act On Minimum Unit Pricing – Elinor Jayne

Originally posted 31 August 2021

This summer we received grim news: after some progress in reducing deaths caused by alcohol in Scotland, we not only ground to a halt but we took a giant step backwards. 1,190 people died directly from alcohol in 2020. This is devastating. Not only did those 1,190 people have to struggle with their addiction and with all the harms both caused by and contributing to their addiction, the people they left behind – colleagues, friends, family, partners – now have the burden of their grief to struggle with. And let's face it, the journey that people who died from alcohol will have been on will most likely have been exhausting and damaging for them and for everyone in their lives – death is just the end of that journey.

So we can ask lots of questions about why things went so badly wrong – and sure, the fact that 2020 was the year of lockdowns will have been a huge factor – but what can we do now to stop the harms caused by alcohol, and ultimately reduce the number of people dying from alcohol.

Well there's a lot in our armoury that the Scottish Government can choose from: as a nation we could de-normalise alcohol by restricting marketing and advertising; we could end the anomalous sponsorship of sport by alcohol brands; we could reduce access to alcohol by limiting the number of places or types of shop that can sell it; we could vastly improve access to – and quality of – treatment and recovery services; and perhaps it's not a job for government, but as a nation we could treat each other with compassion and reduce the stigma and judgement that is so firmly attached to alcohol problems.

But there is one thing the Scottish Government could do now, and that's to return to the thorny price of minimum unit pricing (MUP) of alcohol. This is a proven policy: upon introduction it immediately had an impact. It reduced consumption (though it's still far too high: in 2020 enough alcohol was sold that if it was evenly distributed across all adults in Scotland we'd all have comfortably exceeded the 14 units per week low-risk guideline); less money is now spent on alcohol, particularly in those households that bought the most alcohol prior to MUP; there was a reduction in hospital admissions from liver disease and deaths caused by alcohol fell by 10% in the first full year of MUP. When MUP was finally introduced after years of delay due to legal challenge by the alcohol industry, the Scottish Government committed to reviewing the price two years after implementation, i.e. by May 2020 but has not done so, understandably given the pandemic. But now is the time to increase it. The policy is a whole lot less thorny, with the public becoming increasingly supportive of it since its introduction, and MSPs have had time to recover from the battles of a decade and more ago and recognise the policy's success for what it is. The legal challenges mean that nine years have passed since the policy was approved, to start at 50p, yet inflation was never accounted for and when it was introduced in 2018 we stuck with 2012 price of 50p. Not only that, Sheffield University modelling – which underpinned the case for MUP back in 2012 – carried out in 2016 found that a MUP of 60p would save twice as many lives and reduce hospital admissions by twice the level than 50p. So let's increase MUP to 65p

to not only take account of inflation but to give this hard-won policy the teeth it needs to make more of a difference.

One concern will always remain and that is whether MUP will force people who are alcohol-dependent in the poorest communities to choose between alcohol and food or other essentials. And that is why price – while the most effective way to drive change, as proven – will not overcome this challenge in isolation. We also need suitable treatment and recovery programmes that people can access easily, plus all the interventions mentioned above would ultimately reduce consumption which would help prevent people becoming dependent and being forced into such a situation where they must choose between alcohol and food.

So as a nation, while we can't stop alcohol harm overnight, we must do what we can now – increase MUP to 65p – and then consider all the evidence on the policy interventions that will reduce alcohol harm and decide how to implement them in Scotland, and work towards bringing an end to Scotland's problem with alcohol.

Elinor Jayne is Director at Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP)

Are Exams Reliable? – Melvyn Roffe

Originally posted 28 September 2021

Suddenly everyone is talking about exams. After two years of upheaval as a result of COVID-19 the old certainties are starting to crumble and some surprising people are beginning to think the previously unthinkable and say the previously unsayable. It's as if they've suddenly had to admit that the emperor might in fact be stark naked and that the supposed gold standard of high stakes exams might always have been just the glitter of fools' gold. The OECD report is sceptical and the Scottish Government's International Council of Education Advisors puts it bluntly

"High school examinations are essentially an out-of-date 19th and 20th century technology operating in a 21st century environment of teaching and learning."

Mind you, not everyone seems to get it. *The Times* last week reported Carrie Lindsay, President of the Association of Directors of Education, bemoaning the fact that "it had been challenging to find a consistent and accurate measurement of happiness, confidence and contentment among pupils".

Given how challenging it has proven to be over the last few years even to find a consistent and accurate measurement of mathematics attainment at Higher, I really don't envy the team that will presumably soon be tasked by Scottish Government to rectify this manifest failing in our system. Defining happiness, confidence and contentment would be a start. Personally, I would include a vigorous walk, a long warm shower, an opera by Mozart, blue cheese, half a bottle of good Lebanese red and the love my wife and children. I would argue that they have all been part of my broad general education, but I accept that some might not readily lend themselves to assessment in the senior phase.

What is needed is not more assessment but more humility about the value of assessment. It would help if we actually understood how reliable (or, in fact not) our assessment has been all this time. There is shockingly little data on examination reliability in Scotland but what we see from England doesn't exactly inspire happiness, confidence or contentment.

On 2nd September 2020, Ofqual's then Acting Chief Regulator, Dame Glenys Stacey acknowledged to the House of Commons Education Select Committee that exam grades "are reliable to one grade either way". As my colleague Dennis Sherwood who has researched these data extensively puts it, "That sounds quite reassuring until you realise that this statement is the same as saying 'an A level certificate showing ABB actually means any set of grades from A*AA to BCC, but no one knows which'".

What is worse is that when I recently quoted that to a representative of leading UK universities, they had not the first clue that there might have been a problem. The myth that exams provide useful and reliable information about young people is so central to the way that we conceive of education in the UK that even some of those who advocate change persist in seeing the emperor in his finery.

So, before we get too far into the discussion about new approaches to assessment, let alone the desirability or otherwise of assessing happiness, confidence and contentment, let's be honest about the limitations of any assessment system.

The Ofqual data suggests that across all subjects in England about 1 grade in every 4 is wrong. I would be delighted if SQA could produce data showing the situation in Scotland to be much better.

We wouldn't accept such poor reliability in totting up our bill in a supermarket, let alone in medicine, or thankfully in the testing of aero engines. But if it's just young people's futures at stake, it's more or less fine.

The answer to the problem of "out-of-date 19th and 20th century technology operating in a 21st century environment of teaching and learning" is not to assess more things. It is to work towards a system where we can be happy, confident and content that what we need to assess can be assessed reliably and in ways that support young people's learning. But where most of what is truly valuable about education is not assessed at all.

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A Critical Moment For Health and Care – Paul Gray

Originally published 4 October 2021

The current health and care system in Scotland is overwhelmed. By health and care system, I mean everything from hospital care to primary and community care to social care; I include everything that is delivered by the NHS, local government, the third sector and the private sector. By overwhelmed, I mean that the current design and resourcing cannot meet the current and emerging challenges and nor are they designed to do so. The current system was going to be overwhelmed regardless of Covid. The virus has simply brought the date of that event forward. The intersection between demography, population health status, funding, and availability of the right skills in the right place, was going to mean that the system would be unsustainable in the next 2 to 3 years anyway; in Scotland, the Feeley review was tacit acknowledgement of that. Some would argue that it was already unsustainable. Covid has been the tipping point. For some in Scotland, the chosen battleground is localism versus central control. This will of course attract considerable support from local government, whose role is fundamental. But this particular fight is emblematic of the problem itself. For as long as the delivery of health and care services is split across a range of providers where the incentives, governance, political mandate and accountability mean that the different budget holders can have adverse impacts on their partners, the issue will not turn to the needs of patients and families (or citizens, or clients, or people, or human beings in need of care – call them what you will) or the intractable issues of population health. The issue will be a series of budget and resource challenges where increasing demand will drive increasingly perverse incentives, to the detriment of the people who actually need diagnosis, care and treatment. This will also operate to the further detriment of third sector and private sector providers, who are already under represented in decision making; treating the third sector as a disposable contractor while calling them partners is the worst of all possible worlds.

Another area of contention is the contribution of the private sector to the design and delivery of health and care services. I will return to this later on, but I start from the basis of my own experience as well as my own ideals, and I am very committed to a health and care system in public hands, under public control, accountable to parliament. However, ignoring the private sector or wishing it away is a mistake.

It should go without saying, but in what follows I am making no criticism of citizens who try to access health and care via the range of doors available. It is for health and care providers to make it straightforward to access the right care and advice in the right place, and to help the public understand where they can receive the most appropriate care: the present context makes that more difficult than it should be. I am not ignoring the fact that a few individuals call an ambulance for issues such as a broken finger nail, in the same way that someone calls the police because their parcel hasn't arrived. But the citizen isn't the root of the problem.

Primary care is fundamental to the effective functioning of a health and care system; the vast majority of contact with health systems is via primary care. The narrative in relation to primary care was changing before the pandemic, and it needs to continue to develop. Primary care includes general practice but “seeing your GP” is not primary

care. It includes many other specialisms such as a wide range of nursing skills including community nursing, phlebotomy, health visiting and psychiatric nursing; it includes pharmacy, dentistry, physiotherapy and paramedics. Some primary care consultations need to be face to face; many do not. Some need to be with a GP; many do not. The effective function of primary care involves the patient having contact with the right person, in the most appropriate setting, at the right time. A general practitioner is a highly skilled clinician, with particular strengths in managing undifferentiated risk – complex cases, often where it's not necessarily clear what the immediate problem is. But all of the other contributors to primary care are skilled professionals too and patients will get the most appropriate care by going to the right one.

In the very simplest of terms, if primary care is overwhelmed, people will not come into the system until they are acutely unwell, or in response to life events such as pregnancy and childbirth. Primary care is not the place for acutely unwell people; in most cases they either need hospital treatment and if left untreated, will ultimately need community care or palliative care. So a dysfunctional primary care system leads to more pressure on hospitals, which in turn means that people with treatable but less urgent conditions are left untreated until their condition becomes acute and unmanageable. Or, if they are frail, they move instead into the social care system, either requiring care at home or in a care setting, and they do so more quickly than they would otherwise have done if they had had access to functioning primary care. And across the spectrum if people's acute illness manifests suddenly as a result of under treatment, they pitch up at the emergency department – or they attend in frustration because they cannot access care or treatment anywhere else; or they try to call an ambulance adding further to pressure on the ambulance service. And a dysfunctional hospital system means that people can neither get in, because the emergency department is jammed and there are too few hospital beds to permit a stream of planned admissions, and once patients are in they cannot get out because there is no space in the community care system and no care or treatment at home from primary care; the people who cannot get in revert to primary care which is already overwhelmed, and add to its burdens further. Failure in any one part of the system precipitates failure in all of it.

The social care system is also critical to the success of the whole system, and operates with primary care (ideally in an integrated approach which is seamless for citizens). Further progress with integration is definitely needed, but social care faces other issues as well – not least recruitment and retention. The social care system is under intense pressure and this pressure both contributes to pressure elsewhere in the system (because for example social care does not have the resources to support someone who is ready for discharge from hospital, thus leading to a delayed discharge which in turn slows down admissions), and is increased where the rest of the system is overwhelmed (where for example frail people whose elective treatment in hospital is delayed require additional support from social care providers as a result).

All that said, the health and care system is chock-a-block with highly skilled professionals and amazing techniques for diagnosis, treatment and care. It is at its fundamental best, its inspiring pinnacle of performance, in a crisis. The people within the system are most definitely a crucial part of the answer to the problem we currently face. But the problem will not be solved simply by wishing for more of them, or by a

bidding war between the professions and specialisms, not least because there are worldwide shortages of supply in some specialisms and it would take 10 years to train the additional numbers required, by which time the demographics would have caught up again and we would need more again. And in any case we need different skill mixes from the ones we have just now – and some of the answer to this lies in the third sector and not in the statutory sectors; the private sector will have a role to play too, as it does just now. The real answer lies in fundamental reform of the whole system and not just parts of it.

There are internationally recognised examples of what works. A quick search of the Jonkoping system in Sweden, the Buurtzorg model in the Netherlands, or the NUKA model in Alaska, will demonstrate that health systems can be integrated and can be made to work at lower per capita cost without sacrificing quality, and with better access and better outcomes. A quick search of the official report in Scotland's parliament or Hansard in the UK parliament will almost certainly yield glowing references to all three systems. One feature distinguishes all of these systems – they are truly local. Each system has a different approach to governance: the NUKA system is owned by the population, for example. But they involve integration and local delegation to an extent that would frighten most politicians here. And for example, Jonkoping would mean that the concept of a national health service be very different, except for the highest tariff (i.e. most serious, complex and rare) cases, because the local hospital system is part of the local delivery system and not run centrally.

One of the lessons of the pandemic is that change is possible, and that it can be made to happen quickly. Another lesson is that technology can play a bigger part in diagnosis, care and treatment, and simultaneously reduce the need for patients and clinicians to travel while increasing the efficiency of the system. Better use of technology and properly joined up, patient-centric digital systems are essential components of any development. Even the best of systems embraces the need for change in response to changing contexts: as Jonkoping's Chief Learning Officer said, Our current system serves us well, but it will not serve my grandchildren well in the future. (And yes, they have a Chief Learning Officer at the same level as their Chief Executive Officer.)

Unless we are willing to be clear that 2019 is not coming back and we are not starting from where we were then, and that 1948 when the NHS was first established, is lost in the mists of time and demographics and public expectation, we will continue to have a political bunfight while people suffer and die. If the NHS is truly precious, it deserves a robust diagnosis, and it requires radical surgery. Whether there is the courage to take such an approach remains very much open to question. The alternative is that people will quote international examples of best practice, and will criticise the current waiting list and shortage of staff, and objectively they will be quite right. But wherever they are in the UK, unless the opposition is prepared to go beyond beating the government of the day over the head with the present situation, and unless the government is willing to engage constructively in radical change and stop arguing about increasing investment (record investment in something that isn't working will not make it work), unless the scrutiny moves from telling us what we already know, which is that there are too many people requiring treatment and care, and not enough money and staff to do it now and in the future, to what could be done to make things better, unless we

can find a way that the legitimate role of professional bodies and trade unions places public interest ahead of member interests without sacrificing members' rights, and unless we are willing to engage with all current and potential partners in care constructively and on an equal footing, we will stay on this merry go round.

In order to move on, the contribution of the private sector also needs to be recognised and discussed rationally. Pretending that the private sector cannot or should not have role has no basis in current fact. The NHS does not generate its own electricity, or manufacture its own vehicles, or make its own bricks and mortar. It is dependent on the private sector for much of its equipment and supplies. The private sector has useful experience in designing systems and processes. Some NHS clinicians also work in the private sector; some private sector providers are used when demand for diagnosis or treatment exceeds supply. We would not have vaccines against covid had the NHS, academia and the private sector not worked in partnership. We can do better than adopting a stance of "private sector bad" accompanied by accusations of selling off the NHS; we can equally do better than asserting that the private sector would be better and more efficient at everything – I can still remember being criticised in 2016 for saying that it would take 4 years to achieve our 2020 vision, on the basis that "the private sector would only be given 6 months to do that". Health and care should remain in the public sector, and should retain its core values, and should hold fast to its commitment to safe, person-centred and effective care.

Three key features of a functioning health and care system are access (can people get what they need, in an appropriate setting, when they need it); quality (are people's experiences of care acceptable, and are the outcomes achieved appropriate); and sustainability (is the system designed to continue to function effectively with the current and planned resources available to it). Unless we accept that these factors operate in balance, and derive from the way the whole system operates, we will not make progress. More money is welcome, and needed, but it is far from the whole answer; for a start, there is not a cupboard full of trained and experienced professionals just waiting to be recruited. Pointing to failures in access, or promising to fix those failures – largely visible through waiting times – without a willingness to engage on system design or restructuring the way resources are applied is no more than posturing. I have of course failed so far to mention in any detail some very important issues: in particular, population health and prevention. A sustained emphasis on wellbeing and a real, properly funded and resourced long term commitment to prevention would go a long way to alleviating the rising tide of pressure on health and care services, not to mention its benefits for employers and employability, for the economy, for the environment, for the justice system, and for individuals and communities – particularly those which have been deprived and overlooked for far too long.

But in closing, demanding that everything returns to a golden age would require us to return population health status, quality and outcomes to the levels achieved at that golden moment – all of which would be worse than what we have, worse than we know we can achieve, and worse than what we should aspire to. The system is complex but the approach can be simple: improvements to access and quality will require changes to both system design and resourcing. More money alone will not fix the problem: do we really want to retain and maintain outdated facilities, and continue with skill mixes

that are no longer fit for purpose, and outbid other countries for staff even although they need them more than we do, just because we can afford to do so? Or are we prepared to countenance the hard discussions, and the hard decisions, needed to construct a system of health and care that meets the current and future needs of the population, because we believe that to be just and fair?

Certain groups used to practice gyromancy; some may do so still. In some nomadic settings, this technique for prognostication involved the tribal elders dancing in a circle until they fell down from exhaustion, one by one. Once they were all prostrate, the direction of travel was determined by whichever point of the compass has the greatest number of elders pointing towards it. I hope that we can do better here.

Professor Paul Gray was chief executive of NHS Scotland, 2013-19 and NHS Scotland Director of Primary and Community Care from 2005-2007

Scotland's Framework for Tax – Tom Arthur

Originally published 6 October 2021

When the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, roughly 93% of Scotland's funding came in the form of a block grant calculated through the Barnett Formula.

In a relatively short period of time this balance has drastically shifted, with around 40% of the Scottish Government's resource budget now being funded through devolved and local tax revenues.

While there are significant limits to our fiscal autonomy, we are using our devolved powers to make tax policy fairer and more progressive in Scotland. An example of this is the shift to a five band system for Income Tax in the 2018-19 tax year. This protects those on the lowest incomes, while those with higher incomes pay more in order to help support the vital public services we all need, use and rely on.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. famously said: 'taxes are what we pay for civilised society'. Our decisions on tax have protected lower and middle income taxpayers, while raising additional revenue to support our economy and invest in the widest range of free-to-access public services in the UK.

As we continue to recover from the pandemic, we are also providing individuals and businesses with certainty and stability – for example, we stated clearly in our manifesto that we would aim to maintain current Income Tax rates for the duration of this Scottish Parliament.

A cornerstone of our approach to tax is engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. Taxes do not just support public services, they also allow the Government to support business and encourage growth through economic development, skills investment and major infrastructure. So everyone is a stakeholder. That is why we want to encourage debate, not just at Holyrood but also in businesses, communities and homes across Scotland.

With the sixth term of the Scottish Parliament ahead of us, a handful of devolved taxes now fully operating, and a process underway to develop our strategy for economic transformation, this is an appropriate time to renew focus on our Scottish Approach to Taxation.

On 31 August, the Scottish Government published a draft of Scotland's first Framework for Tax.

The consultation, [Tax Policy and Budget – a Framework for Tax](#), provides you with the opportunity to have your say on how the Scottish Government should use its devolved and local tax powers as part of the upcoming Scottish Budget 2022-23, the priorities for tax over the lifetime of this Parliament, and comment on our draft Framework for Tax.

The Framework for Tax sets out the principles that underpin our approach to tax and how we apply them today; the strategic objectives we are pursuing through tax policy; how we make decisions; how we plan and sequence our work around the policy and Budget cycles; and how we work in partnership with tax authorities like Revenue Scotland to ensure a people-centred approach to tax.

The latter is of critical importance. I want people to understand the taxes they pay, why they pay them, and how their contribution funds the public services we all rely on, or equally why changing their practices or behaviours will help us deliver on policy outcomes like a circular economy.

Overall, the Framework for Tax represents our vision for the design and delivery of a tax system that meets the needs of the people of Scotland. The final chapter of the Framework also sets out our high-level programme of work over the course of this Parliament, in line with our manifesto and public commitments.

Alongside input on the Framework, we also want to ensure that we hear the widest possible range of views on how we use our tax powers at the Scottish Budget 2022-23.

I want to hear views from across the country on the actions we can take, through our tax system, to support our vision of a society that thrives economically, socially, and environmentally, with prosperity for all of Scotland's people and places. This is critical to our commitments to open government and transparency, and embodies our ambition for excellence in tax policy and delivery.

I want to see a more mature public debate on tax in Scotland and I want people to understand the rationale for our tax policy decisions. The data we have gathered suggests that there are low levels of understanding of the tax system, particularly the tax powers devolved to Scotland.

We are at the foothills of this journey. I therefore want to stress the importance of engagement and co-production in everything we do. And I want us to work collaboratively to improve awareness, understanding and the quality of the debate on devolved tax policy making.

We have already used our devolved tax powers positively in Scotland. We now need to look to the future – how tax can help us achieve our economic and policy objectives; and equally how our ambition for the economy can drive tax performance; how we embed continuous improvement in the way we make and evaluate tax policy, and the ways we can improve public understanding and the quality of the debate on tax.

That is an ambitious agenda and we will need the benefit of your insights and perspectives to achieve it. The consultation is open until 26 October so please consider taking the time to submit a response on the draft Framework for Tax and your priorities for tax policy.

Tom Arthur MSP is Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth

Should we be worried about the number of hospital beds? – Gordon Hector

Originally posted 8 October 2021

A wee theme has emerged during the ambulance crisis: that it comes after years of cutting bed numbers, and therefore the NHS isn't ready. This claim popped up earlier in summer, and then again last [week](#).

It's true, but only half the story. Here's why.

An NHS bed exists in time and space: technically we count the number of *days* a bed is available and staffed.

Why does this matter? Because about two-thirds of the drop in 'beds' were in surgical specialties. Over the past 20 years, surgery has become much more efficient. Procedures which would have previously required a couple of days in hospital will now be a morning trip in. This is a **time** saving and is unequivocally a good thing: people can be seen more quickly, recover better and faster, require less risky types of anaesthetic, and avoid introducing or picking up bugs on wards.

And it means that across the system, we can achieve better outcomes with far fewer bed days.

There's also the argument that concentrating some types of care makes it safer. Crudely, a surgeon who does 30 procedures a week is, all else being equal, going to be better than one doing 5. When you create clusters of experience, you can also intensify research, create better progression for ambitious doctors, and reduce the overall cost of care by creating economies of scale for buildings, equipment and salaries. This points, on the whole, to larger intensively-run centres which replace networks of smaller, less intensively-run hospitals – which means fewer beds overall. That's what the big hospitals in Edinburgh and Glasgow are about.

Other countries have had similar policies – in fact, I remember a conference in about 2015 where a panel agreed that Germany's relatively high bed count was a sign of a badly-run system. The punchline was that on beds, the UK was more efficient than the Germans.

You can debate the trade-offs of this approach: it means centralisation. You can call it unwise, in retrospect, to not also increase capacity at the same time, or to prepare for a moment like this year. As Paul Gray [wrote](#) earlier this week, the system is now overwhelmed and 'radical surgery' is necessary – and there are some stand-out examples of radically decentralised health and care systems we could look to.

But you can't claim that reducing beds is brazen mismanagement, a conspiracy, or even really a cut. It was driven by a realistic clinical and managerial logic. And it was a response to the things we have required of the NHS: to offer more care, more safely, more efficiently.

Unfortunately, the pandemic is different. After years of trying to make more care preventative and out-of-hospital, we suddenly had to deal with immediate, hospital-heavy care.

This means that the right number of beds in the old world might not be the right number in the new.

This frames the big question for what comes next in health – and indeed other public services, and even the economy. The past ten years have been about more from less. We are now living through shocks that show us retaining capacity to respond and flex might be just as important.

There's no easy answer but we can at least frame the question for future choices: what do we want – efficiency? Or resilience?

It was obvious before the pandemic which we prioritised. Now it's far less clear. And less clear still, if the answer is 'both efficiency and resilience', how we pay for it and what kind of system will deliver it. Covid-19's impact on healthcare policy has a long way to go yet.

Gordon Hector is a policy consultant and former Director of Policy and Strategy for the Scottish Conservatives

Cambo- Aye or No? – Stuart Paton

Originally posted 11 October 2021

I started writing this piece quite a few weeks ago when the horrendous situation in Afghanistan was top of the news coverage, the UK Prime Minister was about to visit New York and Washington and there was a minor issue about an oil field off the West of Shetland. Energy is now front and centre of the coverage- huge increase in gas prices to the highest price on record, the collapse of a large number of energy providers, petrol shortages (possibly) and COP26 imminent. And of course these topics are all linked to a great degree.

We live in a very different world from a few years ago. The US shale boom provided essentially limitless volumes of oil and gas. The opening up of vast quantities of Russian gas to Western Europe and China. Increased volumes of gas being transported round the globe. Although there is not yet a shortage of energy, the demands of decarbonising the economy are creating a very different energy mix, driving huge changes in investments in projects throughout the world and having a direct impact on consumers through increased prices.

However, amongst all these really big issues, I did want to consider the parochial issue around the approval of new fields in the UK and how this is linked to the macro issues. In recent months, we have seen strident attempts to persuade the Scottish government to intervene to stop the development of the Cambo oil field West of Shetland. (It is worth noting that it is not the Scottish government who make the final decision: presumably the hope of the campaigners is to persuade the Scottish government to influence the Oil and Gas Authority decision). There is also a less publicised ongoing legal challenge by Greenpeace regarding a North Sea field development by BP and Ithaca on the Vorlich field. The grounds in this case are that proper process has not been followed but is clearly another attempt to stop a development: the challenge was rejected by the Court of Session on 7th October. Interestingly, the Offshore Petroleum Regulator for Environment and Decommissioning (one of the UK offshore regulators) declined to approve the Shell operated Jackdaw development this month. The reasons have not been announced publicly (and OPRED's original objections were detailed and specific) but perhaps this reflects a tougher stance from Government on environmental issues without taking imposing a blanket ban on new field developments.

On the other side, bodies such as Oil and Gas UK and industry stalwarts such as Sir Ian Wood have condemned these efforts to stop developments. Most oil companies publicly recognise the climate emergency and support moves to Net Zero by 2045 or 2050. The Energy Transition Deal signed between industry and the Scottish Government in March endorsed this approach- supporting the energy transition, recognising the short to medium value and necessity of the oil and gas sector and supporting a Just Transition.

In amongst these considerations, we also need to consider the ramifications of the recent partnership deal between the SNP and Green party. Although the oil and gas industry is apparently outside the scope of this deal, it presumably will play into thinking between the two parties. Politically, the SNP are in a very different place from

where they were during the 2014 Referendum Campaign. The claims about the future economic value of the Scottish oil and gas reserves at that time now look implausible. This could give the SNP some cover to change its position on oil and gas. However you look at it, hydrocarbon revenue is not going to be the economic saviour of an independent Scottish economy. However, as recognised by the Energy Transition Deal, the sector still provides three quarters of the UK's energy, supports many well paid jobs throughout the country, and has huge potential value in the green energy transition- be that in offshore engineering capability, carbon capture and storage and capital. It would appear disingenuous of the Scottish Government given the New Deal was only signed in the Spring to suddenly change its position.

As is often the case, there is a lack of reality from many environmentalists about our future sources of energy and more broadly on economic growth. Electrification of as much of our energy supply as possible is the big theme of decarbonisation. We have successfully done this over the last few decades with Scotland leading these efforts in the UK. Offshore wind is becoming increasingly important and cost competitive in Scotland, while globally solar is cost competitive or cheaper than gas (particularly at current prices). However, we are going to require vast amounts more electricity as we electrify our cars, use heat pumps for our houses and electrify industry (for example to produce low carbon steel). And for the hard to electrify sectors, such as HGVs, trains, ferries, older housing, hydrogen looks like the preferred solution. And of course, hydrogen either needs to be formed from electrolysis of water using electricity or SMR from methane gas which requires carbon storage to be net zero (an approach opposed by the environmental lobbies). This transition will cost a lot of money, which will need to be paid for by consumers and taxpayers.

One could of course take the moral high ground (which interestingly I have seen some oil industry stalwarts take)- we are in the midst of a climate emergency and we cannot support any further developments in the UK. However, given the recent gas price hikes which may be repeated this winter, are we seriously proposing on relying on imported gas from Russia, the USA or Middle East during the period of energy transition? This approach does not seem tenable.

And as we move to this low carbon future, it is difficult to see how we can do transition without continued use of oil and gas for at least another couple of decades. Even with the huge growth in renewable electricity, oil and gas currently provides three quarters of the UKs energy requirements plus the invaluable role in the petrochemical and feedstock industries. We could increase our imports but the experience of the last few weeks, with soaring gas prices, shows the importance of domestic supply. Further, new fields are likely to have much lower direct carbon emissions, the potential of electrification and avoids the additional costs and carbon emissions due to transportation from afar.

So, what would be an appropriate, balanced response to the current situation?

First, we have a very robust regulatory regime in the UK. So, we should ensure all new oil and gas fields meet the strict criteria we set, which should include minimising carbon emissions during development and production with a particular focus on methane

leaks. The recent decision on the Jackdaw development seems to demonstrate a tighter regulatory regime. However, within that framework the UK should approve new fields. Does this mean we will still be approving new fields in 20 years time? I think that is unlikely but it is essential now.

Secondly, we should continue to encourage the diverse range of energy transition initiatives- the hydrogen strategy, carbon capture and storage, ammonia production. And as much as possible reinvigorate the Scottish industrial sector which has been very poor in benefiting from the renewable sector in the last ten years.

Thirdly, drive the electrification push as much as possible. Increased low carbon electricity generation is vital to deliver on so much of the energy transition. Offshore wind, tidal and wave, solar (even in Scotland) and nuclear all have a part to play.

And finally, develop a strategy and plan for energy storage in all its forms- from gas storage in decommissioned fields, hydrogen storage in salt caverns, batteries, demand management and the rest. The last few weeks have shown how fragile our energy system is. Huge improvements in storage are required to mitigate future problems.

Stuart Paton is the former CEO of Dana Petroleum plc

We need to focus policy on prevention – Helen Chambers

Originally posted 26 October 2021

[Paul Gray's blog](#) presents some critical challenges to us as we move forward, making an NHS that is fit for purpose for today and not relying on a 1948 or 2019 context. However, perhaps we need to pull back to a broader lens. A reason that the NHS is not where it needs to be is design, structure and function. But if we look with a wider horizon, we come back to the key determinant of ill health. We know realistically that the majority of the NHS is designed to treat illness, not to deliver 'health' to a population. Paul touches on prevention, but far too often we redesign the machine we have, rather than put the time and intensity needed into remodelling a broader system. A decade ago Campbell Christie and his Commission, with sharp clarity, specified the challenges we needed to face to really move on with a prevention agenda. There have been very positive moves in the time since then but not at the radical level required to stop the endless and growing inflow to the NHS. Until we truly tackle this, we are charging the NHS with an impossible task.

It is very easy to agree with a rhetorical position on prevention, but historically we have failed to make the large system changes – which in truth boil down to where money is spent – and have not bitten the bullet to move significant spending out of acute services and into communities.

Through the work of many in the last decade with deep, long-lasting, community-based interventions, we do actually know what works to improve individual and community wellbeing. We can help individuals and communities take the actions that reduce illness and improve broader wellbeing, including the 'wicked issues' Scotland has faced with alcohol and wider substance misuse. We have endless reports and studies that confirm and evidence successful impact. We are not struggling with knowing what to do, but with actually implementing it.

Nearly a decade ago Inspiring Scotland started [Link Up](#), with the belief that the ingredients for lasting change lie in our communities, in the passions, strengths, skills, knowledge and interests of local people. When people are inspired, connected and energised, real and radical change can and does happen.

Since 2012, Link Up has worked with over 27,000 people facing the harshest realities of poverty and disadvantage across Scotland. We have a strong understanding of how to really drive community-led, positive change, once the foundations for human development – self-esteem, confidence and positive relationships – are in place.

It may seem that focusing on self-esteem, confidence, and relationships is too simple an approach. However, if these foundations are well built, with a deliberate focus, and with skilled workers who are well supported and empowered, they have a profound impact helping people turn their lives around. People no longer feel like the passive recipients of external help; instead, they become active agents in their own lives and changemakers within their communities. As that happens, wellbeing improves, and ill health is reduced.

If we continue to view people purely as service users or problems to be solved, where external parties decide on the solutions, then we risk the continued cycles of poverty we have seen over decades. If instead we shift our perspective and allow people to be seen, heard and valued for their whole selves, and support them to take positive steps forward, we will shift the dial significantly in terms of health in our most challenged communities.

Paul mentions the Buurtzorg model. Utilising this disaggregated approach and community empowerment, it is possible to see how an intense community-based response would work hand in hand with NHS reforms at a relatively modest cost, certainly compared with the billions we commit to the NHS.

We do need to pick up Paul's challenges, but this must include the wider prevention agenda and actually work with what we know proves effective in our most challenged communities.

Helen Chambers is the Deputy Chief Executive Inspiring Scotland

Transforming relationships: This places the work of Link Up, and the special contributions it makes to communities across Scotland, front and centre of a narrative whose time has come. People, relationships, and kindness are where the changes are being made – and with people and in communities where the need is greatest
<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Link-Up-2020-report.pdf>

The Place-based Programme Learning Exchange, a collaboration of national organisations that champion 'place' in their practices, has released a report highlighting what works and what doesn't in place-based approaches.
<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/publication/link-up-working-better-together-in-place/>

Building a social care system fit for purpose – Chris Creegan

Originally posted 23 November 2021

Can Holyrood succeed where Westminster is floundering? A vexed question we have become wearingly familiar with north of the border in recent years. But with respect to the future of social care, it is far from fantasy politics.

The Scottish Government's [Programme for Government](#), published in September, indicated it would 'establish a National Care Service, backed by at least 25% more investment in social care over this Parliament.' The government would, it went on, bring forward legislation to enable its creation by June 2022.

Back in September, that seemed a way off. With Christmas rapidly approaching, it is beginning to feel like no time at all. And with [consultation](#) on what legislation might contain recently completed, now is a good time to ask whether the early signs suggest the government can pull it off.

The Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland (CCPS) represents the interests of more than 80 of the most substantial third sector/not for profit providers across the country. Social care reform has been high on its agenda for more than a decade. In 2020, it published [Big Ideas](#) which advanced a detailed exploration of how social care might be planned, purchased, and paid for.

Big Ideas offered four key tests on which proposals for reform could be judged. Do they shift power? Do they increase choice and control? Do they improve accountability and transparency? And finally, do they improve social care sustainability?

Publication proved timely. Not only had Scotland, along with the rest of the world, been plunged into the Covid-19 pandemic, the crisis that came in its wake exposed fault lines in our social care system like never before. It was in that context and with an election looming, that the government commissioned Derek Feeley and a small team of experts to undertake the unenviable task of conducting an [independent review](#) in record time.

The central plank of that review, the establishment of a national care service, was never in doubt. Whatever the wisdom of that precondition, for CCPS, Feeley's team succeeded not only in an impressively comprehensive feat of engagement during lockdown, but also in advancing a compelling case for reform. At the heart of its findings was the basis for a paradigm shift in the delivery of social care – as an investment in, not a burden on, Scottish society. We were heartened too by the recognition it gave to the quality of social care provided by the third sector.

Feeley's team posed questions as well as answers, particularly on the *how* as distinct from the *why* and the *what*. And there were, unsurprisingly, given the pace of the review, gaps in its coverage. The digital and data challenge ahead was just one of note. Alignment to housing support was another.

Nonetheless, CCPS's starting point in assessing the proposals in the government's consultation was, do they match the review's ambition? And while we applauded the government's efforts, regrettably we were left underwhelmed and unconvinced in several key respects.

Chief among our concerns is the absence of any fundamental change to commissioning and procurement practice, without which the new local boards will be hampered from the start. The principle of ethical commissioning is indisputable. But the four tests set out in *Big Ideas* – and the principles set out in the review – demand something bolder than the framework proposed in the consultation. In particular, a shift from price-based competition to values-based collaboration is long overdue.

Of course, any system of commissioning must test the offer of providers. And no one would question the importance of value for money. But competitive tendering has not delivered – it treats social care as a commodity which is inherently unethical.

Second, the proposals lack (or at least appear to lack) a coherent model of change. As far as there is one, it seems to be *control more* and *try harder*. But this will not be enough, and neither will an approach predicated on structures and practices alone.

Any model of change to a public service which is about supporting people must be relational. Of course, the proposals necessarily focused on the technical aspects of change which would need to be incorporated into legislation. But cultural and behavioural change are neither optional nor add-ons.

Third, whatever the merits of the structural changes proposed – and CCPS believes they are workable in principle – much more needs doing to get the balance of national and local accountability right.

The absence of an inclusive national board as recommended by the review is a significant omission. At a local level meanwhile, there is insufficient focus on enabling flexibility. The success of any national care service has to be judged on what happens at a hyper local level – a commitment to person-centred, let alone person-led, care is meaningless otherwise.

CCPS's fourth concern is about co-production. The independent review asserted unambiguously that a new national care service must be co-designed with the people it is designed to support.

Alongside the launch of the consultation, the government announced the establishment of a Social Covenant group made up overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, of people with lived experience of receiving social care. This was a very welcome step, but it will be vital to ensure that the group's contribution is firmly embedded in the process of reform to come.

Indeed, we remain perturbed that too often criticism of the proposed reforms – and this is borne out in some consultation responses – completely neglects the business of social care and the people supported by it.

Finally, the scale of the proposed reform poses yet more questions. Does the government have the capacity and capability to make it happen? Ongoing reform elsewhere has demonstrated this is more than a process question.

And does it have a model of funding which makes it realisable let alone sustainable? Bluntly, considering all of the pledges written into the proposals – the scrapping of eligibility criteria for example – do the sums add up? And where is the investment required to create an equitable and coherent pay policy for all social care workers, and close the gaping hole left by decades of outsourcing? There is much more thinking to do here, as so clearly articulated in Reform Scotland's recent paper, [The Cost of Caring](#). Then there is the question of scope. The government has chosen to respond to a question posed by the independent review by simply throwing a blanket over a host of other functions, most notably children's services. This is far from uncontentious not least given *The Promise* change programme, another flagship reform, already underway.

From the perspective of those whose focus is determinedly on keeping that promise to care experienced children and young people, the extension of scope, without a clear evidence base to support it, poses a serious risk to momentum. At the other end of the telescope, many of those who thought when Feeley reported that adult social care was finally getting the attention it had so long needed are now scratching their heads at the risk of dilution. Is this a double whammy?

We will be exploring what others have said and watching closely as the government commissions its consultation analysis. It will be no small undertaking for the contractor with around 1100 written responses and notes from more than 100 events to capture and distil. As we do so, these concerns will inform our approach to what comes next – along with a critical underlying question.

What is the government actually trying to do here? Is this a plan for a national care service or a national health and care service? Further integration unquestionably matters – but health and social care are not the same thing and cannot be delivered by the same means.

Contrary to media focus, social care is about more than care for older people – huge challenge though that is. A national care service must give expression to the principles of Self Directed Support for disabled people too. Simply absorbing social care into the NHS is not the way to do that.

Public service reform is notoriously difficult. Within two years of Labour's landmark victory in 1997, Tony Blair, who had made it his mission, bemoaned that his back was already scarred from early attempts at reform.

Two years later, Blair's government commissioned the Wanless review of NHS. In her foreword to a [report reflecting on that review 20 years on](#), Jennifer Dixon, Chief Executive of the Health Foundation, notes that the challenge for social care at Westminster is even greater than that for health in the aftermath of Covid-19. There is, she says, no reform strategy *and* an urgent need for investment. It is here, Dixon

says that ‘political leadership, deal-making and creativity’ – all called for by the report’s author Nick Timmins – will be sorely needed to ‘fix social care once and for all’.

Here in Scotland we are also, as Paul Gray argued eloquently in a [recent paper for Reform Scotland](#), at a critical juncture for health and social care. The Scottish Government will need all the things Timmins calls for to respond to it. But first it must ensure it has a coherent reform programme, and on the basis of its current proposals it may need to take a step back before it can go forward.

Building a social care system fit for purpose is a race against time, but it should not be a competition. Yet it is also true that 10 years on from the Dilnot and Christie commissions, Holyrood has a chance to show its mettle and steal a march on Westminster. Whether it will, remains to be seen.

The shift so persuasively argued in Feeley’s review still offers a huge opportunity. But right now, getting its strategy back on track – and building greater consensus in doing so – would be a smart move for the government. The road ahead may be paved with good intention – but it is a long and arduous one too.

Chris Creegan is Associate Director at CCPS

Nairnshire as a model for Integrated Health and Social Care in Scotland and beyond – Alastair Noble

Originally posted 25 November 2021

This article is written in response to [Paul Gray's blog -A Critical Moment for Health and Social Care](#).

All the evidence supports the simple fact that the NHS and social care have been a remarkable success since 1948. We have the fittest elderly population ever and the ability to help many people's social care needs. Taxation is the fairest way to pay for this and we have to show value for money in this.

However, we know we now need to change the model to meet current and future needs.

What do individual patients and their communities need?

They like continuity of care, local services and a feeling of confidence that they are getting the best possible clinical care-balanced against the most certain fact that we all will die.

Above all they like honesty and reality. Covid has reinforced the futility of thinking that big hospitals or big nursing homes can keep people alive forever.

Poverty has been seen as a major contributor to early deaths.

What then is the future model?

Looking at the example of the integrated model used in Nairnshire, it is important that we try and deliver the best care package for each individual and then maximise the community team to ensure that, as much as possible, we identify and intervene early and positively throughout each person's whole life. Early and consistent care has been proven over most conditions to yield the best results.

The best way of describing this multi-agency and multi-disciplinary team is to compare it to Alex Fergusson training and picking the best side possible for every game. The more confident and trusting they are of each other's skills and abilities- the better the outcome. It is a great benefit to the individual patient to have all these different professionals and carers sharing information and knowledge to reach the optimum care package for each individual.

Using both the Community Hospital and the Mental Health Team's approach, we could see a consistent benefit in that joined up thinking way of working.

The use of one building allowed all the staff to work and train together. Hard and soft information was shared to the benefit of all.

The practice still does its own on-call, with one of the community hospital nurses answering the phone out of hours, which has been a massive benefit.

The Community Hospital with the General Practitioner as the medical lead allows continuity of care and delivers the optimum community care package for each individual.

It also has allowed us to deliver first class palliative care either in the hospital, the nursing homes or in the patient's own home. Nearly 80% of our patients are dying in Nairnshire under the Community Care Teams' agreed and supportive care.

Minor injuries are well dealt with using local x-ray, physiotherapy, hydrotherapy and nursing care.

The positive links between the social care team and the health team are obvious to all and especially important around vulnerable families -including where mental health, drug or alcohol problems are present.

Contracts

Nairn has had vast experience of not just the General Medical Services (GMS) contracts but also a wide range of intermediate care contracts. The individual patient does not, and should not care who is employed by which organisation or their terms of service. They want to have the best care package delivered in an integrated and friendly professional manner which meets their current need. We need to commission the whole team approach and prioritise integrated community care. We also need to have maximum local flexibility and the team should go to where suits the patient best rather than try to put them into silos.

Finance

We have long agreed that taxation is the fairest way to pay for Health and Social. If we prioritise Integrated Community Care, we have excellent financial data to confirm that we can deliver this highest quality clinical within our Fair Share Integrated Health and Social Care budget and help to iron out some of the historic funding anomalies.

Place Planning

The Scottish Government using Community Empowerment is committed to delivering Place planning in all localities.

Covid has again identified the differing outcomes depending on relative wealth or poverty. Health and social care cannot solve all the problems – good housing, good education, good jobs and above all a green sustainable environment all can add massively to good health and fewer social problems.

Nairnshire is working hard on this model, and I think Highland and Scotland will benefit greatly if we can make it work and deliver the sustainable and affordable future, we all want to leave as our legacy

Dr Alastair Noble worked as a GP in Nairn and has long supported the old Scottish parish community concept with local accountability and responsibility.

A chance to reshape our approach to bereavement – Donald Macaskill

Originally posted 9 December 2021

Since the start of the pandemic, I have filled 26 notebooks with the stories and reflections of people who have told me about their experiences during this difficult time. As the Chief Executive of Scottish Care, which represents the independent care sector in Scotland, I speak virtually daily to those who deliver care and support and many of those who use services. These 26 diaries detail the many hardships that those people have endured throughout this time. Their stories are often heart-wrenching and sometimes life-affirming, but the accounts which are most painful to read are from those who struggled to cope when someone close to them died. Bereavement runs like a stick of rock through all these accounts, and it is evident that, as a society, we do not support people who have been bereaved as they need us to.

Reading through each of those diaries, I think of the model which describes bereavement like a whirlpool or waterfall. It attempts to portray the chaotic, contradictory nature of grieving and bereavement both as an individual process and a collective societal experience. It does not presuppose that one goes through life gently and smoothly along a river and then suddenly over the edge, crashing into uncertainty and turmoil. Life is much more complicated than that. But what it does capture is the uncertainty of loss, one moment you are bashed against the rocks without hope and direction, the next in the shallows coming to some sort of restoration and calm, only for the river of grieving to pick you up again and make you feel as if you are drowning.

The reason I mention that metaphor is that when I was first asked to join the [UK Commission on Bereavement](#), I had a considerable degree of uncertainty. The Commission was established this year to consider experiences of bereavement in the four countries of the United Kingdom, and to make recommendations for change. The Commission is independent of government and is made up of a group of 15 commissioners who were appointed by a steering group of charities including Marie Curie, Independent Age, the National Bereavement Alliance and Childhood Bereavement Network, Cruse Bereavement Care and the Centre for Mental Health. It is an evidence-based review, and is currently inviting people with personal experience of bereavement to share their stories.

Before I joined the Commission, I had to be reassured that, firstly, this was not just about the experience of bereavement during the pandemic. I am convinced that the stories of those who shared their lives with me in the last 20 months were deeply influenced by longer term failures in our society to adequately support people who had been bereaved before the pandemic. For this reason, even before the pandemic, a group was working to establish and launch the National Bereavement Charter for Adults and Children in Scotland.

I also had to be reassured that the Commission can and will tell the story of four different nations in a way which rings true for each nation.

There are commonalities, of course. Lack of, prioritisation, resource, strategic orientation. But I am convinced that it is only through listening to the experience of people from distinctive communities, nations and regions that we will paint a full, rich, and deep picture of the issues facing bereavement support across these islands.

Every one of us can expect to be bereaved at some point in our lives, but we cannot be as sure that we will receive support that matches our individual needs. If we want to create a society where all those who are touched by death have access to the support that they deserve, it will not happen by accident. The UK Commission on Bereavement offers a unique opportunity to make a real difference to the way we approach bereavement in Scotland, each of us are taking part because we want to see change. It will be a report that strives to effect real change, because, having read the stories of the hundreds of adults and children who have shared their lives with me in the last 20 months and in recent weeks, I am not going to let them down.

But, for the Commission to truly reflect the diversity of experiences across the four islands of the UK, before and throughout the pandemic, we rely on the involvement of people and organisations from across the country. In other words, we need you to not merely be present, but take part in the process.

Help shape the UK Commission on Bereavement by [completing our survey](#) before Friday 31st December, either as an individual or on behalf of your organisation. With your help we can ensure that we learn from these experiences, change the conversation and better support bereaved people.

Donald Macaskill is the Chief Executive of Scottish Care and one of the fifteen Commissioners who make up the UK Commission on Bereavement

