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FOREWORD

Dear friend,
As you'll imagine, with a Holyrood election almost upon us, the past year has been furiously busy for Scotland's leading think tank. We've published research across a range of areas, held events galore, and are in constant conversation with political leaders as they prepare their manifestos. We also changed our name!

Our NHS48 programme, which has drawn in brilliant contributions from experts across the health system, has been one of the highlights of our year. In October, we held a full- day conference in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians Edinburgh and Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland. It was a terrific event, with more than 100 senior clinicians and interested parties in attendance. Speakers included the Auditor General, the Health Secretary and the health spokespeople from all the opposition parties, as well as participants from Denmark and Wales.

We have long been a leading voice on the urgent need to reform Scotland's education system, and our work on this front continues apace. Our Commission on School Reform has been in high demand, meeting with political leaders and publishing a range of ground-breaking research in areas such as the school curriculum, behaviour, indiscipline and absence, and the worrying rise in demand for Additional Support Needs.

We've enjoyed partnering with Phoenix Group and Charlotte Street Partners on our Meet the Leaders series. These have been well-attended evenings, and so far I've interviewed John Swinney, Anas Sarwar, Russell Findlay and Alex Cole-Hamilton.

As the search for economic growth and increased productivity continues, Enlighten has staged a series of brilliant conversations. I recommend my chats with Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli about regional economic growth, Professor Graeme Roy, chair of the Scottish Fiscal Commission, Malcolm Offord about the future of devolution, and our panel discussions about entrepreneurship and the crisis facing the retail sector.

We've also continued to make the case for greater devolution to local government and communities, including the need for directly-elected mayors, and for reforms to higher and further education, as our universities and colleges face ever-greater financial challenges. Having led the debate on university funding, we were pleased to see the Scottish Government finally announce a major review into the issue in December.

Over 20 new articles have appeared in our blog this year, with more to come before the year ends. I'd especially recommend "The Positive Impact of Becoming a 'Mobile Phone Free' School" by Bruce Robertson, "Hard to Get Noticed" by Johann Lamont, "How Scotland Found its Entrepreneurial Compass – Then Lost it Again" by Iain Scott, and "Everyone agrees that Holyrood needs change, so why isn't it changing?" by James Bundy and Stephen Kerr.

Our team – Chris, Alison, Morgan and Rowan - sends you all the very best for the festive season.

Regards,

Chris Deerin
Director of Enlighten

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Building A Genuinely Just Scottish Energy Transition

By Neil Gilmour

Originally Posted on 2nd January 2025

While the Green Energy Transition promises a cleaner, lighter, more sustainable future, as currently designed and implemented in Scotland it treats us as hostage consumers, providing relatively few sustainable skilled jobs and minimal revenue for local and national renewal. Relying upon technocratic advocacy, in the absence of wholesale societal and community "pull", it risks wholesale failure. Without glorifying our industrial past, we can learn profound lessons from it. How can we better ensure a successful energy transition truly works for all Scots?

Just Transition: "Greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind." International Labour Organisation definition

Imagine the following: A few hundred kilometres across the North Sea a poor nation suffered centuries of rapacious extraction and export of its raw materials, fish, timber, iron ore. This impoverished its own population and enriched the foreign players who oversaw this extraction. Norway remained one of the poorest countries in Europe for centuries because of this. Indigenous industries were underdeveloped and marginal.

Fifty years ago, when faced with a new bounty, oil and gas, this nation took a very different path. The single key consideration would be their people, the Norwegians. Despite intense pressure from more experienced foreign players, the entire ecosystem would be designed by Norwegians to ensure Norway and its population flourished. They would directly own the raw resources. And the means of production. And the means of export. They would prioritise the sequence in which resources were developed. And levy higher than average taxation while providing stable, safe conditions for foreign investment. Norwegian supply chains would grow providing high quality sustainable jobs. An Oil Fund would be set up for future generations. Every road, school, university, social housing development, research institute, bridge, tunnel, community would share in the bounty. Irrespective of location. Irrespective of political persuasion. For generations. And generations.

Now imagine Scotland and our green transition. And imagine that rather than the latter enlightened Norwegian route we elected to choose the former exploitative model!

We have designed an entire neoliberal ecosystem which guarantees that that we will not flourish. The control of the generation capacity is vested in the hands of private corporations, many foreign owned. Likewise, our midstream transmission grid is owned by private companies. In both cases we guarantee attractive returns and moderate risks. Taxation is light and flows primarily to Westminster. Scottish supply chains are emaciated and marginal since Scottish content is not mandated. There is no Renewables Fund for future generations. Devolved capacity in ScotWind and the Crown Estate is timidly exercised and the proceeds unsustainably used to plug budget "holes". Communities are blighted by private enterprise export infrastructure while paying some of the highest domestic energy bills in Europe, nationally impoverishing hundreds of thousands.

As capacity grows to supply English markets, Scots net employment and revenue stagnates. *Even when we are more than 100% self-sufficient in renewable electricity generation, we are net zero better off!*

In parallel our indigenous Oil and Gas industry is kicked and battered, unloved, heavily taxed and shedding more quality jobs than Renewables will provide. Grangemouth shudders to a halt with no Plan B.

This is the opposite of fair and inclusive to everyone concerned. It does not create decent work opportunities. It leaves most Scots behind. It doesn't even do much for the global environment.

What's on offer for the future? The British Energy chimera? English carbon capture and storage schemes? Thousands more kilometres of high-tension lines criss-crossing Scotland to ensure the lights stay on in Birmingham and London? Billions more in profits from Scottish windfarms and transmission for private and foreign investors? Billions in manufacturing and fabrication for supply chains beyond our borders? Relentlessly increasing domestic energy bills for Scottish consumers, irrespective of any "promises" that Ed Miliband plucks from his incredible strategy hat. Plus, a political and social backlash as seen across Europe, most recently in the wipeout of the Greens in Ireland. A combination of climate scepticism, online trolling and huge push-back on costs and "benefits" makes progress challenging or even impossible in some cases. And even more shrill technocratic advocacy will not cut it.

Extractive industries like mining and oil and gas frequently carry large risks for host communities and governments. Especially where benefits are blatantly shared unequally. In the best cases, like Norway, the bounty "lifts all boats", is sustainable and equable. In the worst-case corruption, theft, environmental blight and political instability and violence accompany exploitation.

Even in European democracies communities can still be destroyed or be left with terrible legacy issues. Scotland experienced this with the brutal demise of our coal, steel and shipbuilding industries. In the northern Netherlands the giant Groningen gas field exported hundreds of billions of euros worth of gas since the 1960's. It paid hundreds of billions in tax to the Dutch State. But the north of the Netherlands remained the poorest and least developed part of the country. When extraction-related seismicity started it was handled technocratically, dismissively, arrogantly. It grew and grew. Now some 100 000 buildings are damaged. Reparations run likely to many tens of billions. Tens of thousands of lives are blighted, and Groningen is a national scandal. A terrible example of extraction for the benefit of private investors and a distant disinterested government at the expense of the communities living with the resource and export infrastructure.

Without glorifying and becoming unrealistically misty-eyed about Scotland's carbon-fuelled industrial past, we must recognise that in large part it worked for many Scottish workers and businesses alike. When I was a boy miners dug coal which burned in furnaces in the central belt to smelt iron and steel. This went to local car factories and shipyards to build the cars that sat in our streets, and ships which carried passengers and goods all over the world. Almost all of this, warts and all, was in public ownership. When the oil and

gas boom came, tens of thousands of Scots helped fabricate many of the offshore facilities that were positioned over our precious resources. Hundreds of thousands subsequently helped maintain and operate these facilities, deliver the commercial deals underpinning the assets, refine and export the finished products. We were not as wise as the Norwegians, but Scotland's offshore industry was an asset, nonetheless.

This legacy is largely gone. Swept away in waves of privatisation, bankruptcy and deindustrialisation. Japanese and Korean shipyards rose in our wake. Likewise German and Chinese car plants and Danish supply chains for the new renewables industry. Our gas is now largely imported from places like Norway and the US where the producers have become rich.

The green economy is undoubtedly cleaner, lighter, more sustainable than our past. But that's simply not good enough. As sold, it won't renew my local primary school. Or build a better NHS. Or offer enough decent jobs to compensate for the decline in the oil and gas sector. Or pull consumers out of energy poverty. Or allow communities hosting green infrastructure to be treated with respect and to share in the bounty. Or convince many Scots that this is a fair trade-off. Or even make much of a dent in the global climate crisis.

As sold, it will however provide billions in profits for foreign and private investors. And keep London running. And put plenty of money in the pockets of the Crown Estate. And the UK Exchequer. And ensure supply chains outside Scotland flourish. While our indigenous legacy industries are run down, and the online and wider opposition inevitably grows.

We didn't vote for this. It was never explained thus. If it had been offered as such, which of us Scots would have accepted this proposal? But here we are.

It is not too late. We can regroup. We can convene around a genuinely just energy transition that puts all Scots needs and futures at its core. While still growing infrastructure and building capacity. We need to get back to defining our needs. Economic needs. Employment needs. Investment needs. Consumer needs. Community needs. We need to get out of the bad carbon versus good electrons ideological rut. Let's look at our key levers. Do we cooperate more closely with Westminster or do we sword-rattle to get better terms? Do we actively encourage bolshie behaviour to slow some progress and extract improved outcomes? How do we change regulation to focus more upon Scottish jobs and revenue? How do we better balance new versus legacy energy investment? We are not helpless. Nor lacking expertise. So, let's stop behaving like it.

The risk is the strategy wonks line up yet again. More toothless Green Energy papers. More self-serving thousands of words. More delays. Or more technocratic "explaining" and "selling". No thanks.

Better put representative Scots and international voices and experiences and needs at the very centre of our considerations. It would be much better to try three different things:

- Organise a genuinely radical fundamental energy convention for the Scots people, rooted in our collective needs and expectations. This should address shorter and longer timelines. We can build upon the positive democratic Irish Citizens Assembly experiences as a model. Groups of citizens empowered and supported to wrestle with the toughest political and social challenges. And create our equivalent of the “12 Commandments” that defined the core principles governing Norway’s oil and gas future and underpinned eventual wealth for all.

- Benchmark our principles against the green transition status quo. Identify gaps and priorities at strategy, policy, practice levels. Sharpen up our priorities, our costs and our prizes.

- Build negotiation teams selected to fight to close those gaps. A broad mix of skills and experiences, mandated by the convention recommendations. Working with and through existing institutions, but with the right to disrupt and agitate against the current frameworks, so heavily stacked against us.

We don’t need to be independent to do this. We don’t need to be SNP members. We have the bright talented experienced thoughtful people to do all this hard work. Within a broad and deep and informed Scottish coalition. I have no illusions that change will be resisted. Hard and long. Incumbents have much to lose. But not as much as us.

Neil Gilmour is a former energy industry senior executive recently returned to Scotland having led numerous successful world-scale projects.

The Positive Impact of Becoming a 'Mobile Phone Free' School

By Bruce Robertson

Originally published on 17th January 2025

A shorter version of this article appeared in The Daily Mail on 13 February 2025.

Recently, I was delighted to receive the following message from a headteacher of a secondary school in Scotland:

"Thank you for promoting your mobile phone policy at Berwickshire High. It gave us the courage to adopt a very similar model and has made a significant difference to behaviour, wellbeing and learning & teaching in a short time."

This was a great message to read. In August 2020, Berwickshire High School was one of the first schools in Scotland to go 'mobile phone free'. The positive impact has been huge and it is rewarding to know that others are benefiting from what they have learned from Berwickshire High School's success. This article has been written to summarise some of the key points relating to this.

The context of Berwickshire High School

When I started as headteacher of Berwickshire High School in August 2020, the school wasn't in great shape. There had been an inspection the year before, which had resulted in the following evaluations:

Quality indicators	Evaluation
Leadership of change	**unsatisfactory**
Learning, teaching and assessment	**weak**
Raising attainment and achievement	**weak**
Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion	**weak**
Descriptions of the evaluations are available from: How good is our school? (4th edition), Appendix 3: The six-point scale	

In the pre-inspection questionnaire, a significant proportion of students indicated they didn't feel safe or happy at school. For example:

	Strongly agree or agree
I feel safe when I am at school	58%
My school helps me to feel safe	49%
Other young people treat me fairly and with respect	46%
My school deals well with any bullying	23%

Fast forward to the re-inspection visit in 2021 and inspectors reported the following:[

"With strong and supportive leadership from the headteacher, all senior leaders are working effectively with young people and staff to set clear expectations for learning and behaviour... The school environment now provides a calm and orderly context for learning. Almost all young people demonstrate maturity, respect and courtesy in classes, social areas, and the school grounds... Staff and young people report that the school is a more pleasant and rewarding place to learn and that they feel safer."

In the time between inspection visits, there had been a transformation in school ethos, including student behaviour. And yet, most of the staff and students remained the same. What had changed?

In short, the school had established clear policies and procedures for almost all aspects of school life. There was a sense of direction and everyone knew what was expected. This included in relation to mobile phones which were now, effectively, banned in the building. We did this because we wanted students and staff to be happier and for the school to feel safer. Both outcomes have been achieved.

Pre-planning

In the weeks leading up to my first day as headteacher, I met with the depute headteachers to discuss and agree key messages I would be sharing with staff and students on their first day back after the summer holiday. One of the proposals I put on the table was that Berwickshire High School should be a 'mobile-phone free school'. In essence, this would mean that while students would be allowed to bring their phones to school, these wouldn't be allowed to be seen, heard or used in the building at any point during the school day. This meant in lessons, at transitions between lessons, and during morning break and lunch. The reason I didn't propose an all-out ban on students bringing their phones to school were two-fold. Firstly, I felt this would be almost impossible to monitor. Secondly, I suspected we wouldn't get parental buy-in. The 'mobile-free' approach was one that I felt could be implemented very quickly and would be straightforward to enforce. Both proved true.

The only other body I consulted prior to announcing the policy with staff and students was the Parent Council. I met with the chair and explained what we wanted to do and why. He took soundings and confirmed that the Parent Council backed the policy. As with so many of the initiatives Berwickshire High School has introduced, including in relation to curriculum, teaching practice and staff professional development, the successes have come about as a result of being brave, bold and innovative.

Implementation

On my first day as headteacher (which was a staff INSET day), I met with staff and outlined a wide range of proposed policies and procedures relating to student behaviour. Staff recognised the need for swift action, and we implemented these immediately (with some in pilot form). The policy on mobile phones was as follows:

Mobile Phones Policy

1. Berwickshire High School is a 'mobile phone-free school'.
2. While mobile phones can be brought to school, they are not to be seen, heard or used at any time whilst in the school building. This includes at break and lunch times, during transitions, and before the bell goes to mark the start of the school day.
3. If a student breaches this rule, normal school discipline procedures apply.
4. Mobile phones can be used whilst outside.
5. Under no circumstances should phones be used to photograph or film any student or member of staff, without their permission.

Like all the new policies we wrote and implemented in Berwickshire High School, the Mobile Phones Policy was simple and clear. (I have a rule that policies and improvement plans shouldn't be more than two sides of A4.) There were no grey areas.

On the first day students returned to school, I led a series of assemblies in which I introduced myself and, amongst other things, made clear the new rules for the school. One of these was a zero-tolerance approach to students swearing at staff, which had an immediate, positive effect. Another was the new policy on mobile phones.

As you might imagine, not at every student was ecstatically happy about this. However, there was immediate compliance and an instant, positive impact. I believe the reasons were because the rules were clear, and all staff played their part in monitoring and enforcing these. Importantly, staff also led by example – they made sure their mobile phones weren't seen or heard, either.

Impact

If you walk into Berwickshire High School today, it's unusual to see a student using a mobile phone at any time whilst they are in the building. Occasionally, you might see one, but this will almost always be put away instantly with a low-key reminder. More often than not, this will be accompanied by an apology. On the very rare occasions when a student doesn't comply, as the Mobile Phone Policy states, normal school discipline procedures are used. For example, there might be a phone call home. Or, the student might be issued a lunchtime detention. (The introduction of lunchtime and after-school detention systems have also been instrumental in turning around poor standards of student behaviour.)

Because students are no longer allowed to use mobile phones in lessons, they are paying more attention to their teachers, which means they are learning more. Teachers aren't having to spend time telling students to get off their phones as they are teaching. At transitions between lessons, break and lunchtimes, students are talking to each other, rather than sitting with their heads in screens. Although a direct cause-and-effect relationship can sometimes be difficult to evidence, I am convinced that one of the main reasons students report that they are happier at school and that there is significantly less bullying is because of the impact of the mobile phones policy.

Lessons that can be learned

As previously mentioned, Berwickshire High School was one of the first – if not the first –

schools in Scotland to implement a ‘mobile-phone free’ policy. Its effectiveness comes from a combination of clarity and consistency.

For example, I don’t believe it would have been as effective if we’d said students were allowed to use phones in the building during break and lunch times. Similarly, if we’d said certain year groups could use phones but others couldn’t, I don’t believe we’d have achieved the same success. If we had said that it was okay for students to use certain apps or features of phones in lessons, such a calculator, the whole approach would have broken down pretty quickly. Grey areas are usually the fastest route to failure.

Occasionally, I hear people suggest that the reason Berwickshire High School has had such success with its mobile-phone free policy is because all students have a one-to-one device, given to them by the local authority. It is true that they do have these, but we would have implemented the mobile-phone free policy even if they didn’t. Mobile phones and one-to-one devices are not essential to high-quality teaching and learning in school. In my experience, both often get in the way of great teaching and learning in lessons. For example, a teacher might be tempted to get students to learn something by internet research simply because they have instant access to a device that lets them do this. However, as so much educational research evidence tells us, this often isn’t a particular good way for students to learn. If students need a calculator, teachers can let them borrow these. They shouldn’t need to use their mobile phone. Arguments that mobile phones facilitate teaching and learning are usually red herrings.

Summary

The mobile-phone free policy implemented by Berwickshire High School in August 2020 has been transformational and it continues to be extremely effective today, approaching five years on. As proven by other schools that have gone down a similar route, any school can become ‘mobile-phone free’ and achieve similar success. It takes a bit of effort, but the payoff is more than worth it. Standards of behaviour in Berwickshire High School today are up there with the best of any state school in Scotland. The ‘mobile-phone free’ policy has been instrumental in helping achieve this.

Bruce Robertson is the Director of Next Level Educational, an education author and headteacher of Berwickshire High School.

Fixing Scotland's Misleading Education Statistics

By Lindsay Paterson

Originally published on 7th March 2025

The plethora of statistics on Scottish school education that has appeared in the last week is a reminder of how inadequate the current provision is. The First Minister, John Swinney, and the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Russell Findlay, fell into the statistical morass yesterday, as First Minister's Questions deteriorated into a slagging match of dodgy numbers. Reform Scotland has repeatedly pointed out the problems, most recently in its *paper* on what needs to change. Yet nothing does change. Here's a sample of what is wrong and the Scottish Government's panglossic media claims to the contrary:

The Scottish government says: '95.7 per cent of 2023-24 school leavers were in a positive destination'.

This is good news only if we accept the undifferentiated definition of 'positive', as 'higher education, further education, training, employment, voluntary work, [or] Personal Skills Development'. Employment can be anything from a stable, full-time job with good prospects to a zero-hours arrangement with no actual contract and no offer of training or any other kind of career advice. 'Personal Skills Development' is too amorphous to be meaningful – any activity to 'improve employability'. The data are collected vicariously (via Skills Development Scotland) rather than directly from the leavers themselves. Setting these vague categories aside, we find that only 71% of leavers were in the only three destinations here that have any kind of quality assurance – higher and further education, and training. The percentage in these destinations was as low as 62% of people who left school after fourth year (the number of which is itself rising). The chasm between these percentages and the 95.7% implicitly cited by Mr Swinney yesterday left open the space for Mr Findlay to propose that the students who occupy that dark hole would be better not in school at all.

The Scottish government says: '57.4 per cent of school leavers left with 1 pass or more at SCQF Level 6 or better'.

Level 6 means Highers but also anything else that is classified as being at that level, such as national units (which are essentially bits of Highers courses), national progression awards, Scottish Vocational Qualifications at (confusingly) Level 3, and much more. Many of these non-Highers qualifications are valuable, but they are not Highers. Specifically, the highest-status university courses will not accept them as part of entry qualifications. Why doesn't the government sub-divide this information into these more meaningful components? If they did, then Mr Findlay would have to recognise that there are courses in school – such as the Foundation Apprenticeships – which do serve the non-academic students quite well. But the Scottish government can hardly complain about his assault on their policies when they don't provide comprehensive statistical information about their operation.

The Scottish government says: 'The gap between the proportion of school leavers from the most and least deprived [fifths of] areas attaining 1 pass or more at SCQF Level 6 or better was 38.4 percentage points'.

This gap is enormous, but expressed like that is almost wholly uninformative in an educational useful way. The importance of the gap depends on the baseline. For students who did not get beyond level 6, the gap is 44 against 31, so that the advantaged proportion is about 1.4 times the disadvantaged proportion. For those who reached level 7, the advantaged percentage is 34 against 9 for the disadvantaged, which is a smaller gap in an absolute sense but better expressed as nearly four times greater. These re-calculations can of course be done by the reader of the statistical tables, although it would be more helpful if some inkling of them were given in the headlines. More serious is the absence of longitudinal data that would explain why the gap widens so much between courses mainly taken in school fifth year and those taken a year after. More generally, the absence of longitudinal data of this kind makes all these statistics quite useless in a pedagogical sense.

Part of the problem is also the inadequacy of the measure 'deprived area'. It is not a valid measure for individual students. Around one half of families with low income do not live in the most deprived fifth of neighbourhoods as measured by the SIMD. So these statistics that seem to show us something about the impact of social inequality on attainment give us no evidence about what works in helping young people in different circumstances.
In the same vein, infecting all the statistics here is the complete invisibility of pupils at independent schools: in Scotland, the official picture simply pretends that they don't exist. It is as if having parents who are wealthy enough to afford a place at an independent school deprives a student of membership of Scottish society.

Deprivation is not the only unsatisfactorily measured social characteristic. Another is ethnicity. On this, the Scottish government choses to say nothing at all in the form of a headline, which is itself rather surprising when groups generally called 'minority ethnic' constitute about *10%* of all pupils in local authority schools. Scottish statisticians still stick with the rather dated ethnic categories that have been used for decades. These are becoming far too crude for a society that is increasingly diverse. For example, the proportion gaining at least one pass at level 6 was 84% in the category which the Scottish datasets call 'African/Black/Caribbean'. In the 'white – Scottish' category, it was 65%. The conclusion might seem straightforward: black students are doing better than white students. But the inadequacy of this may be seen from the better data on ethnicity in England. There, it is clear now that 'African' and 'Caribbean' measure very different educational experiences. In GCSE, for example, consider the proportion gaining an award at Grade 4 or better (analogous to a National 5 pass at levels A-C). Among students labelled 'African', that proportion was 69%, but for students labelled 'Caribbean' it was 52%. Students classified as 'white British' had 64%, and so any inferences that might be drawn about ethnic disparities are complex (as has often been pointed out). There is no reason to expect the patterns to be much different in Scotland. The Scottish data environment still does not seem to have learnt that crude ethnic labels can conceal as much as they reveal.

These are merely a few topical examples to illustrate the annual disappointment of Scottish educational data. Official statistics ought to give us insights into how our society is changing, and how the public services are contributing to that. In Scottish education, such illumination is still far away.

Lindsay Paterson is Professor Emeritus of Education Policy at the University of Edinburgh

Hard to Get Noticed

By Johann Lamont

Originally published on 20th March 2025

We are not short of eye-catching headlines in Scotland: “Ferries launched with painted-on windows but not in service”; “Rapists in women’s prisons”; “Cats to be banned”.

You can understand then why an opposition politician – in this case Russell Findlay, the Tory leader and erstwhile tabloid journalist – might reach for a bit of shock-and-awe policy to get noticed.

At a Reform Scotland event this month, Mr Findlay called for a reduction in the school leaving age to 14. With a speed rarely associated with the SNP Scottish Government in addressing the crisis in our public services, ministers denounced the idea. It was not long before talk of chimney sweep opportunities for urchins and children being endangered in the dark Satanic mills of modern industry filled the air. As night follows day, this attention-seeking policy option sparked for a debate about what is to be done for our young people. We were instantly back to evidence-free platitudes and anodyne general concern – much to everyone’s relief. The leaving age policy may never be raised again except as a chance to deride the Scottish Tory leader as a modern day Gradgrind.

This is a tale that reflects so much of what passes for political debate in Scotland. Fun, I guess, for those who get to do the denouncing. But thinking is sacrificed.

For the avoidance of doubt, I do not support the reduction of the school leaving age and believe we need to invest in education and our public services so that all our young people can thrive and achieve their potential. But the current approach to ‘debate’ brings a heavy cost, for it obscures the perilous nature of Scottish education. And it hides the long-term consequences for all too many from a Scottish Government which would score A+ for assertion but is in utter failure territory for delivery.

The attainment gap in Scotland remains a scandal of lost chances, with many young people now leaving with few or no qualifications. While the school leaving age remains at 16, the truth is that all too many of our young people have effectively dropped out of school by the time they are 14. The stripping away of the scaffolding around compulsory education – attendance officers, home links workers, in-school support for those affected by family circumstances or learning needs – has had a profound impact. As with so much of public policy in modern Scotland, compulsory education until 16 is largely theoretical.

And in the eagerness to attack, the Scottish Government misses the opportunity to learn from past action. It was only about two minutes ago that there was cross party support for pre-apprenticeship schemes and the use of college as a means of diverting young people who were in danger of falling out of education altogether into learning paths that allowed them to flourish. Those initiatives floundered for a lack of funding and a lack of seriousness amongst those in government who, evidence would suggest, were off hunting a new shiny toy to hold up to the sun.

While these serious times require thoughtfulness and rigour, we have instead what seems closer to wilful amnesia, the hunting down of the dividing line and the denunciatory soundbite.

If it were a game, I guess we could just withdraw and watch the football. But the sheer wastefulness of time and resources in the pursuit of non-arguments should be an affront. Young people, and most particularly those from poorer backgrounds, disproportionately hit by the fallout from lockdown, now are denied future hope by the indulgence of knockabout masquerading as politics.

We should insist questions are answered.

What can we do – must we do – to restore Scottish education and give our young people a chance and our society the benefits of their talents?

Answers on both sides of the paper and leave the slogans for those selling beans.

Johann Lamont was leader of Scottish Labour from 2011 to 2014, and an MSP between 1999 and 2021. She is a member of Reform Scotland's Commission on School Reform

Can Community Wealth Building change the conversation?

By Naomi Mason

Originally published on 17th April 2025

There has been some excitement in the Scottish policy landscape over the last few weeks with the introduction of (a long awaited) Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill. While it may not sound that exciting, as the first legislation of its kind in the world, this is actually a big deal.

But what is Community Wealth Building, and why does it matter? I am going to use this article to set out the nuts and bolts, explore the implications of this new legislation and look to the future. First, though, I'll explain who the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) are. CLES are the national organisation for local economies. We have been working for nearly 40 years supporting places to understand how they can make their local economies more resilient. We pioneered the development of Community Wealth Building in the UK, following on from work in the US and, nowadays, we work across the UK and Europe to support places to take a Community Wealth Building lens to their local economies. We work with places to instigate and enable change and are proactive in supporting them to develop economic strategies and activities which suit their challenges and opportunities and which deliver for their people. Here in Scotland we have been active for many years as Community Wealth Building has become more established, first in our places and now in government legislation.

Before I get into Community Wealth Building, I'll set the scene for why we need to take a new approach. We have an economy which currently prioritises economic growth, delivered via external private capital. We are told that more growth will reduce inequality and pay for public services. Yet, despite our relentless pursuit of growth, in recent decades the UK has seen dramatic rises in poverty levels, business uncertainty and an escalating climate crisis. It is clear, then, that economic growth alone cannot be relied on to tackle these issues.

Community Wealth Building works on the principle that, instead of relying on attracting capital investment to solve all of our local challenges, we need to rethink how we'd like our economy to function. We need to set goals and targets we'd like the economy to help us to meet, goals which go beyond growth and are based on local needs and challenges, like reducing in-work poverty or poor local supply chains for essential services. To do this, we need to make use of the wealth that is already within our economies and flowing through our places – harnessing it to support those who need it most. That is not to say we don't want or need economic growth in places, but that it should not be the sole aim and focus of economic strategies – we need to be clear about where we want the benefits to be seen.

Community Wealth Building advocates for a rethinking of how we view our local economies and the levers we can pull within them to retain wealth. Our work has traditionally focused on large organisations known as "anchor institutions" – the NHS, councils, colleges, universities and housing associations, among others. These organisations are rooted in their places and committed to local communities and – crucially – they employ, spend and own assets at scale. Collectively the public sector in

Scotland spent £16.6bn in 2022-2023 of which £8.9bn was spent in Scotland alone. Our public sector organisations can have a huge role to play in creating economies which work for us all, particularly through the formation of anchor institution networks. These networks enable organisations to come together on either a local or regional level to discuss challenges and consider how they can adapt their practices to address them.

There are also important roles for the private and third sectors in Community Wealth Building. More and more organisations across all sectors in Scotland are taking up the narrative of Community Wealth Building and articulating how they are supporting their people and places through their activity. Community anchor organisations are equally rooted in their place and can shape their local economies and the private sector, too, can play a huge role in Community Wealth Building.

In practice, Community Wealth Building centres around setting a vision for change and then using five levers of activity to help meet this vision. The levers are:

- Progressive procurement of goods and services – who and where we buy goods and services from
- Fair employment – ensuring good working conditions, fair pay and representation
- Socially just use of land and assets – how can communities have access to, or more ownership of local assets in their places
- Making financial power work for local places – how can local wealth be harnessed and redirected to local areas
- Shared ownership of the economy – building a stronger ecosystem of more generative enterprises which support local people and places.

These activities should not be considered in isolation. Instead, where institutions focus on the outcome they are trying to achieve and then use the lens of Community Wealth Building to get there, some really exciting and creative interplay of these levers can be found.

In Scotland, North Ayrshire Council was the first place to adopt a Community Wealth Building approach in 2020. Following on from this, five pilot areas were supported by the Scottish Government to focus their attention on taking forward elements of it in their planning – Clackmannanshire Council, Fife Council, The Western Isles, Glasgow City Region and the South of Scotland. In the years since then, other Scottish local authorities, NHS Scotland and some in the third and private sector have all begun to think about how they can use their economic power to better shape the places they work within.

We've seen evidence from places the length and breadth of the country that taking a Community Wealth Building approach can have positive impacts, but the most profound research comes from a study conducted in Preston. The Council there has been on a Community Wealth Building journey since 2012 and research published in the Lancet in 2023 showed a direct link between taking a Community Wealth Building approach and an increase in physical and mental health and wellbeing. More examples of Community Wealth Building activity can be found on the CLES website as well as case studies showing local impact.

The newly proposed Community Wealth Building legislation sets the intention of the Scottish Government that the approach will “reduce economic and wealth inequality between individuals and communities in and across Scotland” as well as “support economic growth in and across Scotland”. The mission is a laudable one, and sets the scene for how Community Wealth Building can be delivered. It also links back to the National Strategy for Economic Transformation where taking a Community Wealth Building approach is linked directly to the aim of creating “A Fairer More Equal Society”.

The proposed legislation states that the Scottish Government will publish a statement, guidance and require public sector bodies to collaborate to create Community Wealth Building action plans.

The Bill is not perfect. It makes no mention of the private or third sectors, and this is a glaring omission as many in this space are starting to talk about and use Community Wealth Building in their own work and activity. It asks more of an already depleted public sector and it provides no resource to back up the aims. But it is a start. Views are being called for on the Bill at the moment, and as it travels through parliament amendments may well be made.

I, for one, will be watching its progress with interest. The opportunity Community Wealth Building can provide for our places is immense. Encouraging anchor institutions to direct their wealth and energy towards Scotland’s businesses, enterprises and communities could be transformational for our local economies. We need to ensure the public sector is supported to be innovative here. There is much scope for local action to meet local challenges. There is also an opportunity to move beyond solely thinking about economics and foster the links to local democracy, participation and empowerment. An Act which cements these links would be ground-breaking indeed.

Naomi Mason is a Senior Researcher with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies and leads the organisation’s work in Scotland.

The S6 problem?

By Lindsay Paterson and Keir Bloomer

Originally published on 23rd April 2025

In recent weeks the situations at Dundee, Robert Gordon and Edinburgh Universities have once again shone a spotlight on the unsustainable nature of higher education funding in Scotland. As a result, different policy suggestions have been proposed from different quarters, including Reform Scotland's call for a graduate payment.

Others, such as Russell Findlay (leader of the Scottish Conservatives), have raised the issue of whether Scottish universities need any longer to offer a 4-year degree, especially when the norm elsewhere in the UK is three year courses.

While there may be merit in examining this option, we would urge policy makers to ensure that any review of the 4 year degree is linked to discussion about what happens in S6 at school.

In Scotland, pupils who are likely to go on to university tend to sit their main exams at the end of S5, not in their final year of school. Throughout the period since at least the late-1940s, that has often led to questions over how to make the most effective use of the final year of schooling. While this question is usually cast as a problem for schools it was actually created by the universities. It stems from the initial introduction of the 4-year degree in the late-nineteenth century, which itself happened in the face of reluctance to modernise the old degree structure in ways that would have been more consistent with Scottish traditions than with those of Oxford and Cambridge.

The essence of the problem arose when the Scottish universities had to allow specialisation by students in order to enable them to compete with the graduates of Oxford, Cambridge and London, and increasingly also of the newish English universities in the large industrial cities. One of the main arenas of competition was in the new entrance assessments for the UK (and imperial) civil service.

Two options were available. One was to create Honours degrees, but these could not be fitted into the 3 years of the previous degree structure. The other would have been to have followed what became the typical North American pattern, of 3 years of general education and then 1-2 years of specialisation. That option was in fact widely discussed in Scotland, especially by people who resisted what they called anglicisation, but the pressures not to deviate so fundamentally from the English model were too great.

But that then left an anomaly. Entry to the first year had to be at the level of the Highers (after they were inaugurated in 1888), and so had to be lower than what was required at Oxford and Cambridge. As a result, Honours degrees had to be 4 years. The old general degree was re-named the Ordinary degree, which continued to last for 3 years.

So the legacy created by S5 entry was the Ordinary degree. At first, and until after the second world war, Honours were taken only by a minority, and even as late as 1960 two thirds took the Ordinary degree. Until that time, there were no options of advanced learning for school pupils beyond Higher. In other words, of the relatively small number of

young Scots going to university until then, quite a number finished with one year less education than their English contemporaries: 7 at primary, 5 at secondary, and 3 at university, compared to 6 plus 7 plus 3 in England.

Now the reverse is true. The Ordinary Degree collapsed in the 1980s. The standard route through the Scottish education system for an academic pupil then became 7 years in primary, 6 in secondary and a 4 year degree: 17 in all. In England the standard route still takes 16 years. Of course not everyone follows the standard route but the public purse is funding an extra year of education in Scotland.

While in England A-Levels are largely sat in the final year of school, the legacy of this history is that, in Scotland, academically inclined pupils take their highest-stakes exams at the end of S5. Nevertheless, S6 has increasingly been put to better use than it was in the past. It offers a chance to re-take Highers, to sit additional Highers, to pursue more advance study through Advanced Highers, or to develop vocational options. Because this present day 6th year does probably provide a better choice than in the past, both academic and vocational, more students are encouraged to stay on. So the school problem of S6, though still present, is not the main issue. The main issue is the essentially wasted year for students who proceed from S6 to a 4-year degree. We are no nearer to resolving this now than we have ever been in the past eight decades. The greatest danger is that trying to solve it would undermine what has been achieved in schools, for example by trying to make S6 into a university-preparation year, or a surrogate for university first year. If the problem is going to be fixed, the responsibility lies solely with the universities, not the schools.

Lindsay Paterson is Professor Emeritus of Education Policy at the University of Edinburgh and Keir Bloomer is a former director of education. Both are members of the Commission on School Reform.

The Spartacus Problem: Why Poverty Won't Be Fixed One Policy at a Time

By Sean Duffy

Originally published on 28th April 2025

Why Scotland Needs Public Sector Reform that Puts People — Not Programmes — at the Centre

As the Scottish Government consults on the next phase of its child poverty strategy, we welcome the renewed focus on boosting incomes, reducing costs, delivering holistic family support, and helping young people thrive. These are the right ambitions — but financial levers alone are not enough.

At the Wise Group, we know from over 40 years of working alongside people in poverty that raising incomes is essential — but it will not tackle the root causes of exclusion on its own. Poverty isn't just about money — it's about life chances.

Without tackling the structural barriers that prevent people from thriving — poor mental health, fuel poverty, housing insecurity, digital exclusion, low confidence — we risk managing poverty, not preventing it. Preventing poverty requires public sector reform — reform that joins up services around people, invests in relationships not just transactions, and focuses relentlessly on what works.

Poverty is crowded at a policy level

Too often, people experience services not as a safety net, but as a maze.
Households living in poverty are crowded with well-intentioned interventions — welfare assessments, housing appointments, health referrals, employability programmes — all designed in isolation. On paper, the support looks comprehensive. In reality, it's disconnected, duplicative, and exhausting. At a policy level, this looks like progress — but for the person navigating it, it feels like noise.

This is the Spartacus problem of policy making: "I'll fix it"... "No, I'll fix it"... "No, it's me that'll fix it." That's what single-issue policy making creates — disconnected responses to deeply connected lives.

We've spent years trying to define and redefine poverty — when in truth, we know what needs to happen. We need to learn by doing. Act, not talk. Listen and engage with households and communities on what they know needs to change. And we know — from our own data — that poverty never comes through just one lens. For example, people with an energy need are 25% more likely to have a financial support need, 21% more likely to need help with housing, and 14% more likely to need help with physical health than people without an energy need.

This is the reality of life on a low income. The issues are connected — so our response must be too.

We don't need to fix one issue — we need to support the whole person.

A smarter approach: Reform how we deliver support

It's not just about what services we offer — it's about how we offer them.

To move from managing poverty to preventing it, Scotland must now focus on four things:

- Integration: Breaking down silos between local services — particularly in education, health, employability and justice.
- Sustainability: Prioritising long-term, relationship-based, preventative approaches.
- Impact: Directing investment toward approaches that demonstrably change lives — measured not just in outputs, but in outcomes.
- Invest to Save: Preventing poverty costs less than responding to it. Let's fund what works and scale it.

Relational Mentoring: Putting Public Sector Reform into practice

Through support from the Scottish Government, our Relational Mentoring model currently supports families across six local authority areas. We work across 15 areas of need, recognising that no single intervention solves poverty.

Our mentors:

- Act as connectors, guiding people through complex systems and linking them to the right support at the right time.
- Are matched with lived or relatable experience, building trust quickly and engaging people meaningfully.
- Work over time — quick fixes don't work for people who've often been let down by the system before.
- Track progress holistically, not just ticking boxes but evidencing the real journeys people take.

And crucially, our mentors don't replace existing services — they enhance them. They add value, reduce duplication, and create cohesion between disconnected parts of the system.

Our offer to Government: Scale what works

We believe Scotland has a clear opportunity to lead the way on public sector reform.

- Expand Relational Mentoring as a standard offer for families at the sharpest edge of poverty.
- Align investment with outcomes, not outputs, and reward genuine collaboration between services.
- Expand co-location of services in high-need areas — bringing mentoring, health, employability and financial support under one roof.
- Commission for impact, using data to track progress and focus investment on services that improve life chances.

A Call to prioritise the Families who need us most

We know from our own data that the six priority family groups identified by government — lone parents, minority ethnic families, families with disabled members, young mothers, larger families, and families with children under one — respond best to sustained, relational support.

That's why we're asking for a stronger focus on:

- Tailored whole-family employment pathways for groups furthest from the labour market, including those with offending histories.
- Culturally competent support for minority ethnic families.
- Wrap-around advocacy for young parents and those living with long-term exclusion.
- Services that are accessible, local, and designed with those who use them.

Let's move from Crisis to Confidence

Scotland has the ambition, insight, and leadership to make poverty preventable — not inevitable. But financial levers alone won't get us there.

Preventing poverty means reforming the system itself — integrating services that work, investing in trusted relationships, and putting people, not processes, at the centre of delivery.

It's time to reform for prevention.
It's time to scale what works.
It's time to shift the dial — together.

Sean Duffy is Chief Executive of the Wise Group

Edging towards the precipice: the dangers facing social care in Scotland

By Donald Macaskill

Originally published on 2nd June 2025

Just over two weeks ago, the United Kingdom Prime Minister Keir Starmer, delivered a speech whose content, tone and central message has been viewed with dismay by the majority of Scotland's social care sector. The primary focus of the White Paper which his speech outlined is the removal of the designated Care Worker Visa route. In a post-Brexit landscape this Visa has enabled a significant number of Scottish care providers to recruit staff from across the world. This has helped to meet long-term vacancies within the sector.

The initial concerns of the sector upon hearing of Starmer's intention have been further underlined by some recent research which has been undertaken by Scottish Care. A short, focused research questionnaire has detailed the significant extent of vulnerability within the sector. It has stated that perhaps as many as between 28-36% of those working in social care in Scotland are international colleagues. Further it has pointed out that at least 7000 individuals are working under international visas and perhaps even more challengingly that the geographical and organisational make up of international workers at present is a real risk to the sustainability of the delivery of social care in parts of the country. This is because there are a notable number of organisations who have a very high reliance on international staff. The report stated that for 7% of the 298 responding organisations that international workers make up over 90% of their total workforce; 14% have over 75% of their total workforce and 11% had a situation where international staff made up 50-75% of their total workforce. These are geographically critical organisations.

In the weeks that followed Starmer's "island of strangers" speech there has been an attempt to explain why it is important that Scotland needs to continue to attract international workers. The distinctive nature of Scotland's demographic and workforce needs should alone convince Westminster to take a more regional/national and sector specific approach to immigration.

Scotland has an ageing population and increasing demand for social care services as a result both of that ageing population and the well-known health inequalities which scar our population, alongside an ageing workforce presents a very real challenge. Taken together this is evidence of the current and future requirement of attracting people into the country in order to sustain social care provision.

The debate since the Starmer announcement has also advocated the importance of prioritising, equipping and skilling up of an indigenous workforce. Many of these comments have been made without recognition of the continuous and ongoing attempts in this field for many years. In Scotland, not least, there has been a long running campaign to pay staff salaries commensurate with their professionalism and skill. Given most workers, regardless of who they work for, are on Government resourced contracts – the obstacles to better terms and conditions lie squarely with political leadership and their fiscal priorities. Regardless of this, to withdraw a life-line of workforce supply without an alternative, or without a pathway to that alternative through substantial investment in improved terms and conditions, is singularly irresponsible.

The debate has not been helped by the comments from certain politicians which have described social care and its work as being of 'low skill' or indeed being 'unskilled'. This affront to the professionalism of workers who require to be registered and regulated betrays a lack of understanding of the nature of social care. The changes in social care provision not least within the community in the last few years evidence the need of a workforce who deliver low level clinical tasks as well as other key functions which would in a previous era have been the preserve of primary and community health.

The threatened loss of critical social care services in already fragile communities will have almost immediate impact on the wider health economy not least the NHS and indeed on the ability of commerce and industry to function successfully.

One dimension that perhaps has not been as widely considered in the recent debate is the reality that Scotland in and indeed, the United Kingdom as a whole, is not alone in facing shortages of social care staff. There are many countries in Western Europe where there has been significant enhancement to terms and conditions of care staff and yet even these nations have struggled to recruit indigenous populations and have had to rely on attracting international workers.

Globally it is increasingly recognised that there is an existential challenge to developed and developing economies – and that is as a direct result of the shortage of workers willing to commit to careers in aged or social care. Every modern economic system in the western world is reliant upon a social or aged care system that enables economically contributive individuals to be able to work because the care of their family and relatives is supported and delivered by others.

It against the backdrop of such international demand that the negative rhetoric and the actions of the UK Government are so harmful and naïve. In a globally competitive employment market, it is little wonder that providers are already hearing of individual workers choosing other nations rather than Scotland as their destination of choice.
One of the saddest legacies of the last two weeks are the numbers of dedicated professionals who are questioning their own experience of Scotland as a hospitable place because of what they are watching and hearing on their televisions, radios and on social media. Given the essence of care and support is the showing of compassion to others and the bestowing of dignity on all human relationships – these seem to be standards in short supply in the recent discourse both socially and politically.

The people who are being made to feel like strangers in our nation are the amazing women and men who are caring day in and day out for some of our most valued citizens. If nothing else, we need to affirm the presence and to increase the value of those who are already working here – or our likelihood of being able to hold on to these critical colleagues becomes sharply diminished.

I hope that some of the political and advocacy approaches already underway will bear some fruit because without change the reality is one of a dramatic decline of social care provision across Scotland and in some areas in specific the complete removal of support and care. And if social care collapses as a sector the very fabric of our communities soon disintegrates.

Dr Donald Macaskill is the Chief Executive of Scottish Care.

A Wholly Unjust Transition for Aberdeen and the North East

By Neil Gilmour

Originally published on 4th June 2025

On 22 May the Scottish Government sponsored Just Transition Commission published its fourth and final written briefing based upon a "people-and-place approach". The previous three papers focussed upon Grangemouth, Shetland and Dumfries and Galloway. This fourth paper entitled "A Just Transition for Aberdeen and the North East" makes for stark reading. Having conducted two days of reviews, interviews and group discussions the Commission concludes:

- There is no just transition plan for Aberdeen and the North East, particularly for oil and gas workers.
- Deployment of renewables needs to accelerate, and employment therein made more attractive.
- Domestic supply chains are key but emaciated.
- Retraining and skills are essential.
- The Scottish and UK Governments need to cooperate and work seamlessly together
- Most key players are in denial and therefore progress is glacial.

In essence, if this was a report card it's a D. A solid D. This matters a lot because more than 100,000 direct and indirect jobs are risk. And given Scotland's deindustrialisation track record it looks like our wheels are thoroughly stuck in the same old tram tracks as coal…steel…shipbuilding…refining.

The report inevitable has several pages of recommendations. Regrettably these lack three essential things: associated costs; a credible integrated timeframe; and any clear accountabilities.

Even more curiously the report lacks three other key aspects, the realpolitik of Transition if you like:

- Any systematic examination of the key players positions, needs and roles (this crucially needs to address the institutional hostility between Edinburgh and London)
- Any examination of the "money side": costs, the underpinning economic drivers for the status quo, the key players therein, and the desired transition
- Any appraisal of institutional capacity, especially capacity to retrain thousands of workers, build Scottish supply chains, reorient whole complex systems

There are pages of recommendations, albeit sans commercial, political, institutional capacity insights. No timeline. No costs. No specific accountabilities. No integrated road map for the overall journey. It's like trying to embark on a round the world cycling trip with a child's globe as guide.

So, we have deindustrialisation Groundhog Day. This report partly describes what's not working. But elects to shy away from the "why?" and has almost nothing to say in practical terms on how to credibly get our wheels out of the tram tracks.

Meanwhile there is a growing exodus from the sector. Workers unsurprisingly see the writing on the wall (geological as well as this UK and Scottish governmental bourach) and are voting with their feet. Moving to jobs abroad or out of the sector. Key expertise, much of it painstakingly grown over decades, bleeds away. The renewables sector offers a minority potential roles, but this sector offers on average lower wages and cannot conceivably (given the almost wholesale absence of e.g. Scottish manufacturing supply chains) balance the losses from oil and gas.

Transition, indeed transformation, is hellishly difficult on the scale we require in Scotland. It has rarely been affected elsewhere. And our track record in Scotland and the wider UK is pretty grim. Just to get properly started, as a minimum this requires a few fundamentals to be fixed:

- Strategic alignment as UK and Scottish Government levels and a deep commitment to work together towards common medium and long-term goals. These goals to be set within joint road maps. And road maps to be "live", fully costed, credible and public.
- Creation of integrated, empowered, well-staffed joint teams to work on multiple key aspects of the transition (e.g. technical, fiscal, environmental, supply chain, skills, costs)
- Broad and deep discussion with local communities, worker and employer groups about "the how" (and their role therein in creating success)
- Appointment of senior figures with broad industry and political credibility (and staying power) to oversee the key chunks of policy development and implementation

None of these are currently in place. Not in Holyrood. Not in Westminster. Not in GB Energy. Not in the Just Transition Commission. What do we have instead? Hundreds of position papers, blogs, media pieces, tweets. Endless commentary (like this I suppose), very little of which is of any practical use whatsoever.

What's really the problem here? Governments don't know how to tackle this level of complexity? We don't really care about oil and gas workers when push comes to shove? There is a plan...it's just not finished? Or in the public domain?

The Transition Commission's summary is about right. There is no credible plan. If this was a fire smoke is already belching from under door. We can hear the flames crackling. The heat is becoming intense. Meanwhile we are standing nearby. Observing. Writing about how severe the fire is becoming. Blogging about it. Tweeting about it. Wringing our hands about it. While the precious industry burns down right before our eyes.

This is the vacuum in which political insurgents flourish. That hopeless, impotent, angry place. Where uncertainty, rumour and inequity are rife. Where "wait for the experts to sort this out" or "the government cavalry will come charging over the horizon" doesn't work (or happen). Where multitudes lose their jobs, and their families their main source of income. Where poverty and inequality grow. Our industrial past falls apart, unloved, uncared for, and even despised by some of those with an eye on a "cleaner future". Lochaber. Sutherland. Bathgate. Linwood. Methil. Irvine. Grangemouth. Aberdeen?

I had hoped for better. Aberdeen and the North East (and Scotland more generally) deserve better. There is plenty of expertise around to fill out the huge gaps here. However, I'm not sure there's any Scottish or UK political appetite or capacity to deal with the current complex and highly challenging reality. That wouldn't matter were it not tens of thousands of jobs and a big chunk of our economy are inexorably hurtling towards the scrap heap.

This is negligence at best. Rank cowardice at worst. We can and need to do a great deal better than this. I am just not sure where the Just Transition Fire Service are. Or who they are. Or whether anyone has even picked their eyes up from X and actually called 999.

Neil Gilmour is a former energy industry senior executive recently returned to Scotland having led numerous successful world-scale projects.

Together in Electric Dreams?

By Stuart Paton

Originally published on 23rd June 2025

The UK government recently made a headline grabbing statement on energy – backing the Sizewell C nuclear plant with £14 billion, plus commitments to Small Modular Reactors (SMR) and fusion technology. However, despite these decisive steps, energy policy and the energy market in Scotland and the UK are broken. Although some of this is due to geopolitical issues, there are also significant policy issues. I want to highlight three areas in particular. First, the promise of ever increasing generation of renewable electricity is being challenged due to increasing costs and public backlash. Secondly, the domestic oil and gas industry is being hammered by the Labour government's approach to domestic oil and gas. Thirdly, and most importantly, continuing high electricity prices are impacting on UK households and industry leading to populist politicians questioning New Zero. Fundamentally, the promises of renewable energy being introduced through a 'Just Transition' that will automatically lead to new jobs and lower energy costs are not coming to fruition.

There are key structural elements in the UK energy market that do not work. Most critically, the electricity price is set by the last therm generated which, about 80% of the time in the UK, is from gas. Therefore, there is an intimate link between the gas price and electricity price which means that the notionally lower price of renewables are not being seen by consumers.

This is the key reason why electricity prices remain high in the UK. To be clear, this is a feature of the system not a bug- it ensures that we should always be producing enough electricity as there will always be gas generators available to generate the final therm at a price that makes economic sense for them. In time, this issue should decrease. As more interconnectors are installed from the north of Scotland to east of England, as currently under construction by National Grid and the Scottish operators, renewables will be able to deliver more of the time. Storage capacity will also come onstream- be that pumped hydro storage, including plans to upgrade Cruachan and newer schemes in the Highlands, or battery storage. California essentially shows the future in this regard- enormous generation of solar during the day fills batteries which are then discharged in the evening and overnight.

A second live issue is 'zonal pricing'. Under this proposal, the UK would be split in to a number of regions. If there is excess generation in a region which cannot be exported consumers in this area would get cheaper electricity and vice versa. Zonal pricing should reduce curtailment charges and drive investment in new generating capacity to areas with higher prices (eg new nuclear power stations in the south of England) and new consumers to areas with lower prices (eg new data centres in Inverness). Some people in the industry, in particular the CEO of Octopus Energy, are strongly advocating this in support of consumer rights. Many of the incumbent generators and companies with plans for large developments are vehemently against it. Although it has not yet had much publicity, I assume there will be some pressure (?!) against the concept in the south of England which is likely, at least in the short term, to see higher prices. And, in time, if the market works properly, this approach will decimate the renewable industry in Scotland without even greater investment in grid infrastructure or storage. The proposals are therefore highly contentious in the industry.

The growth of renewable electricity generation over the last few years has been remarkable. According to the SNP government, Scotland now generates more than 100% of its total electricity consumption from renewables. A better figure is that in 2024, renewables accounted for 70% of Scotland's total electricity generation with about 40% of the total electricity generated exported to England and Ireland. Despite the SNP claims, Scotland still relies on base load nuclear generation and imports from England because the wind doesn't blow all the time. Further, as is widely known, huge amounts of money (£500 million year to date in 2025 according to a study by Octopus) are paid to generators in curtailment charges when there is an overcapacity of generation in the system. These issues could become a key factor in the Holyrood elections next year particularly in rural communities facing an onslaught of wind farm proposals with locals realising that most of the new generation will either be exported or shut in as there is insufficient grid capacity.

The removal of coal from UK electricity generation is the most important factor in the UK's reduction in CO2 emissions in the last 30 years. For many years, this was driven by the replacement of coal by gas but has more recently been due to the huge increase in wind and solar generation. The last few years have seen a huge expansion in offshore wind. The last licencing round, Allocation Round 6 in 2024, had bidders for 9.6GW of capacity- this is against a current total of about 75GW. However, very significant increases in costs are meaning that developers' economics are being challenged. Within the last few weeks, Oersted announced that they will not be progressing their Hornsea 4 wind development offshore Yorkshire- one of the largest windfarm developments in the world. This development was underpinned by a Contract For Difference (CFD), awarded in September 2024, which provides guaranteed electricity prices to the developer. However, very significant cost increases in the sector have led to decisions such as that on Hornsea 4 and likely on other developments. There will presumably be less impact on onshore developments which are much lower cost- but which are also likely to foment much more local opposition. In principle, renewable electricity should be cheaper than gas or nuclear generation- the cost of the inputs are free- and not subject to variable international commodity prices. However, due to capital costs increases, the requirements for storage- as the wind doesn't blow the whole time- and essential upgrades to the grid, consumers are not yet seeing cheaper electricity.

Another fundamental energy issue is the impact of Energy Profit Levy (EPL) on the North Sea oil industry. The EPL, which is a marginal tax rate of 78%, was introduced as a windfall tax when oil and gas prices were substantially higher. Although certain capital allowances were retained at the last budget, the tax rates are crippling for new capital expenditure. There have been substantial job losses over the last few months at a number of the large operators- not necessarily the household names but the companies which now dominate the North Sea industry. Uncertainty about licencing and field development approvals have also led to a haemorrhaging of capital investment. The Labour government has removed some clarity last week by providing guidance on how developers should account for downstream, or Scope 3 emissions. However, there still remains significant uncertainty on the actual approval of these projects and on oil and gas licensing generally. This framework of general unfriendliness to the industry is in contrast to other countries, including the Netherlands and New Zealand, which have backtracked on their previous de facto bans, and near neighbour Norway which is maximising its production. Last week Centrica signed a deal with Equinor to import £20 billion of gas over the next 10 years.

Only a small proportion of this gas could be produced in the UK- however, even a small proportion would be helpful for the UK Treasury, UK jobs and UK shareholders. Noone in the industry is pretending that the UK oil and gas industry will ever be the scale it was 20 years ago. However, they are pointing out that it seems ludicrous to be importing increasing volumes of oil and gas from international markets including Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) from countries like the USA, Qatar and Peru, which have significantly higher CO2 emissions related to transportation than North Sea produced gas. The Scottish government talks about a 'Just Transition' but there seems to be nothing 'just' about prematurely curtailing UK oil and gas production while replacing this with imported gas and oil. The UK government is considering changes to the regime but there does not seem to be the necessary urgency.

The combination of all these factors, with a dose of blatant political opportunism, are placing the Net Zero commitment of the Scottish and UK governments in the cross hairs of right wing parties and populists questioning the principle of Net Zero in its totality or at a minimum questioning the timeframes. Even the Tony Blair Foundation seemed to get in on the act with the headlines around their recent publication stating that current net zero policies are 'doomed to fail'- although in this case the headlines missed the key points of an incredibly well thought out set of proposals which do not in any way question the need to tackle climate change. And who can blame people? Households are seeing ongoing high energy costs because we still link the electricity price to gas price. UK industry is saddled with the most expensive electricity in Europe. Local communities throughout Scotland are facing proposals for windfarms and electricity pylons to export electricity to England while seeing little benefit. This is compounded by the Scottish government stating that renewables are the new North Sea- with the key differences being the number of jobs created during the supposed 'Just Transition', most of the infrastructure for the oil and gas industry being hundreds of miles offshore rather than back gardens in Angus and unspoilt Highland glens, and that we actually still need North Sea oil and gas.

However, what consumers are not yet seeing is reduced electricity prices as a result of supposedly cheaper forms of generation. Why would local people agree to new windfarms or huge electricity pylons when they know the electricity is being exported south and they are not seeing cheaper electricity bills? No Scottish manufacturing of wind turbines- so where are the just transition jobs actually going to come from?

So what can be done? Well, a positive conclusion is that most of the issues and problems I have highlighted can be solved by policy interventions rather than tricky new technology- albeit policy interventions requiring a huge amount of investment.

From a Scottish perspective, the government needs to get real about the 'Just Transition'. As my colleague Neil Gilmour wrote on this forum recently, the report from the Just Transition Commission has 'No timeline. No costs. No specific accountabilities. No integrated road map for the overall journey.' It is therefore doomed to failure. Enlighten have previously highlighted the plethora of targets, strategies and initiatives from the Scottish government which do no link up. The Scottish Government need a reality check.

Secondly, the Scottish Government, working with Scottish SNP and Labour MPs (and indeed Conservatives MPs & MSPs), must be much more forthright with the Westminster

government about the North Sea oil industry. It is difficult to identify another sector which can demonstrate highly paid jobs, UK capital investment, tax revenue, reduced import costs and lower carbon emissions for the next twenty years. The current consultation has to result in a new tax structure and licencing framework which will be implemented very quickly to protect the industry.

The Scottish government needs to think realistically about base load electricity generation. Although supposedly self-sufficient in renewable electricity, Scotland still relies on base load capacity from Torness nuclear power station and imports from England. The UK government has committed to nuclear plants at Sizewell and investment in Small Modular Reactors and fusion to underpin the base load capacity and Ed Milliband, UK Energy Secretary' has stated that he sees no reason why there shouldn't be nuclear in Scotland. Although principally involved in planning decisions, the Scottish government should support the UK position. The construction of new nuclear capacity at existing sites at either Torness or Hunterston, close to Scottish population centres with grid connections would be transformational for the Scottish energy system. The Scottish university sector, with its own severe financial challenges, would benefit from a resurgence in nuclear engineering requirements. Scotland currently generates more electricity than it uses. However, much of this is in wrong place- requiring huge impact on remote parts of the country and transmission lines to the population centres. Better to place the generation close to the central belt.

The UK government needs to redesign the electricity market to a system which will lower prices in the short to medium term. Disconnecting the electricity price from the gas price, as is the case in other countries, would be a first step. Zonal pricing may be a short term fix to placate some objectors who see local windfarm developments but do not see the benefit of local pricing and may also encourage local businesses. However, it would also have a devastating effect on the renewable sector in Scotland. At a minimum, the UK Government should publish its Review of the Energy Markets as soon as possible to remove ongoing uncertainties from the sector.

The single most important way to achieve Net Zero in the UK is electrification of everything that can be electrified- home heating, transport, industry. This requires investment in generation, storage and transmission. However, as Enlighten have written previously, even more important is the hearts and mind campaign to demonstrate to individuals that this energy can be delivered reliably but cheaper than currently, into a daily experience similar to how people live now. It still strikes me as amazing that the need for change- to electric cars and heat pumps, district heating projects, demand side management, domestic generation and storage of electricity, improved domestic insulation- are still geeky, niche topics much like homemade yoghurt in the 1970s. Until these interventions and solutions become mainstream, alongside the policy changes outlined above, we are not going to have a chance of delivering Net Zero.

Stuart Paton is an energy industry advisor and former Chief Executive of Dana Petroleum. He is also an associate of Enlighten.

Reimagining Primary Maths Education in Scotland Through Journaling: An Innovative and Transformational Pedagogy

By Holly Drummond & Kirsten Fenton

Originally published on 11th August 2025

Scotland has long held a proud tradition of educational innovation and leadership, yet in recent years, concerns have grown over declining attainment in mathematics among children and young people as well as a decline in PISA standings and outcomes for learners in exam years. Despite ongoing efforts, national and international benchmarks continue to reflect a troubling trend—persistent gaps in numeracy skills, widening disparities in achievement and a growing population of learners who develop maths anxiety at an increasingly early age. More than a crisis of performance, these issues point to deeper pedagogical and philosophical questions about how we approach mathematics education and how we can equip Scotland's children for their world of tomorrow.

The Big Issues

At the heart of this is the fragile mathematical identity that too many children internalise from a young age. When students feel they are either "good" or "bad" at maths—often based on speed, memorisation or external validation from correct answers—they can become disempowered, disengaged and ultimately alienated from the subject. This identity is often reinforced by societal attitudes that treat mathematical ability as innate, inherited, or fixed. Comments like "I'm just not good at maths" are commonplace among adults, including teachers and parents, inadvertently shaping how children perceive their own potential. Maths anxiety, which is becoming more widely recognised and studied, emerges early and impacts not only performance but also long-term confidence and willingness to engage with numeracy in everyday life.

Another pressing issue is the disconnection of maths from other areas of learning. While Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence aspires to be interdisciplinary, in practice, maths is frequently siloed from the rich contexts in which numeracy naturally occurs—science, art, social studies, even storytelling. This separation contributes to a perception of maths as abstract, irrelevant, or inaccessible. Children are often denied the opportunity to use mathematical thinking as a tool for making sense of the world, or to see its application in creative, collaborative, or exploratory contexts.

What's the alternative?

To address these challenges, a shift is needed—not only in methodology, but in the underlying philosophy that informs how we teach and learn maths. Central to this shift is the recognition that mathematics is a language, and like every language, it must be taught, spoken, practised, explored, written and reflected upon to be truly understood. This is where journaling offers a radical, research-informed and inclusive approach that meets the needs of 21st-century learners.

Journaling in mathematics invites children to explain their thinking, reflect on strategies, and engage metacognitively with their learning. It highlights oracy and disciplinary literacy (currently relatively absent within Scottish education)—not simply as add-ons to the curriculum, but as essential tools for mathematics as meaning. Through writing and talking, learners come to understand that there are multiple ways to approach a problem,

that mistakes are opportunities for insight and that reasoning can be as valuable as a correct answer. It creates space for pupils to connect mathematical concepts with their own experiences, fostering deeper understanding and personal knowledge of their own identities as learners.

This approach also aligns closely with insights from cognitive science on how children learn. Research shows that learners benefit from retrieval practice, elaboration and metacognitive reflection—techniques naturally embedded in journaling. By articulating their reasoning, revisiting prior knowledge and tracking their growth over time, children strengthen neural connections and develop a more coherent, integrated understanding of mathematical ideas. Crucially, journaling supports formative assessment, offering educators rich insight into learners' thought processes, misconceptions and emerging strengths, allowing for more adaptive and responsive teaching. Writing engages multiple cognitive pathways which helps consolidate learning in long-term memory, while explicit teaching of vocabulary and the use of stem sentences decode "the secret language" of maths for learners.

Moreover, the act of journaling supports equity. Traditional approaches to maths often privilege speed and procedural accuracy, inadvertently marginalising learners who may process differently, use alternative strategies, or need more time to think. Journaling democratises the classroom, valuing each learner's voice and way of knowing. It provides a platform, particularly for those who may struggle, to contribute thoughtfully and meaningfully. It also helps challenge assumptions about who is "good at maths" by making mathematical thinking visible and valued in diverse forms, personalised for each individual learner.

A Vision for Change

This pedagogical shift holds promise not just for individual classrooms but for national renewal. As Scotland seeks to redefine its role on the international education stage, there is a compelling opportunity to reclaim leadership by embedding a philosophy of inclusive, interdisciplinary and research-informed maths pedagogy. By embracing journaling as a core strategy, Scotland can pioneer a practice that is both grounded in the science of learning and animated by the values of equity, inclusion and curiosity.

The ambition to equip learners with the meta-skills needed for future success—collaboration, critical thinking, creativity and communication—cannot be realised if we do not radically rethink how we approach core subjects like mathematics. Journaling fosters all these skills. It helps learners build resilience by working through challenges, develop adaptability by testing and refining strategies and become numerately literate by making sense of data, patterns and quantities in real-life contexts.

In practice, this approach does not require abandoning current curricular goals or content but rather it enhances them. Fluency and factual knowledge remain key—but journaling supports their development by embedding them within meaningful, reflective practice. Rather than seeing problem-solving as a distinct stage after "learning the basics," learners are immersed in reasoning from the beginning, seeing mathematics not just as answers, but as a way of thinking and making meaning.

Teachers, too, stand to benefit. Journaling transforms the mathematics classroom into a place of enquiry, dialogue and shared discovery. It encourages pedagogical reflection, creates space for responsive feedback and builds stronger relational trust between teachers and learners.

To lead this change, Scotland must invest in professional development that supports teachers not only in how to implement journaling, but in why it matters. Policymakers must create conditions for innovation—valuing depth over test scores, supporting holistic assessment practices and promoting a public narrative that celebrates mathematical curiosity and growth over innate "ability."

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, the time is now for Scotland to lead a transformational shift in mathematics education—one that reclaims the subject as joyful, meaningful and accessible to all. Journaling offers more than a method; it represents a new philosophy of learning grounded in talk, reflection and inclusion. By adopting this approach, we can not only raise attainment, but we can also reimagine what it means to be mathematically capable in the 21st century. Scotland can once again be a beacon of educational innovation—by listening to how children think and learn we can empower them to write their own mathematical stories.

Holly Drummond and Kirsten Fenton are experienced primary practitioners at ESMS Junior School, with a keen interest in research and its application in the classroom. They are co-creators of the PACE framework, and their work on oracy, curriculum design and maths journalling has been featured in The Herald and TES. They have also delivered numerous papers at national and international conferences. They are passionate about creating high-impact pedagogy rooted in reflection, equity and learner voice.

How Scotland Found its Entrepreneurial Compass – Then Lost it Again

By Iain Scott

Originally published on 14th August 2025

Forty years ago, Crawford Beveridge returned from the sun and entrepreneurship-infused world of California to become the first head of the newly formed Scottish Enterprise. Thirteen Local Enterprise Companies were formed as part of that. Beveridge quickly i*dentified a critical issue:*

"We in Scotland have been aware that as a nation we seem to have lost some of that entrepreneurial drive… It is apparent that we have a fundamental problem – a lack of companies in Scotland."

This concern sparked the launch of an in-depth national enquiry into Scotland's low rate of new business formation. The 1991 Business Birthrate Enquiry was followed in 1993 by a groundbreaking Business Birthrate Strategy that was looked at by the OECD and across the world.

That vision has either faded or been eliminated. Today, despite bold strategies and big spending, Scotland's entrepreneurial engine is misfiring. Growth remains sluggish. Business formation is stagnating. And for all the initiatives, slogans and agencies, we are not seeing the dynamism or diversity of business creation that we need.
This is why I studied what happened and wrote "How Scotland Found Its Entrepreneurial Compass – Then Lost It Again" – and why I'd like to invite you to an event that goes deeper into what's gone wrong, what we've forgotten, and what we might yet recover. This isn't a nostalgia trip. It's an invitation to think again about where new business growth comes from, and who gets to be part of it.

A System That's Lost Sight of Its Purpose

Scotland's current approach to entrepreneurship has narrowed in scope and ambition. We hear constant reference to "high growth" companies, to scaling tech, and to elite entrepreneurs. Yet when we examine the budgets it is clear that this approach is not delivering broad-based business growth or building the kind of everyday economic activity that once sparked confidence in towns and communities across the country.

Let's be honest: much of what passes for entrepreneurial policy today is exclusive. It is designed for a perception of "the right kind of entrepreneur" – one in certain sectors and especially one that is seen to create jobs.

But growth doesn't only come from above. Nor does innovation only happen in the tech sector. New firms are born every day in kitchens, in workshops, in conversations at school gates or corner shops. They're started by people with grit, imagination, and insight, many of whom will never attend a demo day or pitch to a panel.

Scotland's entrepreneurial revival, if it is to come, must make space for these people too.

What We've Forgotten
In the early days of Scotland's business birthrate strategy, the focus wasn't just on unicorns or scale-ups. It was about getting more people started. It was about building local ecosystems of support: business advisers who knew your name, enterprise centres that were open to walk-ins, practical help without jargon or filters.

We've forgotten how powerful that was. We've also forgotten that business creation isn't just an economic act, it's a deeply human one. It gives people agency, confidence, and purpose. It brings vibrancy to neighbourhoods. And it creates resilience. When more people can start and run businesses, communities can adapt and evolve rather than be left behind.

We've traded much of that bottom-up energy for glossy presentations and centralised strategies that look impressive but rarely touch the ground.

Why This Matters Now
We are in a moment of profound economic and social transition. Technological shifts, demographic changes, political uncertainty, and climate pressures are reshaping every aspect of our society. We need more creativity. We need more problem-solvers. And we need more ways for people to participate in economic life.

Entrepreneurship—real, inclusive, everyday entrepreneurship—is one of the best ways we can do that. But right now, Scotland is being left behind.

We need to widen the lens, listen more deeply, and rebuild systems that genuinely encourage new business formation across the board, not just among the usual suspects.

Entrepreneurship for all has been displaced by a policy focus on startups that are inaccurately thought to generate maximum employment. An outdated way of thinking in a world of Instagram and AI and deeply prejudicial to rural and island economies, female-led startups and areas with low economic activity.

Let's Talk About It
Enlighten is hosting an event to bring people together around this conversation. It is built around the research I've published in entrepreneurship, mostly, but it's not just about the past. It's about the future, and about finding new ways forward.

Whether you're a policy maker, business adviser, educator, or entrepreneur (aspiring or actual), your insight matters.
We'll be asking:

- Why has business start-up fallen off the national radar?
- Who gets included in today's entrepreneurial systems—and who gets left out?
- What kind of enterprise culture do we really want to build in Scotland?
- How do we design support that works for the many, not the few?

This is not a panel of experts talking at you. It's an open, engaging, and – yes – provocative conversation. And your voice is needed.

A Call to Participation
Entrepreneurship has always been a messy, courageous, personal act. It's about having a go, and helping others do the same. And it needs space, support, and belief.

If you've ever started something, thought about starting something, or worked with those who do, you'll know how crucial that support can be.

So let's not let this conversation stay in the past. Let's ask what it could mean for Scotland now.

Join us. Challenge us. Share your story. Help shape a new agenda for entrepreneurship – one that includes more people, more ideas, and more of the country.
The entrepreneurial compass is still there. We just need to stop looking in the wrong places.

Iain Scott is an entrepreneur, researcher & instigator

Tweak, Test, Repeat: Making the Most of ChatGPT

By Morgan Higgins

Originally published on 19th August 2025

OpenAI, the US-based artificial intelligence (AI) company, recently unveiled GPT-5. Described as 'PhD-level' in coding and writing, ChatGPT features are set to roll out across Apple devices via Apple Intelligence later this year. To be clear, ChatGPT is only one aspect of AI – not the discipline itself – and one of many platforms, albeit the most familiar today.

With a top five spot on the Microsoft Store, top ten on Google Play for Android, and reigning supreme at number one on Apple's App Store, it comes as no surprise that the company is on track to reach around 700 million weekly users. Taken together, it would be fair to say that ChatGPT certainly isn't going anywhere, it's just getting started.

'Digital Lead' may sit proudly in my job title and imply I'm a tech pro, but the truth is that when it comes to coding, data tools and engineering, or AI, I'm in over my head. To put that into context, here are genuine questions I've thrown at ChatGPT:

- 'If I climb a Munro, will there be midges?'
- 'What is the highest-calorie meal to ever be created?'
- 'Create a "wanted" image but it's a picture of a black North Face slider' (Sadly, still lost).

Evidently, AI hasn't been my go-to for personal tasks, yet as the topic dominates headlines and debates worldwide, its capabilities are becoming impossible to ignore.
Behind those humiliating questions lies a steep learning curve. I now find myself knee-deep in ChatGPT tutorials to get up to speed. Critics will say that AI makes us lazy, harms the environment or threatens humanity. For me, the real revelation has been uncovering the extent of AI's capabilities – but only when guided by human judgement.

The best advice I've had so far comes from the computer science rule: 'GIGO', meaning 'garbage in, garbage out'. Much like the human body needs good nutrition to stay fit and healthy, AI systems require high-quality data and clear humaninstruction – feed either of them junk and you'll get junk back. (Or think of the song "You Get What You Give" by The New Radicals. Same principle.)

Human inputs, or prompts, are what allow us to gather information from AI systems like ChatGPT in the first place. IBM describes this process, known as prompt engineering, as: 'the process of writing, refining and optimising inputs to encourage generative AI systems to create specific, high-quality outputs.'

Prompt engineering is a skill, one that takes patience and a lot of trial and error to develop. I like to think of a prompt as a mini project: you set its role, outline the task, share the context and specify the output format, then ask it to self-critique and improve using iteration methods (tweak, test, repeat). The process is iterative. You find yourself working alongside AI to get the answer you need: refining prompts, introducing constraints, providing extra context, altering the framework and more.

Now you might be thinking, have I used ChatGPT to write this blog? The short answer is yes, but its role and contribution are more nuanced than it seems. I was born in 2001; I've grown up with Google at my fingertips – I've leaned on it for everything from thesaurus entries and grammar checks to paragraph prompts and quick facts. As one of the first generations raised on smartphones, instant access to online tools has become second nature. The only difference now is that ChatGPT brings all those tools together.

A quick parallel: handheld calculators were once branded 'cheating', yet they are now part of everyday life, taught in the curriculum, used at work and at home, and on every smartphone. Whether an exam allows them or not, students must still show their working. Technology moves fast and AI is quickly becoming an everyday tool, so the same logic should apply. It is more powerful, but with clear rules and transparency it can support rather than replace understanding and judgement.

To reiterate, ChatGPT did not write this blog for me, but I have used it to rearrange sentences, check for repetition, critique my tone and suggest alternatives. Essentially, I'm working with ChatGPT to draft, critique and revise my own writing.

No matter where you stand on the spectrum of AI scepticism, there's no denying AI will be transformational for society. From how we work, learn, interact, travel and access healthcare and much more; the potential for AI feels almost limitless.

From a small think tank's perspective, it's about deepening understanding, testing ideas and sharing results transparently. Could feeding it different policy scenarios generate viable solutions? Can it analyse and visualise relevant data in new, insightful ways? What blind spots or alternative perspectives are we missing?

Not forgetting the real-world impacts: as AI adoption grows, so do its energy needs. Every question to ChatGPT runs on servers in large data centres that require significant electricity and cooling – some analyses compare a short chat to using the equivalent of a small bottle of water. There are huge opportunities for Scotland to grow AI and data centres, but that will demand substantially more clean, reliable electricity. The more we use, and rely on, AI platforms like ChatGPT – the more we need an open debate about how to power them.

Ultimately, it's not about quick fixes or a single plan; it's about recognising AI is here to stay and opening the conversation about what it means for our work, Scotland's economy, and the wider policy debate.

Morgan Higgins is Enlighten's Digital Engagement Lead

A Call to Supercharge Philanthropy in Scotland

By Kenneth Ferguson

Originally published on 27th August 2025

Philanthropy has always been part of Scotland's social fabric – from the great benefactors of the past to the foundations, businesses and communities driving change today. At times of crisis philanthropy has provided the spark for innovation and resilience. Yet as Scotland faces rising social need alongside tightening public budgets, the question is unavoidable: are we doing enough to unlock the full potential of philanthropy?
The honest answer is no. A step change is required in how philanthropy is understood, encouraged and integrated into national life.

Why Philanthropy Matters Now

Scotland's charities and community organisations are under growing pressure. Demand for their services is increasing while public funding is stretched. Philanthropy can help in two vital ways:

- Supplementing public funding to accelerate national missions such as tackling poverty or driving sustainability.
- Supporting small and medium-sized charities with the stability to innovate and sustain their work.

Unlike government budgets, philanthropic capital can move quickly, take risks and back pioneering projects. Yet too often this potential is under-realised.

The Warning Signs

Recent UK wide trends highlight a concerning picture:

- The number of UK non-governmental grants fell from nearly 100,000 in 2023 to just 31,000 last year.
- Corporate giving is down with £164 million in lost contributions.
- High Net Worth Individuals are donating less, with the UK's wealthiest reducing their contributions by £200 million in one year.
- The UK is experiencing an exodus of millionaires, many citing more favourable economic and philanthropic environments elsewhere.

If unchecked, this decline will weaken civil society's ability to respond to need precisely when it is most required.

What Needs to Change

Scotland requires a bold and coherent National Philanthropy Strategy led by the Scottish Government to give clarity and confidence to both givers and charities. This strategy should:

- Set an ambitious national target for charitable giving over the next five years.
- Establish a £100 million match fund from dormant assets to attract co-investment – a model proven to multiply contributions.
- Appoint a National Philanthropy Champion supported by regional champions to galvanise action across the country.
- Embed philanthropy into Local Authority planning and national policy frameworks.

OSCR, the charity regulator, should also play a stronger role. Beyond its regulatory function it can act as a facilitator, raising awareness of Gift Aid and Payroll Giving, improving data on giving and encouraging collaboration between charities.

Philanthropists themselves must adapt too. Greater transparency, more multi-year unrestricted funding and simpler application processes will make resources more accessible, particularly for smaller organisations.

A Moment of Opportunity

Scotland has historically shown what is possible. Public–private partnerships have delivered regeneration projects, employment programmes and education initiatives. The next wave of philanthropy can help us confront inequality, climate change and the need for sustainable communities.

For this to happen leadership is essential. The Scottish Government can set the direction. Philanthropists are ready to respond. At recent Centre for Social Justice Big Listen events donors made clear they want to give more but need assurance that their efforts will align with a clear national roadmap.

Building a Nation of Generosity

Philanthropy is not a substitute for the state. It is a multiplier – a force that unlocks innovation, strengthens communities and amplifies Scotland's reputation as a nation of fairness and solidarity.

The forthcoming 2026 Holyrood election provides a natural moment to embed this vision. By committing to a National Philanthropy Strategy, political parties can signal that generosity is not only part of Scotland's past but central to its future.

Now is the time to act. With the right framework Scotland can become not just a nation of resilience but a nation of generosity.

Kenneth Ferguson is Head of Scotland at the Centre for Social Justice Foundation

Part-Time Learning Works

By Martin Boyle

Originally published on 2nd September 2025

For fifty-six years The Open University in Scotland has championed widening access to education. Embracing our role as Scotland's national widening access university, our supported flexible distance learning model and open entry requirements ensure that anyone, regardless of background or circumstances, can purse a degree and/or upskills and reskill in the workplace.

Widening access is at the heart of our social justice mission. We operate in every parliamentary constituency with students from the Borders to Shetland and everywhere in between. Across Scotland, we foster a community of over half a million learners who access free courses on **OpenLearn** or join our community programmes and events.

We support students to achieve their goals with outcomes that open up new opportunities in life and work. We help **employers** across public, private and third sectors to develop their workforces and build skills and enterprise. All of this makes a significant contribution to the country's economic growth and societal wellbeing.

The next Scottish Parliament election is ten months away. Regardless of the outcome of the election the next Scottish Government is facing significant challenges among them:

- delivering the National Strategy for Economic Transformation with real societal impacts
- caring for an aging population with increasing demands on the NHS and Social Care systems
- supporting Scotland's SMEs to plus skills gaps such as in cyber skills
- supporting Scotland's employers to meet the unfilled demand for apprenticeships places
- delivering the Net Zero transformation with high skills jobs and not warm words

At The Open University in Scotland we set out our stall early publishing our election manifesto back in April. We believe the election is an opportunity to choose to take a different approach to supporting part-time students to help meet the challenges outlined above. For too long parliamentarians have primarily focused on the traditional four-year full-time campus-based degree to the detriment of part-time learners.

Education is not linear; people enter higher education at different stages of their lives and may balance work with study, caring responsibilities, or other commitments. It is the flexibility of studying with the Open University that makes us such an attractive and appropriate choice for our students.

We are calling for the next Scottish Parliament to have a laser focus on part-time students, prioritising their funding and support. This paradigm shift to lifelong learning should take the form of:

- the creation of an equitable student financial support system so that part-time students have access to the same allowances, benefits and loans as their full-time peers

- an increase to the threshold for the Part-Time Fee Grant adjusted for inflation, addressing the fact that it hasn't altered since its introduction in 2013
- the creation of a new Fund to support employers and employees looking to upskill and re-skill

In publishing our manifesto so early we wanted to engage not just with MSPs but also with the political parties as they develop their own manifestos ahead of the election. It has also given us a platform from which to respond to the Scottish Government's consultation on 'Support for Part-Time Study and Disabled Students'. We welcome the consultation particularly as we've been consistently calling for greater support for part time students for the past few years.

The Part-Time Fee Grant, for instance, is one of the lasting achievements of the parliament with a legacy of students undertaking life changing education. You can read our students' case stories on our website to see the positive impact the grant has had on students.

The £25k personal income threshold at which students can receive the grant hasn't however increased since its introduction in 2013. This has led to a significant drop in numbers of students receiving the grant as salaries have sought to keep up with inflation during the cost-of-living crisis. In turn reducing the opportunity to undertake life changing education for many. We hope that will change as a result of the consultation being held by the Scottish Government. They are seeking the views of past, current and future students so make sure you have your say before the consultation closes on 9 October 2025.

As we look forward to the next parliamentary term, we want to see a focus on supporting part-time students. Education has changed over the past twenty-five years and the parliament must adapt and innovate to meet the future challenges. Find out more about our manifesto and why Part-Time Learning Works on our website.

Martin Boyle is the Director of The Open University in Scotland

Scotland's next Government has opportunity to end myth of dying High Streets

By Ewan MacDonald-Russell

Originally published on 26th September 2025

Glasgow's Sauchiehall Street has become emblematic with the discourse around Scotland's High Streets. Over the last five years, as the retail industry responded to Covid closures, enormous inflationary pressures, transformative technology and customer choice changes, it has been a visual reminder of the enormous challenges facing Scotland's town and city centres.

Yet for all the doom and gloom, the closures, the endless streetworks, it remains a retail destination. Many shops have closed, but others remain, alongside coffee shops, eateries, and bars. Battered and bruised perhaps, but this high street, and plenty others, are not quite dead yet.

That survival is a tribute to the robustness and adaptability of the Scottish retail industry. Despite challenge after challenge retailers have got on with the job; serving customers, innovating, doing everything possible to keep down prices, promoting their products through new media, making shops run with fewer staff hours each month.

But it's also a reflection that the retail industry knows there is still huge value in our high streets. For all the convenience of online and out-of-town retail those are different settings which don't work for every product. Especially when trying to appeal to customers with products they want rather than those they need the vibrancy of Glasgow or Edinburgh and our other major conurbations absolutely matters.

High streets at their best have a life of their own. The mixture of residents, workers and visitors combined with the mix of leisure, culture, hospitality and of course retail create an experience. The bustle of busy stores, cafes, and bars, creates the excitement which encourages that small moment of indulgence which high street retail exists to satisfy. Great centres take that spark of interest and fan it into a flame of exploration.

Yet we know high streets are struggling. Last year footfall fell on average by 0.9 percent across Scotland whilst non-food retail sales rose by a miserly 0.7 percent; far below inflation. For all the theatre and excitement, the cold numbers mean retailers can often make a greater return by investing in online than high streets. That is of course what has been happening – every retailer of scale now has some form of online sales presence.

The scale of change is enormous, and to be honest there isn't space to cover it in depth here. Enlighten are kindly hosting a discussion on the 22nd of October where our Insight Director Dr Kris Hamer is going to be joined by the President of high street stalwarts schuh Colin Temple and the SRC's Chair, and executive board director for Dobbies Garden Centre, Debbie Harding to discuss all things retail and consumer. That will be a great chance to hear from the real experts on the detail around retail transformation.

However, the simple truth is many retailers in fact are only able to operate on the high street because of that online model – something uninformed commentators who seem to

think ‘taxing online’ will somehow help the high street often forget. It’s a bizarre idea to assert that an over-taxed retail industry (retail is worth around 7 percent of the economy but pays over 20 percent of non-domestic rates) would be helped by paying more taxes. Instead of hobbling the more successful parts of the industry policymakers need to put high streets at the heart of their economic strategy. Earlier this month the Scottish Retail Consortium published our first mini-manifesto on Protecting Scotland’s Future High Streets with a five-point plan to revitalise these destinations.

That starts with taxation. Currently over 2,400 Scottish shops, many of them the large shops which anchor our high streets and disproportionately drive footfall, pay a higher business rate than the equivalent English store due to the Scottish Governments Higher Property Rate. This fleecing of retailers in Scotland costs them £9 million each and every year and has done so for a decade. With Westminster on the cusp of reforming their own rates system to give a permanent discount to retail, the current and next Scottish Government will need to go further to make Scottish high streets attractive propositions for investment.

Perhaps as crucial is the timeframe for that return on investment. Right now the planning and building warrants system isn’t fit for purpose. Businesses talk with exasperation about the long delays to get permission to refit or take over high street stores. This isn’t about the policy framework, it’s about delivery. So the next government needs to increase the number of planning and building standards officers to speed up the decision-making process. Businesses need to know much more quickly if they can proceed – if there is uncertainty then the capital will be used elsewhere. Similarly the status quo where businesses need to wait for a building warrant before they can start improvements should adapt to the standard approach elsewhere of permitting work to begin once an application is submitted. It also wouldn’t do any harm to break up the local authority monopoly on providing building warrants as well and allow external providers, again as happens elsewhere in the UK.

The third area of focus needs to be on making high streets accessible through making it as easy as possible for visitors to come to the city or town centre. That means investing in both public, but also private, transport options. There is a very virtuous school of thought which appears desperate to make it as difficult as possible for car users to travel to and park adjacent to the town or city centre. The reality is when that approach successfully deters drivers from visiting it doesn’t force a modal shift in their transport choices – they just drive to places they can park at. The opposite approach, which to be fair the current Scottish Government is pushing through abolishing peak fares, where public transport is made more appealing, is much more likely to lead to increased footfall, and then hopefully sales.

Perhaps the single biggest concern retailers raise right now is crime. Official figures show both shop theft and shopworker abuse and assault have risen year on year. The SRC’s crime survey found last year that theft cost the industry over £170 million in Scotland last year; whilst there were over 4000 assaults. Of course that is an unacceptable and horrifying burden for businesses to ensure. Yet it also has a huge impact on shoppers. If customers witness theft or violence on the high street then they aren’t going to come back, especially with their families. Physical retail relies on people having an experience; that isn’t possible if shoppers are scared. So while Police Scotland are doing everything in

their power, and the addition of a retail crime task force is a valuable first step, greater and sustained funding is needed to give the police the tools they need to tackle and bear down on retail crime. However, there remains a question of priorities, which is why the SRC believes the time is right to explore whether a directly elected Scottish Police Commissioner could be right. Retailers in Wales and England tells us the Police Commissioners there work well.

Where we have seen town centres flourish is when the right framework is led by local leadership invested in a unique approach right for their community. We're hearing good reports from members about the joint efforts – from the private and public sectors – underway in Aberdeen to reinvigorate Union Street and reduce the number of empty units and attract footfall. One place where this is desperately needed is Glasgow, where shopper footfall remains becalmed well below pre-Covid levels. The city has many strengths including the extensive local rail network and subway and with the Argyll Arcade it has the leading jewellery and watches retailing destination outside of London. However, the challenge in Glasgow is the city centre itself is in competition with the outlying areas, and of course the relative levels of affluence create further perverse incentives for individual councils. There is a case for examining whether the lessons from the West Midlands and Manchester, where directly elected Mayors have been able to use their convening powers to drive forward regeneration, could be applied to create a greater Glasgow authority, where a directly elected Provost and a small number of Councillors could replace the current hodgepodge of councils covering a shared economic area.

Of course high street regeneration is part of a wider story about how we rebuild our economy after the last five years of disruption and difficulty. There is no doubt a good burst of economic growth would make everything a little easier. But even if the economy bounced back next year, the reality is our town and city centres need to be put on the path to sustained prosperity. However, with the right decisions from government, we can continue to confidently dispel the myth of the death of the high street.

Ewan MacDonald-Russell is Deputy Head of the Scottish Retail Consortium

Time to Ditch the Nuclear Ban

By Michael Hill

Originally published on 6th October 2025

Across the UK, momentum is building behind a new era of nuclear power. Energy Secretary Ed Miliband hailed a “golden age of nuclear” backed by a landmark energy security partnership with the United States. This agreement should attract billions in private investment to power industry and data centres.

Developments from British and American companies like Rolls-Royce and Last Energy are already lining up projects. These developments are set to deliver thousands of skilled jobs. Centrica and X Energy’s £10bn deal could lead to the building of 12 advanced nuclear plants creating 2,500 jobs on Teesside and providing clean, homegrown energy for decades to come.

The PM recently created a Nuclear Regulatory Taskforce to capture this opportunity. Their interim report declared Britain’s nuclear regulation is not fit for purpose. The Taskforce was empowered to look at safety and environmental rules, but there was one area where they were forced to stay silent. Holyrood’s effective ban on the technology.

Why Scotland Is Being Left Out

Scotland risks being left behind. While energy policy is set at Westminster, planning rules are devolved. The SNP government has used its planning powers to impose an effective ban on new nuclear construction.

This position is hard to defend. The SNP claims nuclear power is too expensive, but that’s hardly a matter for the planning system. DP World, Centrica, and Tritax are all investing in UK nuclear projects to power data centres and industrial sites, clearly nuclear being ‘too expensive’ isn’t deterring them. Nuclear costs aren’t fixed either. France and Finland have built reactors for half the cost of the UK. South Korea builds at a sixth of the cost.

Crucially, Scotland cannot rely on renewables alone. Even in one of the windiest countries in Europe, the wind does not always blow. When Torness shuts, Scotland will lose its last source of zero-carbon baseload power. Without nuclear, the backup will not be more wind farms or batteries, it will be fossil fuels or imports from Norway. Fossil fuel prices have fluctuated wildly in recent years, and amidst rising energy prices, Norway has been threatening to cut off their interconnectors and will likely seek renegotiation to secure higher prices. This is not energy security.

Why the SNP’s Arguments Don’t Add Up

Nationalist politicians fall back on two arguments: nuclear is unsafe and nuclear is too costly. Both collapse under scrutiny.

On safety, the data is clear. Nuclear is one of the cleanest and safest energy sources available, safer on a deaths-per-unit-of-power basis than wind. Most of the fatalities associated with nuclear have come not from radiation, but from poorly managed evacuations, such as after Fukushima.

On cost, pointing to Hinkley Point C ignores international experience. France builds nuclear plants for half the UK cost; South Korea for a sixth. Regulatory reform and economies of scale can deliver affordable nuclear here too.

And nuclear vs. renewables is a false choice. We need both. Nuclear is reliable, compact, and provides power around the clock.

What Scotland Thinks
The SNP ban doesn't just defy economic and engineering logic, it also defies public opinion.

A Britain Remade poll found 51% of Scots support new nuclear in Scotland's energy mix, rising to 68% among those with an opinion. New nuclear is essential to meet the SNP's own net zero target of 2045 according to 56% of those polled. Support for SMRs is even higher, with 77% of those expressing a view in favour of them.

Crucially, even those who voted SNP in 2024 are on board. A plurality of 47% believe nuclear is necessary to meet net zero and 56% of those who express a view back the construction of SMRs.

The Opportunity at Torness and Hunterston
Scotland already has the sites and the expertise. Torness in East Lothian and Hunterston in Ayrshire have hosted nuclear power for decades. They have skilled workforces, grid connections, and community support.

We've consistently found that support for nuclear power is strongest in areas where stations already exist or existed in the recent past. Britain Remade has tapped into this by drawing large audiences to pro-nuclear events in former nuclear communities. Across these sites, we've found a deep local pride in their nuclear heritage. In Dunbar, near the Torness station, we packed a hall with residents calling clearly for new nuclear investment.

UK ministers have made clear that Torness and Hunterston are prime candidates for new nuclear power if the SNP lifts its ban. Gigawatt-scale plants would mean billions of pounds of investment and thousands of jobs. Even SMRs would deliver hundreds of millions in investment and hundreds of new jobs.

In other words, these sites are ready to go, if only Holyrood steps aside.

Why It Matters Now
For years, the SNP's nuclear ban didn't matter. Westminster wasn't building nuclear, so Scotland wasn't missing much.

That era is over. Scotland faces a choice: embrace nuclear and share in the investment, jobs, and clean power, or stick with an outdated ban and watch opportunity flow elsewhere.

Investment is not just from taxpayers and bill payers. Technological progress means there

are billions of pounds' worth of private investment in SMRs available. This could power Scottish industry through the 21st century.

Torness alone has generated enough clean power to supply every home in Scotland for 36 years. Yet when it shuts, Scotland could be left with no nuclear power for the first time since 1959. At the very moment when nuclear matters most, the SNP want to lock it out.

A decade ago, the SNP's nuclear ban was the equivalent of the London Borough of Lambeth declaring itself a 'nuclear free zone'. Pointless, but largely costless posturing. Now Scotland is at risk of missing out on billions of investment. Scotland needs to change course, fast.

Support the campaign: Lift The Ban On New Scottish Nuclear Power

Michael Hill is a Policy Researcher at Britain Remade

Reforming Health And Care In Scotland: Getting Strategy Right By Being Properly Strategic

By Peter Williamson

Originally published on 9th October 2025

Introduction

In August I wrote an article about the difficulties the Scottish government has had in developing strategies capable of guiding the much-needed transformation of health and social care in Scotland. Instead, my argument was that the various strategies the Scottish Government has produced over the years have not provided the kind of robust plans which set out in appropriate detail what has to change and how these changes could be brought about.

What follows are five proposed steps to improve the way the development of health strategy is pursued in Scotland, followed by consideration of what at heart is fundamental to major strategic change for health and social care.

Strategic Capacity And Expertise

The first step is to recognise that those individuals with a leading role in developing strategy really need the strategic skills and mindset to make it happen. It is perhaps not a sufficiently recognised specialist role. The role particularly requires the abilities to: vision/imagine the future, think long-term and identify what the critical factors are that help and/or impede major change, adopt a systems analysis perspective, employ data analysis, and have strong advocacy skills to address the differing views of stakeholders. Despite the significant number of people employed in the NHS in Scotland, the recruitment to key leadership positions appears to value an operational rather than a strategic outlook. Likewise, civil servants are principally concerned with political management and oversight of the NHS, including the important role of mediation among the various stakeholders, and the promotion of government policy to the media and public.

The result is an important under-representation of strategic skills and thinking in the government and NHS. Even where those developing strategy actually have such capabilities, the intense pressures on operational management and extensive scrutiny of performance are not an environment which creates the space for serious strategic development to happen or even be given priority. To change this position requires a radical change by **recruiting or identifying a cadre of people who bring the right skills to strategy development, and equally importantly are free of operational demands to employ these skills. How this departure can best be achieved will require further consideration, especially around where such skills can be found.**

Stakeholder Engagement And Strategy

A second step needed is to recognise that the dynamics of a strategy development process, which prioritises significant engagement of stakeholders, including different NHS Boards, professional groupings and public/patient interests, can lead to sub-optimal strategic outcomes. Stakeholder engagement is of course crucial to any serious attempt

at fundamental change. However, the compromises involved in this process can lead to emphasising the position of particular interests at the expense of the wider collective benefit. One feature of this historically has been the tendency to provide 'too many' services in 'too many' locations. This not only presents additional financial costs but can also adversely affect service quality. **An objective assessment should be undertaken by the strategy consultants proposed above to provide for each major strategy to incorporate a collective Scotland-wide perspective. This would highlight where there are significant benefits foregone by the system as a whole in responding to the requirements of achieving the agreement of stakeholders**. Scotland has a longstanding health policy community, pre-dating devolution, upon which Scottish governments have shown considerable reliance historically. The policy community can work against bringing into the strategy process more independent or critical considerations which, given the severe pressures on the system, should become a more explicit part of strategy development.

Finance-Led Strategy

A third step in changing the approach to strategy development is to avoid being overly driven by short term financial constraints. Over the years I have observed that major strategic developments – as well as many smaller initiatives – often from the outset start with the question of 'what can we afford?' This confuses economy with efficiency. In simple terms, reducing a strategic programme's cost by 20% may disproportionately affect its ability to get even near 80% of its original aims. There is a critical mass for any service to operate effectively. Shaving away at that often results in false economies and reduces the total impact of strategic change. **To make sure that any strategic development produces high impact results, a review of the cost-benefit ratios against different investment levels should be undertaken to highlight where an optimum investment lies.** This of course may restrict the number of initiatives that can be funded at any time, but again the argument is to look at the overall impact on the system and to recognise that different strategic changes will provide different levels of benefit that points to the need to prioritise.

Making Strategic Objectives Tighter

A fourth step-change is tackling the increasingly well recognised feature of many Scottish government policies, including health, of multiple objectives. The 2023 Scottish Government Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for example contained by my calculation 14 separate provisions on objectives and principles. This included a vision with nine outcomes, ten priorities along with related outcomes and associated challenges and opportunities, ten core principles, 20 policy priorities resulting from other strategies and a non-exhaustive list of 71 key policy drivers with which the Strategy has to connect. The strategy is just excessively complex and obscures what are the critical, top-level changes needed to give the whole endeavour a focus. Similarly, the Scottish Government-COSLAHealth & Social Care Service Renewal Framework 2025-2035 (June 2025) contains 71 objectives, commitments and changes of varying degrees of precision that overall is difficult to comprehend in terms of what is most important going forward – and that is without even attempting to address the interconnections and overlaps among the various objectives.

In addition to the matter of multiple objectives, there is also a tendency to have objectives that contain ambitions that are not supported by any proper consideration of

feasibility. The Scottish Government's NHS Recovery Plan 2021-2026 contained several such objectives. For example, there was a commitment to 'design a new sustainable system, focused on reducing inequality and improving health and wellbeing outcomes, and sustainable communities', one to support the needs of people with dementia to live well, including post diagnostic support, and another to reduce attendances at Emergency Departments by 15% to 20% – all without any detail on how these objectives could be made to happen.

The complexity and over ambition of objectives risk making it difficult to build programmes of change which are clear about the major strategic shifts required to secure transformation and how they will be delivered. **There is a pressing need to streamline and better organise the way objectives are presented in strategies with fewer – certainly top line – objectives. Objectives also need to be presented in a measurable form, supported by an evidence-based plan of what is needed to achieve the objectives, backed by realistic timescales – all necessary to determine the feasibility of the objectives.**

Supporting Service Strategies With Resource Planning

The fifth and final step relates to strategic resource planning. While there is widespread recognition of the importance of strategic resource planning, this is not matched by the intensity with which it is undertaken. As an example, the already mentioned Financial Framework for the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in looking forward did not contain any spending figures but only had a list of five 'early priorities for investment' presented without comment. The subsequent Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy Delivery Plan and Workforce Action Plan – Update on Progress and Next Steps only included six statementson specific examples of additional spending. Some of these were ambiguous because they did not separate new funding from what was already being spent. Most importantly, there was no overall financial plan setting out past and future total spending on mental health analysed by relevant categories. It therefore proved difficult to understand the financial consequences for mental health of pursuing the whole strategy beyond the very short list of funding provisions included.

There are also causes for concern on workforce planning. The Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy announced that a Mental Health and Wellbeing Workforce Action Plan would be published. That plan was subsequently included in the Update on Progress and Next Steps document. A list of activities around education and training and initiatives to attract staff to particular roles, all undoubtedly of benefit, was produced. However, the only additional staffing resources identified were some new psychology posts. The complete mental health workforce plan was not set out. This made it difficult to understand how the strategy's aims, for instance the reduction in mental health inequalities, would be supported by any changes to the make-up of staffing or not. Similarly, in the Health & Social Care Service Renewal Framework 2025-2035, there is no workforce plan of any sort. Even the National Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care in Scotland of March 2022 provides no overview of the planned changes to the numbers and make-up of the entire health and care workforce, and there is no way to link it to the Health & Social Care Service Renewal Framework. **There is an urgent need to incorporate into strategies detailed and audited resource plans (finance, workforce, technology and estates). This will create a framework upon which to guide strategy as it is implemented without gaps and delays resulting from underdeveloped resource plans. It will also avoid missed opportunities for better services caused by the absence of the**

full resource base. At the same time, more attention needs to be given to making sure that service strategies are produced with the clarity necessary to calculate accurately future resource requirements.

Developing Strategic Planning

Audit Scotland in its NHS in Scotland 2024 report made a series of recommendations including that the Scottish Government publish a series of national strategies setting out a medium-term approach to health and social care reform 'to provide greater certainty for boards as they prepare their plans.' Current government strategies do not provide such certainty. In fact, when there is an increasing call for transformative change and major reform, strategies have shifted towards a more evidently incremental and gradualist approach. In essence, strategies have less strategic content. This reflects in large measure that health strategy essentially operates on an 'existing service plus development' basis. Change is delivered through add-ons. The tighter financial and other resource constraints have become, the more limited the opportunities to construct a strategy on an 'existing service plus development' basis becomes.

Strategy development now has to bring about a major drive to re-balance, re-structure and (in some cases) reinvent the health and social case system. This requires radical rethinking. There has to be a major reworking of the make-up of the type and range of services made available to citizens. The good news is that there is already a broad understanding and, to some degree, local experience of the types of services that are needed increasingly to help the process of change. Some of these will be long-standing and established, especially in primary care. Others will be more recently developed, less familiar services that will prove more challenging to roll out.

At its most fundamental, high-level form strategy should be built around a series of strategic imperatives. Each of these should capture a fundamental priority shift to the make-up of services required for the future. For the health and care system as a whole there might be only around half a dozen of them. Individual clinical and social services will have their own, more specific strategies which will obviously need to align appropriately with the necessity of meeting the top-level strategic imperatives.

One such potential strategic imperative which has been much discussed over many years is reducing the reliance upon inpatient care. It is essential to emphasise that this is not first and foremost about resources and funding but is about improved benefits that should drive and validate the strategic changes. In the case of reducing reliance on inpatient care there are many benefits for service users including: reduced risk of infection; less exposure to over-investigation and intensive treatments; less disconnection from home life; less disorientation and disablement; the opportunity to assess and manage people in the environment in which they normally live; quicker recovery; and better integration with other health and support services around a person's home and community.

Therefore, the strategic change is about providing better experiences and outcomes for service users. Critically, there will also be a system benefit. Reducing reliance upon inpatient care shifts service provision on to alternatives whose costs are overall lower than those of existing inpatient care. At the same time different types of services can

reduce health and social care needs through, for example, crisis and rapid response capability in the community, greater support for self-management to mitigate the incidence and severity of crises, health promotion to make people fitter, and highly integrated health and social care home support to reduce gaps and delays in care. The system becomes more cost-effective, increasing funds for meeting other needs that are not presently so well-placed.

Conclusion

To conclude the argument, there has to be a major improvement in the process of formulating strategy along the lines of the five steps set out above. However, what is required now is not just about improving strategy development against the range of ambitions currently published in strategy documents. There has to be a much more radical approach to what is required to deliver transformation than has ever been seen in the life of the NHS. This will require a highly sophisticated approach that maps out in significant detail how the make-up of services will change over a number of years in a way that overall provides increased benefits at lower cost and delivers long term sustainability. It will be imperative that new services are properly designed and supported by effective evaluation, consideration is given to managing interim double-running costs, and good information systems are in place to provide sound and timely feedback on progress. This will have to happen across a range of fundamental strategic imperatives. And of course, the delivery of services day to day and management of operational challenges will have to continue to be overseen. Most importantly of all, the Scottish Government has to make a very serious commitment to develop its capability to undertake the major strategic change needed. There is a lot to be done to build a strategic infrastructure.

Peter Williamson taught and researched health care policy and management at Aberdeen Medical School, was a strategy director for NHS Boards, and led policy work on health and innovation for the Scottish Government.

Diary of an anonymous secondary school teacher

Originally published on 2nd November 2025

This article first appeared in the Scotland on Sunday on 2 November 2025

The problem of poor behaviour in Scottish schools, and the devastating impact this has on life chances, can no longer be ignored. The Commission on School Reform's recent report captured the scale and consequences of the problem. The systemic denial about, and failure to adequately deal with, poor behaviour is the biggest barrier to pupils achieving their potential in our schools. We can have the best curriculum in the world (spoiler alert: we haven't) but if pupils are disrupting their learning and that of the well-behaved majority then everything else is pointless.

What's preventing this from being tackled? I think there are broadly three main reasons. First, there's systemic and institutional denial that there's even a problem in the first place. This permeates governmental, local authority and school leadership level, and is present even amongst some teachers ("they behave for me") for whom poor behaviour and low standards are just normal. This is driven by ideology. The system is currently based on trauma-informed and restorative practices. Not only are these not working they're causing immense damage. To therefore challenge those ideological sacred cows is to admit their ineffectiveness and we don't have brave or visionary leadership prepared to do that, beyond the occasional outlier like Bruce Robertson. Scotland's largest teaching union, the EIS, is part of the problem, as they too are committed to this flawed and damaging approach to behaviour that's wrecking such havoc in our schools. Second, at all levels the system overwhelmingly promotes conformists who won't rock the boat. Job interviews largely check for ideologically correct answers making it extremely difficult for those with new approaches and fresh ideas to break through. Third, there's a rainbows and unicorns approach to education in Scotland with bold statement and a complete lack of accountability from a leadership that displays learned helplessness and revels in an excuses culture. Look at the headline on the SQA's website: "the heart of Scotland's world-renowned education system." Evidence shows this to be a completely false claim. Poor leaders and bad teachers get moved around and schools are not answerable to the communities they serve whilst local education authorities are mammoth bureaucracies unanswerable to the public. Behaviour problems in Scottish schools reflect these profound wider systemic failures.

So, what does this look like on the ground? I've worked in a few Glasgow secondary schools over many years and decided to record a typical week. As always, there's far more that can be said.

Monday

Period 1. When the bell goes to start the lesson, I have three pupils present and ready to learn. Everyone else trails in over the next forty minutes, causing significant disruption, especially to those already ready to learn. There's constant talking and I count that I ask for quiet a total of 47 times. I'm an experienced teacher and know this isn't normal. Most pupils take a pencil from the front because they're not expected to have their own. An email is regularly sent round reminding staff not to challenge pupils on lack of equipment. It's not just about a pencil though, is it? It's about habit, culture and routines. Needless to

say, they all remember their phones. We have no expectations of pupils at all. We don't even expect them to turn up on time, in uniform and with the correct equipment. In a class of 27, only three are wearing the correct uniform. Two look like extras from Michael Jackson's Thriller video. One girl can't hold a pen because of her massive nail extensions. Despite excellent attendance records at primary school and latterly with us, many pupils have reading ages that are three or four years lower than their chronological age. We have a literacy crisis and a behaviour crisis.

Tuesday
Period 3 I ask a pupil to put their phone away and am told to fuck off. Period 5 I ask another pupil to remove their outdoor jacket, and am also told to fuck off. My faculty head laughingly tells me that I could write it up, but, as always, to remember that I won't get any support on this. As I leave school a depute asks for a word and tells me that I shouldn't challenge pupils on uniform or outdoor jackets, as "we're lucky to have them in school" and that "it's a social justice issue". I ask if kids having £500 trainers and not being in uniform is a social justice issue but am met with a look of total incomprehension. I arrive home to read an email that lists about one hundred pupils who are excused from wearing uniform due to "sensory issues". As I leave the building, I walk past our unused and very full uniform store where families can collect brand new and used uniform for free, no questions asked.

Wednesday
Almost thirty years on from the Dunblane tragedy, it staggers me how open access our schools are. There is no security, which unsurprisingly leads to three intruders entering the school and staying there undetected for a total of three hours as they seek out a child in S3 for a revenge attack. Management hush up the incident but everyone knows what's happened, not least because kids have their phones out all the time and it's on YouTube before you know it. A young, pregnant female member of staff is pushed and falls in a corridor scrum, with jeering following. She's encouraged not to formally report it because she's on a temporary contract so "you should leave it with us". Nothing happens.

Thursday
A probationer, whom I really rate, is told in response to extreme behaviour problems in their class that they need to "build a relationship". There are absolutely no consequences for any behaviour infringements, other than a general chat with a middle or senior leader. And guess what? None of this works. There are no systems in place and that's before we even get into issues of teaching and learning, neither of which can happen in an atmosphere of such chaos. On the upside, my day finishes a little earlier than scheduled, as last lesson half of my S1 class have an "anxiety pass" to get out five minutes early and are entitled to take a friend with them, leaving me free for the final few moments of the school day. These passes are available on parental request to pastoral care.

Friday
We have a no-consequences behaviour system and an education system that medicalises normal emotions. Someone once told me that you can get a sense of a school and its ethos within the first five minutes of walking around the building. I think that's so true. Whilst extreme behaviour is always hard to deal with, no matter how normalised it's become, it's actually other things that really depress me as I look around at what's in front

of me: pupils routinely turning up late, wandering around school chewing, with phones out and earpods in completely unchallenged. Many, if not most, pupils wearing tracksuit bottoms and lots wearing crocs. Corridor rowdiness and a scrum between lessons. Litter and food waste left all over the place for minimum wage female cleaners, usually working several jobs, to pick up. Phones out all the time despite our supposed ban on them. The acceptance of lateness. And that's before we get into the literacy crisis.

Schools are microcosms of society. What sort of society are we creating with this culture and lack of any expectations at all? When colleagues tell me that many kids won't succeed, out there in the real world I profoundly disagree because society's standards will lower to accommodate them.

It's often hard to see a pathway to change, but the behaviour crisis is proving increasingly difficult to ignore. There are no rules in most Scottish schools; a rule is only a rule if it's enforced, otherwise it's just a statement. Indeed, we have lots of statements in our school policies. The behaviour crisis only exists because we've collectively decided that we're fine with how things are, and extreme behaviour has become normalised. However, this is not normal and there are no shortages of solutions; look at the work of Tom Bennett and the success of systems used in English schools. Without getting into the finer details, behaviour management systems need to be clear, fair, have robust and centralised for consistency and practicality. Tackling the so-called minor issues means that the bigger problems will eventually be significantly reduced. This can absolutely be done, but we need more teachers to speak out and better leadership to achieve it.

The author is a teacher at a secondary school in Glasgow.

A Budget to Save Scotland's Colleges: A Call for Strategic Investment

By Gavin Donoghue

Originally published on 2nd November 2025

College funding in Scotland is in a perilous state. Two recent reports – one from Audit Scotland, another from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) – underscore the urgency of bringing forward investment in these valuable public institutions. The draft Budget for 2026/27, coming to the Scottish Parliament in January, will be an inflection point for the government and parliament.

The shrinking investment in the college sector in real-terms is stark. We are a quarter of the way into a new century, where the desire for upskilling and reskilling has never been greater, and the projections of skills need are only increasing. But colleges – Scotland's skills engines – have faced a 20% real terms cut in funding since 2021/22, according to Audit Scotland, and are having to turn away potential students.

This situation seems non-sensical when employers regularly cite skills shortages as holding back economic productivity. Skills Development Scotland projects needing 344,000 skilled people to fill roles in 14 key industries in the next nine years, and inter-generational poverty continues to stalk some our most deprived communities.

Colleges bring great value for money for the public purse. The Fraser of Allander Institute found that the Scottish economy is £52 billion better off cumulatively over the 40-year working life of college graduates and that every college graduate creates an additional £72,000 boost to productivity for the Scottish economy.

Colleges also produce strong pass rates, and very high positive destination and student satisfaction scores. Even in this challenging funding climate, student satisfaction remains very high – 92% – a resilient statement from learners on their positive experience at college and a testament to dedicated college staff.

The draft Budget brought to the Scottish Parliament in January next year will undoubtedly have many competing pressures, but there must be an optimistic commitment to invest in Scotland's colleges if we are to have any hope of driving sustainable economic growth and eradicating child poverty.

What Colleges Need

Colleges Scotland's draft Budget submission sets out four scenarios – from flat cash to sustainable funding – and shows the impact on colleges from the potential choices due to be made by our politicians early next year.

- The worst-case scenario for colleges would be another flat-cash settlement, which ignores the inflationary pressures on college bills and historic cuts. This would likely lead to 11 colleges running out of cash and being unable to cover their operational costs in the 2026/27 academic year. In these conditions, most colleges would have to move to significant cost saving programmes including job losses (with potential compulsory redundancies), campus consolidation, and further shrinking student numbers.

The next scenario Colleges Scotland sets out asks for recognition of inflation, and seeks a £60m increase in funding that would cover the additional costs colleges have faced recently. This level of investment significantly reduces the risk of college closures in academic year 2026/27. So, an improved picture, but not a scenario where colleges are thriving.

The final two scenarios would normalise investment in colleges as Scotland's skills engines; substantially reducing the risk of colleges closing or becoming insolvent, and allowing for an improved level of support for staff and students, including seeking increase in student support levels.

The much-missed Flexible Workforce Delivery Fund (FWDF) could be re-imagined to enable colleges to connect more smoothly with employers and deliver a diversified income stream for the college sector. Colleges could move away from fire-fighting, and start to focus on what is required regionally to pivot to provision that will have the greatest impact for learners and the local and national economic and skill needs.
Colleges would also be able to adequately pay for student mental health support, careers advice, sport on campus, address digital poverty, and increase international links. This would enable learners to thrive.

How much has the sector shrunk already?
Since 2021/22, in real terms, college funding has fallen by 20% in real terms. Colleges have responded with cost containment – cutting staff numbers by 8.7%, scaling back courses, consolidating curriculum. Having made every conceivable saving there are no sustainable options left to take. The most striking and alarming repercussion of real-terms cuts is that student enrolment is down by over 30,000 (12.4%) as colleges tighten capacity rather than risk insolvency.

In June, two college Principals told the Education, Children and Young People's Committee directly about the unmet demand issues they faced in their regions. Ayrshire College turned away 764 students who passed at interview, and Glasgow Kelvin College could only accept 1 out of every 3 applicants. Glasgow Kelvin also told the Committee that the college had received 700 applications within 24 hours for a 24-person ESOL class.

Supporting the call for investment
On a personal note, I've only been CEO at Colleges Scotland for a few months now, but in that time I've yet to meet a politician from any party who doesn't understand the importance of upskilling and reskilling people for our economy or care deeply about the future of their own local college. Cross-party support for colleges is very welcome and I would like to thank all the MSPs and MPs who have taken the time to visit and engage with their local college and see all the fantastic work that takes place there for themselves.

However, warm words are not enough: we need to see political commitment and prioritisation of sustainable funding of our valued college sector at this next Budget.

That is why it is so important for colleges to generate support from other parts of civic society, to show our politicians the importance of colleges for Scotland's economic and social growth. Anti-poverty campaigners, educationalists, employers, think tanks such as Enlighten, and experts from a very wide range of organisations have all noted the negative

impact of lack of college investment, and the positive contribution colleges make to life in Scotland. This collaborative support has been hugely welcome.

The draft Budget itself is a collaborative creation, and I do believe that with the support of civic society and our politicians that we can show the strong case for sustainable investment for our nation's colleges.

Gavin Donoghue is CEO of Colleges Scotland

Reform of the School Year – lessons learned and missed

By Dewi Knight

Originally published on 2nd November 2025

What if I told you that there is an aspect of school life in the UK that is still shaped by farming and faith? Another f-word would probably come to mind, as you told me not to be so ridiculous.

But the pattern of the school year, with it's long summer break, is "unchanged for over a century, shaped by agriculture and religion" according to Gillian Hunt's recent excellent paper. And not just in Scotland.

Frustrations in government

As the former specialist adviser for education in the Welsh Government, I worked with ministers to try and reform Wales's school year (and day). We argued – as a learning from the pandemic – that it was a policy change which could help address educational inequalities, prevent learning loss, and provide teachers and school staff with more consistent term times and holidays.

It ended up being one of my most frustrating times in government. A fear of change, living in the past rather than looking to the future, and teaching unions fired up to oppose any moves to alter their working patterns.

As former First Minister Mark Drakeford said during his recent evidence to the UK covid inquiry: *"we have a pattern of the school year that was formed at the end of the19th century for an essentially rural economy, where children needed long periods of time off in the summer to help with the harvest."*

The pandemic experience

During the pandemic, we sought to give pupils more time back in school, at the end of the first lockdown in summer 2020. We managed to provide an opportunity for pupils of all ages to get back into school during an end of term three-week period. But we wanted to extend that time, making use of the better weather and downturn in Covid cases, and then give everyone a week back as part of a longer autumn half-term.

Despite thinking we had secured an agreement with Welsh local authorities and teaching unions to make this change – it fell apart just before the schools fully re-opened. It was the three weeks back in school, and no more. And no alterations to the autumn term.

Pupils ended up spending even more time out of school that winter following another lockdown. We spent weeks negotiating on how and when to re-open in the new year. All this despite a government commitment that schools would be the first to re-open as covid restrictions were loosened.

Reflecting on the pattern of the school year and those difficulties in 2020 – and again during the winter of 2020/21 – Mr Drakeford lamented that we hadn't tried to reform the school year earlier:

"Had we had a different approach before the pandemic I think some of the difficulties we faced in those contractual issues would have been easier to resolve or we should do them now while we have the chance."

Despite those frustrations, it's worth noting that pupils did return to schools in Wales earlier in 2021 than counterparts in Scotland. Comparative policy research and cross-nation policy learning is now the day job for me at PolicyWISE, but I do remember that cross-administration sharing of best practice and challenges was one of the positive experiences of working during the pandemic.

An attempt at reform – policy proposals

Welsh Labour's winning manifesto for the 2021 Senedd election committed it to "explore" reform of the school year. In government following the election, this was further strengthened in a co-operation agreement with Plaid Cymru where they committed to "narrow educational inequalities and support learner and staff wellbeing, we will look to radically reform school term dates to bring them more in line with contemporary patterns of family life and employment.

Despite this, the unions often questioned the legitimacy of the government's proposals to reform the school year. Whereas Keir Bloomer, chair of Enlighten's Commission on School Reform says that "getting the school year right is about as basic as it gets" and an example of low cast educational reform, Welsh unions said that such reforms were a "vanity project". Carly Simon might say that they probably think this blog is about them...

The government looked at international evidence and practice. Initially it was willing to consider radical changes to the school year, including one that started in January, longer Christmas breaks and a four-week summer break. Having consulted with unions, parents, children, local authorities and other stakeholders, and then in a public consultation, it eventually proposed terms of more equal length, a redistribution of holiday times, and a reduction in the summer break.

This meant extending October half-term break to two weeks and shortening the summer break by one week, and de-coupling the spring break from the Easter public holiday to allow for consistent scheduling. The government also sought views on extending the May half-term break, potentially reducing the summer break by the same amount. In all these considerations, the Minister said that overall days and hours in a school year would not change.

Whilst those proposals were relatively conservative, the reforms would "damage learning" according to one of the unions. Parentkind and the Child Poverty Action Group conducted their own survey with thousands of parents and carers across Wales. This found that a majority of parents supported a more evenly spread school year. There was greater support amongst lower income parents, who also reported significant struggles with the additional costs of long summer holidays.

Back to the drawing board

However, changes of First Minister and Education Secretary eventually meant that the policy was paused, becoming one of the flashpoints in a difficult time for Welsh Labour. It's unlikely that we'll see the next government – of whatever stripe – return quickly to

school year (or day) reforms. And that would be real shame, particularly as Welsh policymakers must continue to address the conservatism in their education system. A culture that too often can content itself with low expectations and looks for easy excuses on inequalities and attainment.

The relationship between Scottish policymakers and education unions is shaped differently to the Welsh context. The continuing model of 'England and Wales' operations for the majority of the unions is a big factor, as is the expectations on what 'social partnership' means in the school sector.

Perhaps Scottish and Welsh reformers can make common cause on the issue of school year reform – and make the case that these changes can benefit teachers, staff, parents and most of all children. That would be something worth fighting for.

Dewi Knight is Director of PolicyWISE, the UK and Ireland comparative policy research initiative, and is a former Welsh Government specialist adviser for education reform.

Dealing with the gaps: how can Scotland address regional skill issues?

By Joe Robinson

Originally published on 18th November 2025

P***art of Enlighten's mission is to increase the level of debate about policy reform in Scotland. As well as publishing our own work, we seek ways to work with a broad range of individuals and organisations with expertise in all and any sectors, and of all political affiliations and none, to contribute fresh thinking, debate, challenge, and policy proposals.***

As part of this work we were delighted to partner once again with Edinburgh University's SWAY programme. Joe Robinson carried out an MSc dissertation based on our initial research question around regional economic disparities. This article is a summary of his dissertation "Dealing with the gaps: how can Scotland address regional skill issues?"

Regional disparities in Scotland's productivity persist and have not improved since the advent of Scottish devolution. Skills are a crucial part of this productivity puzzle and can help Scotland and its regions become more economically prosperous and resilient.

Skill gaps are a large concern for productivity and regional growth. Despite having one of the most educated workforces in the OECD, Scotland also has a higher percentage of adults with no qualifications (8.2%), than its neighbour England (6.2%). This is reflected in Scotland's productivity, which traditionally struggles compared to the UK average. There is also a clear regional dimension to these skill gaps, with Edinburgh's population having the highest 'high skill' percentage with 73.2%, whereas areas like North Lanarkshire lag the UK average at 38.2%.

Considerations of 'place' have generally become more prominent in Scottish policymaking, and this has also found its way into skills policy. The idea being that by moving skills policy to a regional level and closer to local actors and expertise it can help integrate skills into coordinated models of economic development that address local and regional challenges.

Concerns over skills and regional disparities are far from new in Scotland and yet a number of policy gaps remain. The rhetoric from the Scottish government suggests that a regional approach to skills has emerged. But there are concerns that Scottish policymaking as a whole suffers from an implementation gap – good at developing strategies but struggles to put policy into practice. Questions therefore persist around what is happening at the regional level, and whether this approach to skills shows any promise in tackling Scotland's regional issues.

As part of the research for my dissertation, I interviewed 17 actors in the regional skills landscape. The aim was to explore the realities for individuals and organisations at the regional level, and to question if there is a policy gap and if so, where? In the rhetoric at the national level; the implementation at the ground level; or even in the understanding of what an appropriate regional skill approach for Scotland needs to be?

Scotland's approach to skills

In recent years a new approach to skills has emerged. One that is interventionist, place-based, and focuses on aligning the demand and supply of skills. This requires a consideration of regional context and cooperation with local institutions and their knowledge.

This challenges a more traditional view of skills – an approach that focuses on the supply side and is space-neutral. This approach rests on the market assumption that increasing the supply of skills (by boosting education rates) will in turn encourage demand for high skilled jobs. The market will also decide geographically where this demand will be met – often in cities, where economies of scale can be utilised. This 'supply-push' approach was taken by many countries in the 1990s and 2000s, including Scotland and the rest of the UK. These two policy ideas are often conceptualised as 'place prosperity' versus 'people prosperity'.

Scotland appears to be the flagbearer for a place-based approach to skills. The Scottish government have long been aware of the country's issues with skill gaps, productivity and regional disparities. Back in 2007, the ***Skills for Scotland report*** launched the idea of skill utilisation, which highlighted the limits of the 'supply-push' approach and called for more engagement with the demand side. The 2010 ***Skills for Scotland*** report likewise emphasised the need for "realigning the skills, learning and work system".

Two key motivations were to encourage collaboration with partners and to gain a better analytical understanding of skills. Since 2014, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) has published annual Regional Skill Assessments (RSAs) for all areas of Scotland, which are then used to formulate regional Skill Investment Plans. The regional landscape in Scotland has also developed with 12 regional growth deals across the country in partnership with the UK and Scottish governments. The more mature regional growth deals, Edinburgh & South East Scotland City Region (ESESCR) and Glasgow City Region (GCR), both have skill programmes, with Edinburgh's IRES programme perhaps the most established. There are also the 8 Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs) across the country who work with the Scottish government and grew out of the governance arrangements of the growth deals.

These developments suggest a shift towards place-based approaches in both skills and broader Scottish policy. But there are still questions over how place-based approaches can be effective in Scotland. The National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) in 2022 pledged to take 'full account of regional circumstances'. However, there are a number of trade-offs in practice. How to balance regional and national priorities? How to boost productivity whilst ensuring that the benefits are shared across the region. In his 2023 review of the Scottish skill system, James Withers argued that the system was not fit for purpose at regional or national level. This seems to suggest that these tensions have not been addressed, and that the reality is in fact different to the rhetoric.

Findings

From the interviews, it was clear that success of this regional approach varies, and several structural, institutional and cultural barriers persist at the regional level and in the wider system.

Joined up working

Difficulties remain with cooperation between regional partners. A recurring frustration from the interviews was the struggle to engage with both the REPs and the growth deals. There is evidence that partners such as colleges have felt "excluded" from the decision-making process of growth deals. Whereas the REPS, are often bypassed as they are not constituted bodies – one interviewee noted that the REPs "could be viewed as a bit toothless" in terms of directing activity.

A key partner that often struggles to be involved are the employers – in particular small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) which make up 99% of Scotland's business base. Unlike larger employers, SMEs don't have the time or resources to engage with skill projects – they are "just literally trying to get through day-to-day". Engaging with employers is an "unending task…that's probably never complete". However, there was general agreement that more needs to be done to improve Scotland's culture of engaging with employers.

In 2023 the Wither's review recommended to introduce a network of regional employer boards and a national employer forum. Whilst the Scottish government accepted the basis of the Withers review, there are concerns that it is still "not obvious how the employer voice will be raised in the new structure". Despite the perceived importance of employers, they still do not have a sufficient platform.

Collaboration depends on funding

Joined up working benefits greatly from time and available resources – in particular, funding. However, a lack of consistent funding has restricted actors' ability for collaboration and long-term planning. The two most prominent funding streams available are the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) from the UK government and the Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF) from the Scottish government. The FWDF has not had any funding allocated since 2023. Concerns were also noted by interviewees that UKSPF allocations to councils are set to be *cut* by "40% for 2025/26", but the allocation for capital spending is higher meaning that the 'real cut' is in revenue spending. There was some frustration that the funding from the UK government is focused on capital spending rather than revenue, which can make it difficult to allocate funding for skills projects that involve regional partners. A lack of reliable funding with an appropriate understanding of skill issues is a clear barrier to regional cooperation.

Understanding of regional issues

There were also concerns from the interviewees around having the correct information. In terms of data that can identify skill gaps, there is a "wealth of information that is available". However, issues remain around sharing and engaging with the data.

The RSAs were seen as useful but limited in several ways – one interviewee noted that the data does not "come down to a granular level and a lot of sectors are missed". An interviewee from SDS admitted that the RSAs are a "good starting point for discussion" but they need to be supplemented by local actors' own evidence and insight. Several interviewees for instance praised the *Intelligence Hub* that provides in-house labour market analysis for the GCR. This has encouraged a tradition of sharing data in the GCR, but not all areas are as lucky to have this. This can potentially dissuade some actors from engaging with the RSAs. An interviewee from SDS remarked that more can be done to

ensure the appropriate utilisation of the RSAs. In the past SDS, have tended to “put them out and just left people to interpret them”.

Skills for who and where?
A common perception from the interviewees was that the overall focus of skill policy often struggled to reflect the broader focus needed for a regional approach. There was concern around the lack of direction from the Scottish government. Several interviewees criticised the NSET, one arguing that it “prioritised everything… to keep everyone a little bit happy”.

Several interviewees felt there was tendency to focus on “transformational sectors” with high skilled jobs and attractive growth opportunities, despite, these not necessarily dealing with the main concerns of a region. Actors from more rural areas argued that the “multiplier effect” is often larger in rural areas, and yet funding is often focused on projects of scale in areas closer to cities. Whilst certain practicalities must be considered, this raises questions about how Scotland values certain projects and skills. Investment in less ‘glamorous’ sectors such as social care or jobs that are deemed ‘lower-skilled’ may not see a quick return on investment but will be vital in the long term.

Often, the interviewees felt that skill policy failed to reflect the regional nuances of Scotland’s skill issues. In many rural areas, the main concern is not skill gaps but rather labour shortages – “the youth flight issue is a big, big concern for us”. Another is rates of economic inactivity – areas such as South Ayrshire and Argyl and Bute have significantly higher rates than the Scottish average. These people need steady employment not a job in a new ‘transformational’ industry. Employability cannot be ignored, and a balance needs to be struck between providing opportunities at the regional level for “higher skill, better paid” jobs, and linking in the local employability partnerships. However, again this link needs to be supported by strong regional governance.

Cultural biases
The interviewees also discussed the longstanding cultural biases which were in part skewing the wider views on skills. A key bias that was highlighted is one towards certain educational pathways. The university route is often seen as the gold standard, whilst anything else is seen as “second best”.

Universities are key institutions and Scotland is incredibly fortunate to have more world-class universities than any other country by head of population. But several interviewees felt that colleges and apprenticeships were being wrongly ignored, both as a regional partner and an educational pathway. Arguably, apprenticeships are naturally tuned into employer demand and have a clear assessment of skill demand in each region. Colleges, likewise, were considered to be key as they are “rooted” in the local communities and regions. However, both are limited – colleges by credit allocations, and apprenticeships by the ambiguity of the apprenticeship levy. Not only have colleges in Scotland seen a ‘real term cut’ in funding, but funding through credits restricts their ability to adapt to regional needs, as stressed by the interviewees from Colleges Scotland. Likewise with the apprenticeship levy, employers are keen to have “more transparency with the levy and how it is utilised”. In Scotland, the money from the UK-wide levy was passed onto employers through the FWDF (in cash rather than credits). However, since the FWDF has stopped being funded, there has been a sense of ambiguity.

"National control freakery"
Overall, the interviewees showed concern at the lack of progress on regional skills. Skill gaps have been discussed for several years, yet perceptions were that it was unclear whether "it really led to much change". Many of the issues raised in the Withers review seem to remain. One interviewee even went as far to say that there was no clear "overarching" skills policy – "there is a series of initiatives and programmes, but they're all fighting for space".

The rhetoric of regional skill policy is not necessarily translating into action. There was agreement that progress was being hindered by concerns from the Scottish government about handing over power to regional institutions – there is "still too much sort of national control freakery going on".

Reflections
Overall, in Scotland regional skills face several structural, institutional and cultural barriers. Joined up working is limited by weak governance structures, lack of funding, and a limited culture of working together. There is still a lack of understanding around why a regional presence is needed. The power of certain institutions and a cultural bias towards certain educational pathways and procedures restricts any progress. There does appear to be a gap with implementation, but also perhaps a gap with how the regional reality is understood and what an effective regional skill approach means.

It is clear that the regions need more control and flexibility. For this to be effective they need a clearer governance framework. Whether Scotland could or should follow the mayoral combined authority route being taken in England is debateable. But amongst the interviewees there was a recognition that at least the combined authorities have a clearer structure and leader. For Scotland's regions, these leaders do not necessarily have to be the same type of institution. Although a common theme has been the important role that colleges can play – perhaps they could take more of a central role. The interviewees from Colleges Scotland noted that colleges "can help deliver both the skills planning, but then actually join up the skills planning with skills delivery". Northern Ireland has their colleges in a more prominent role answering to their Department for the Economy, rather than a separate funding body. Admittedly Northern Ireland only has six further education colleges which is far fewer than Scotland. However, it demonstrates that even a small organisational change could potentially encourage joined up regional working.

In terms of regional working, it is essential that SMEs and employers play a larger role. Institutional and structural changes could be a starting point, by giving these partners a platform and a recognised role in the system. The Withers report reflected this, highlighting the need for employers to have a stronger national and regional platform. Naturally it will take time to move forward with this, but the lack of action currently is concerning.

Once the regional institutes are in place, they need appropriate funding and decision-making control. The regional institutes currently are limited in power and ultimately rely on the central agencies who control the funding. There is a risk that Scotland currently does not have the appropriate levers to address regional skill issues and is simply reinforcing "some of the things that are already happening in the system".

Regional control is key but must be complemented by a strong national role. This will help create a clearer balance between the regional and the national elements. There has been a strong consensus that the NSET lacks clarity. It needs to be considered what the role of each region is in the national plan. A possible comparison could be to Skills England and their key sectors within their strategy. A place-based approach can focus on the key sectors that will help push national aims but also consider how to benefit regions and play to their strengths.

Alongside this, there needs to be a greater recognition of the benefits of working at the regional level. Additionally, there needs to be an acceptance that it is unrealistic to expect everywhere to benefit equally. Take for example, work done by the Resolution Foundation on what levelling up meant to people in Yorkshire – what people really wanted was to feel like they are connected to opportunities but also to retain a sense of pride in their local area.

This must also be accompanied by a reconsideration of how Scotland values certain skills, sectors, and educational pathways. It must be acknowledged in each region what will have the most impact on the people who live there. This in turn can encourage a more flexible approach to skills and learning – one that can properly engage with demand.

The current understanding and perceived value of skills are in part cultural but are reinforced by the structures and funding in place. Even slight changes to these could help improve the parity of esteem between the different skill providers. Colleges and apprenticeships are often seen as lesser than universities, but they can prove to be more effective regional partners. The Tertiary Education and Training Bill promises to establish a single funding body for tertiary education. This could potentially help shift the cultural bias but is still being discussed in the Scottish parliament. Greater parity of esteem would help give a larger role to colleges and apprenticeships, which arguably are more in tune with the regional needs.

Several gaps are present in the ideas and understanding of a regional skills approach in Scotland, but also between the rhetoric and the reality. These are enforced by large structural, institutional and cultural barriers, that are ingrained in Scottish policy. These will not be easy to address, but even small changes or reconsiderations of values could benefit greatly. One thing that is certain is that there is a strong appetite for regional working, and a desire to tackle skill issues and regional disparities. The regions would benefit greatly from more control and flexibility, but this must be accompanied by clear and decisive action from the Scottish government.

Joe Robinson is a recent graduate from the University of Edinburgh, with an MSc in Public Policy. His dissertation can be viewed here.

Misleading Educational Statistics

By Lindsay Paterson

Originally published on 9th December 2025

Campaigning for next May's elections to the Scottish Parliament will doubtless draw widely on published educational statistics. But these are deeply flawed. A ***report*** by Enlighten a year ago explained this in detail, and proposed ways in which the situation could be improved. No political party has yet said what they would do about it.
Here are seven examples of misleading statistics. When you hear politicians making claims based on data of any of these kinds, challenge them to explain why they trust numbers that are so suspect.

Attainment in secondary schools

The claim that is heard every summer – and celebrated by government and opposition alike – is that attainment is stable or rising, and that the difficulties caused by Covid have been put behind us. On the face of it, the data seem to bear this out. One favourite criterion is the proportion of school leavers who had five or more passes at level 5 – that is, at National 5 or equivalent. In 2024 this was 55%, essentially the same as in 2012. No progress, but no apparent harm from those things that politicians cite as deeply harmful – Covid, economic difficulties, Brexit. For the next level of examination above that, there even seems to have been an improvement. In 2012, the proportion of leavers who had passed three or more Highers (or equivalent) was 40%. In 2024, this rose to 42%.

There are of course two ways in which a country's examination attainment can appear to be strong. One is real learning. The other is a weakening of the standards of assessment. Objective criteria that are defined independently of the country's own measures can distinguish between these two. When we do that here, the Scottish picture is not good. The only available international criteria are from the so-called PISA studies, run by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. In all three measures in PISA, the attainment of Scottish 15-year-olds has emphatically fallen since 2012. The most useful yardstick to say how bad the fall has been is equivalent years of schooling. In reading, between 2012 and 2022, the fall was about three quarters of a year. In both mathematics and science, it was a year and a half.

The age for the PISA assessments – around 15 – is much the same as for the Nationals, and only a year lower than for Highers. If the attainment of 15-year-olds has been falling in the way that PISA suggests, then the only reliable conclusion is that the assessment standards of the Nationals and Highers have weakened.

So the political claims of rising attainment, and of no lasting Covid harm to attainment, are statistical fictions.

Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels

The same is even more true of Scottish government reports of attainment in early secondary and primary. These are published annually in December as 'Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels'. They appear to show a system that is doing extremely well, even better than in the statistics on Highers and Nationals. The earliest school session for which the information was published was 2017. For pupils in the third year of

secondary school in that year, 90% had achieved the stipulated level in reading, and 88% in numeracy. In 2024, the corresponding figures were both 90%.

Pupils in the third year of secondary school are aged 14-15. Again, they are broadly the same age as for the PISA studies. So these attainment statistics, too, fail to capture the serious decline of attainment that has been picked up by PISA. They also fail to record any impact of Covid.

The reason for the discrepancy between the reported achievement and the PISA results is not difficult to find. What is euphemistically called pupils' achievement of the curriculum levels is in fact teachers' impressions of whether their own pupils have achieved the levels. These impressions are not based on objective data of the PISA kind. They are not even based on the somewhat more reliable data of the kind represented by Nationals and Highers. They are simply hunches. None of us, as teachers, are very good at assessing our own students on the basis of informal judgement. That's why education has developed objective testing over the past century and a half, independent of teachers and of politicians. The Scottish government used to check regularly on the discrepancy between teacher judgements and real attainment, through the Scottish Survey of Achievement. It has not done so since they abolished that survey in 2008.

So the political claim that almost all pupils reach satisfactory levels of attainment is our second statistical fiction.

Social Inequality

The present Scottish government says that closing what it calls the 'poverty related attainment gap' is its educational priority. No other political party dissents from that aim.

The published statistics seem to show that progress is being made. The regular series on this topic reports attainment in terms of the social characteristics of the neighbourhood in which pupils live. These characteristics are summed up in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, which for publication is grouped into five categories, ranging from the most deprived fifth to the least deprived fifth. Inequality of attainment at a particular level is then measured as the difference between the proportions in these two groupings who gained that level. For passing at least one National 5 or equivalent, the inequality was 27.4% in 2012, but 18.1% in 2024. For Higher or equivalent, it fell from 43.8%to 31.8%. Over a decade – especially one that included the enormous disruption caused by Covid – the fall of inequality might seem quite heartening.

But this whole approach mis-uses the Index of Multiple Deprivation. It is a genuinely valuable way of understanding the characteristics of whole neighbourhood. But it is misleading as a measure of the social circumstances of individual pupils and their families. That's because the 'neighbourhoods' on which the Index is based are internally heterogeneous. There are many non-deprived people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods (and there is much hidden poverty in the most advantaged places).

We can estimate the extent of the inadequacy by using the high-quality annual Scottish Household Survey. The most recent survey from which the dataset is available is 2022. This survey reveals large pockets of social advantage even in the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods.

For example, fully 18% of families with children in these deprived neighbourhoods contained at least one university graduate. One quarter of families with children in these neighbourhoods had annual household income of more than £40k. The corresponding proportions in 2012 were much lower – 10% and 5%.

The problem is that the improved attainment by pupils in the most deprived neighbourhoods might well be due entirely to the growing minority from these non-deprived families. Children in families with a graduate parent tend, on average, to have much higher attainment than other children. So the apparent fall of inequality might not be due to any relative progress by children in actually deprived families.

The PISA studies again allow us to assess what has truly happened to individual inequality. PISA contains an index of the social circumstances of individual families, not neighbourhoods. Inequality can then be measured by the gap in PISA attainment between the most and least advantaged quarters of that index. In 2012, in reading, the gap was equivalent to 3.9 years of schooling; in 2022, it had widened to 4.7 years. In mathematics, these gaps were 4.3 and 5.2. In science, they were 4.1 and 4.8. The consistently growing gap, when measured properly in this way, adds strongly to the sense that the progress painted by the Scottish government's statistics is an illusion.

An ostensible narrowing of inequalities because graduates increasingly live in socially deprived neighbourhoods may tell us something about the dire state of the graduate labour market. But it does not, on its own, tell us about the quality of the schools. So this political claim of falling social inequalities of attainment is our third statistical fiction.

Attendance

Statistical reports on pupils' absence from school seem to show no more than a quite minor problem. They show, for example, that in primary school, on any given day in 2023-4, around 7.5% of pupils were absent, and only 2.6% were absent without permission ('unauthorised absence'). The picture was somewhat less rosy for secondaries, at 12.3% and 5.2%, but even these could not be described as a crisis.

But the real crisis is persisting absence. The one in twenty secondary pupils who are unaccountably absent on one day might or might not be the same as those who are absent the next day, or the next week. Enlighten's Commission on School Reform found in 2023 (but only through Freedom of Information Requests) that there was an alarmingly high proportion of pupils who were absent for lengthy periods of time. Around a quarter of pupils at primary school, and four out of ten at secondary, were absent on at least 10% of occasions. Following that report, the Scottish government started publishing annual information on this, including some historical data that confirmed Enlighten's research. This is indeed a crisis. No wonder attainment (when measured properly) is falling.

So the political claim of generally good attendance is our fourth statistical fiction.

Global citizenship

Faced with the indubitable evidence of declining attainment in PISA, Scottish politicians like to cite the apparently better Scottish showing in a test of 'global citizenship' that was part of the PISA study in 2018. Compared to other countries, Scottish 15-year-olds did

perform relatively well in these tests, but only 27 countries took part (whereas 78 took the tests of attainment). These did not include any of the high-attaining European countries – such as Estonia – nor any of the other parts of the UK. A rather larger group of countries did use the accompanying survey which asked for students' attitudes to global issues, and for whether these were taught in schools. This included 20 EU countries. Scotland had high proportions with liberal attitudes. For example, large majorities of Scottish 15-year-olds had positive attitudes to immigrants, for example supporting equal opportunities for immigrants, their right to vote, their right to a distinctive culture, and their general rights. On each of these questions the proportion in support of the liberal position was around 88% in Scotland but around 13 points lower across the participating EU countries.

But the Scottish pupils were less likely than elsewhere in the EU to report that they were learning about global challenges from their school. For example, for learning about different cultures in school, the proportions were 70% in Scotland but 76% across the other EU countries. For learning about solving conflicts, they were 52% and 61%. For learning about the interconnectedness of economies, they were 40% and 56%.

So the claim that Scottish adolescents are liberal and globally minded is quite accurate. But the political claim that this is due to the schools is our fifth statistical fiction.

Positive destinations

In Scottish-government parlance, a positive destination for a school leaver is having something worthwhile to do. According to the annual reports on these, the proportion who enter them is extremely high – over 95%. But the definition of positive is amorphous, being 'higher education, further education, training, employment, voluntary work, [or] Personal Skills Development'. Employment might in theory be a stable, full-time job with good prospects. But for a school leaver who is not progressing to training or education, it is much more likely to be a zero-hours arrangement with no actual contract and no offer of training or any other kind of career advice. If we narrow down to the destinations which have some form of quality control – higher and further education, and training – the numbers are far lower. Recently, around 30% have not been in these three categories.

Again, as with attainment, the problem is compounded when we are trying to understand social inequalities. Using the Index of Multiple Deprivation, the proportion of leavers in 2024 with this narrower definition of positive destination was 70% from the most deprived fifth of neighbourhoods and 79% from the least deprived, a gap of 9% that was a quarter less than the 12% of 2012. That drop was mainly due to a rise in the most deprived fifth from 64%. But as with the attainment measures, this change of inequality since 2012 could be entirely explained by the growing proportion of families in deprived neighbourhoods who have a university graduate in the household. Graduate parents not only help with a child's learning. They can provide advice on career paths, on how to apply to university, on what kinds of voluntary work can eventually lead to a good job. Therefore, once again, the published statistics do not tell us whether the apparent fall of inequality is an illusion.

So the political attributing of positive destinations to anything which schools are doing is our sixth statistical fiction.

Relationship of per-pupil expenditure and outcomes

The final topic is about inputs as distinct from outputs. The Scottish government spends more per pupil than England. That is affordable only because of the flow of tax money to Scotland from the rich parts of England.

A study earlier this year by the Institute for Fiscal Studies quantified the gap:
'in 2009-10, spending per pupil in Scotland was around £8,300 in today's prices, which is about 4% higher than the £8,000 seen in England at the time. By 2024–25, spending per pupil is expected to be £10,100 in Scotland, approximately 20% higher than in England (£8,400 per pupil).'

The IFS authors point out that much of this relative increase in Scottish spending was taken up with salaries for teachers. The overall growth of 27% between 2015-16 and 2023-24 included three 7% increases in teachers' pay (2019, 2022 and 2023).

However, spending tells us little about the quality of a school system. Even if we were to take the Scottish government's version of the statistics quoted above, we would still have to conclude that the increase of expenditure had led to only a rather modest increase in attainment or 'positive destinations'. When we use objective data, and when we also compare that with England, the inefficiency of Scottish public spending in education is stark. In PISA, comparing 2012 with 2022 (thus including the Covid disruption), whereas Scottish reading scores fell by the equivalent of three quarters of a year, the English fall was only one fifth of a year. In mathematics, the year and half fall in Scotland was about nine times greater than the fall in England. In science, the fall in Scotland (a year and a half) was more than twice the fall in England. The well-funded Scottish schools, with well-paid teachers, did not provide any greater resilience during the pandemic than the less generously funded schools in England.

So the political boast of generous public spending on education in Scotland is beside the point. Claims about the value of spending lots of money is thus our seventh statistical fiction.

In short, despite misleading data, attainment is probably not satisfactory, policy is probably not causing inequality to fall, destinations for about a third of school leavers are not, in any genuine sense, 'positive', and lavish expenditure is, in large part, a waste of money. So when confronted over the next six months by canvassers or candidates or manifestoes – or even by ostensibly neutral publications from the civil service – be sceptical. And perhaps recommend Enlighten Scotland's plan for better educational statistics.

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Everyone agrees that Holyrood needs change, so why isn't it changing?

By James Bundy & Stephen Kerr

Originally published on 10th December 2025

We are proud Scots. We love our nation and want her to reach her full potential, knowing she can always do better. We are blessed to live in a country which has such natural beauty, deep history, and meaningful cultural traditions. For any nation, the primary function of Parliament is to conserve the features that make their country unique and empower people, families and towns to reach their potential. At the heart of these efforts is holding the Government of the day to account. For the most part, it is Government that sets the legislative agenda and oversees the implementation of legislation. Therefore, it is Parliament's job to scrutinise the proposals of Government; flesh out any weaknesses in Bills; shape proposals so they work in reality. If Parliament is weak, comparatively to Government, then no nation will reach her potential. A strong Parliament is essential for a prosperous nation.

Scotland's Parliament is not strong. In fact, we would go so far to say that it is institutionally hamstrung through structural design and cultural attitudes. This belief, and our love of Scotland, is what compelled us to write our essay for the Scottish Affairs Journal. We are, however, not the only people talking about the need of Parliamentary Reform at Holyrood. Our party colleagues, Donald Cameron and Murdo Fraser, have written extensively about this. But it is not only Scottish Conservatives. Former SNP minister, Alex Neil, and former Labour MSP and former Presiding Officer, Ken McInstosh, have also written about this; as has former Labour First Minister, Henry McLeish, and Professor James Mitchell in a new book. Whilst the recommendations in each work mentioned are not identical, there are significant overlaps of key themes: committee restructuring, empowering backbenchers, and making Parliament more accessible to the public.

If there is cross-party and academic recognition for parliamentary reform, which there is, then the question becomes: Why is Holyrood not changing? If most recognise that the system is broke, then why is there little attempt to fix it? There is not one definitive source for this scenario, but there are overlapping attitudes. The first of these is complacency. We have a complacent Government who enjoy having a set-up of a strong executive and weak Parliament. We have several complacent MSPs who seem to believe their job is to be photographed with as much third-sector organisations as possible, rather than the actual hard work of holding Government to account. A source of this complacency is the lack of public appetite for the events of the Scottish Parliament and the subsequent lack of parliamentary reporting by the media. Another attitude is control. The Government feels in control due the weak Parliament. Party leaders feel in culture due to a lack of backbench culture. Why would you seek any reform which diminishes your control? The third, and final, attitude is pride which punishes all questioning. Of course, we should inspire for a Parliament which all Scots can be proud of, but there is also a reason why pride is one of the deadly sins. When pride results in out casting for simply suggesting that not everything is perfect, then pride is an obstacle of progress. It is this deadly combination of complacency, control, and pride which is preventing Holyrood from becoming the parliament it can and should be.

Control

Holyrood was conceived as a legislature in which ideas would emerge from the "bottom up." Its institutional design was intended to disperse power: committees were empowered to draw on their subject-matter expertise, scrutinise legislation robustly, and, crucially, initiate Committee Bills. The absence of any built-in mechanism for single-party dominance was meant to ensure that legislation reaching the Chamber would be the product of negotiation, compromise, and cross-party deliberation. In its early years, between 1999 and 2011, this vision broadly held. Committee Bills remained infrequent, but the institutional culture was more pluralistic, and the executive was structurally required to engage with opposition parties.

The watershed moment came in 2011. With the SNP securing an outright parliamentary majority, the dynamic of governance shifted dramatically. For the first time, a Scottish Government discovered that Holyrood's institutional architecture makes it unusually vulnerable to executive dominance. Both structurally and culturally, the Parliament's mechanisms for scrutiny are weak when placed under strain by a confident majority administration. As the experience of several controversial Bills demonstrates, such as Named Persons, Gender Recognition, and Offensive Behaviour at Football, an assertive government can push legislation through Holyrood even when the design or public support for that legislation is questionable. This is not an aberration; it is the rational exploitation of a system whose checks and balances were never built to withstand majority rule.

Holyrood's structural vulnerabilities are compounded by the legal and bureaucratic environment in which MSPs operate. Members still lack full parliamentary privilege, a deficit that the Salmond inquiry starkly illuminated: MSPs cannot speak freely without risk of legal consequences, and a Parliament that cannot speak freely cannot properly scrutinise. At the same time, the civil service wields disproportionate institutional influence relative to the small, unicameral Chamber. Ministers rotate, but officials endure, drafting legislation, shaping committee evidence, and acting as the default repository of policy knowledge. Committee churn and the rapid turnover of MSPs and staff mean institutional memory is constantly lost, preventing expertise from bedding in and leaving ministers and civil servants with a decisive informational advantage. Without a second chamber and with committees insufficiently empowered, there is no effective check on this bureaucratic dominance. Executive control, reinforced by bureaucratic continuity, legal constraint, and the erosion of institutional memory, thus finds fertile ground in Holyrood's design.

This political reality suits governments. When executive dominance is achievable, why would any administration, regardless of party, voluntarily expose its agenda to greater scrutiny or empower institutions capable of constraining it? Parliamentary reform requires a majority of MSPs, yet government parties are structurally incentivised to resist changes that would dilute their influence. The result is an institutional paradox: meaningful reform requires the consent of those who benefit from the status quo.

A second locus of control reinforces this dynamic: party leadership. As argued in our essay in the Scottish Affairs Journal, Holyrood's internal parliamentary procedures have, in practice, strengthened the authority of party leaderships over their MSPs. Apart from members' business, MSPs must seek permission from party whips, not the Presiding

Officer, to speak in debates. This grants party hierarchies significant control over not only who is heard in Parliament but also what is said. An MSP who gains a reputation for independent thinking rather than message discipline is unlikely to be prioritised for parliamentary visibility, and without visibility, electoral viability weakens.

These pressures are compounded by the party-list component of Scotland's electoral system. While parties require votes to secure list seats, individual MSPs require favourable placement on their party's list to be re-elected. Securing such placement demands popularity with party leaders and with party members. To remain in favour with party leadership, MSPs must align with the party's strategic priorities. To remain visible among the membership, MSPs must speak frequently in the Chamber. Both incentives reinforce conformity. The logic is simple: loyalty is rewarded, independence penalised.

Reforms that would strengthen Holyrood's institutional autonomy, empowering backbenchers, enhancing committee independence, or diluting leadership control, run counter to these incentives. Party leaders have little reason to support reforms that would weaken their authority. MSPs, even those who privately support reform, risk damaging their career prospects by championing it publicly. The consequence is a self-reinforcing cycle: party leaders maintain control because MSPs are incentivised to seek their approval; MSPs seek their approval because leaders control their visibility and advancement.

In such a system, the absence of reform is not a failure of imagination or political will. It is the predictable outcome of a Parliament designed to disperse power but practised in ways that concentrate it, and of political actors who rationally choose to preserve the advantages that concentration affords.

Complacency

Alongside structural control, a deeper cultural complacency permeates Holyrood. The atmosphere is unusually comfortable for an institution that should function as a forum of rigorous scrutiny, intellectual contestation, and demanding public service. Parliamentary life ought to involve engagement with complex legislation, mastery of parliamentary detail, sustained interaction with constituents, businesses, and civic organisations, and, above all, a persistent appetite to hold power to account. Yet across parties, this appetite is too often absent. The prevailing culture discourages the kind of restless vigilance that healthy democratic institutions depend upon.

A central feature of this culture is the emergence of what may be described as "insiders" and "outsiders." The insider group is defined by conformity, deference, and a reluctance to disturb established hierarchies. In the Chamber, this manifests in opposition MSPs softening their criticism of ministers, often in the misplaced belief that courtesy or restraint will secure goodwill from the Government. The empirical reality shows otherwise: conciliatory behaviour is frequently met not with constructive engagement but with dismissive or partisan responses from ministers. Yet the habit persists. This reluctance to challenge, to probe, or to risk unpopularity functions as an informal protection for those in power, reducing the likelihood of confrontational scrutiny and therefore undermining any meaningful push for parliamentary reform.

The insider culture extends beyond the Chamber. Many third-sector organisations, some heavily reliant on Scottish Government funding, exert disproportionate influence in shaping parliamentary discourse. It is appropriate for interest groups to contribute to policy debates (though they shouldn't get Government funding); it is not appropriate for parliamentarians to accept their views uncritically or to outsource legislative judgement to them. MSPs should interrogate evidence, weigh competing perspectives, and situate proposals within broader strategic goals. Too often, however, they do not.

A pattern has emerged: organisations receive government funding, develop policy proposals, use their networks to elevate these proposals, and are then invited to committees as "independent" expert, where they predictably advocate for the same policies they have helped design. This circularity blurs the boundary between independent scrutiny and state-sponsored advocacy. It is why we proposed that any organisation receiving public funds should be required to declare this explicitly when providing evidence to a committee.

The existing closeness between government and segments of the third sector reinforces insider behaviour: those who support the Government's preferred direction are amplified and rewarded, further diminishing incentives from out with for parliamentary independence or reform.

By contrast, those who resist this culture, the outsiders, face tangible consequences. The clearest example is Fergus Ewing, whose opposition to the Deposit Return Scheme stemmed from a detailed examination of the evidence and a willingness to diverge from the official party line. His refusal to adopt the positions advocated by ministers and echoed by influential third-sector groups led to his expulsion from the SNP group. Ewing's case is instructive: independent thought and principled dissent came at significant personal and political cost. His experience illustrates the risks borne by MSPs who challenge entrenched control. For many, the message is obvious: conformity ensures career stability; dissent invites sanction. This dynamic breeds the complacency that now characterises large parts of the institution.

If Holyrood is to undergo substantial parliamentary reform, more MSPs must be willing to reject the comfort of the insider role and embrace the responsibilities, and risks, of the outsider. Parliamentary reform will not emerge from those who benefit from the system as it stands. It requires a cultural shift in which independence, scrutiny, and intellectual honesty are rewarded rather than penalised. Without such a shift, the Parliament will remain structurally constrained, culturally compliant, and resistant to the reforms necessary for it to function as a truly autonomous check on executive power.

Pride

As we argued in our Scottish Affairs essay, the Scottish Parliament was founded on a defining aspiration: that it would be fundamentally different from Westminster. This aspiration, shaped by the political mood of the late 1990s, carried with it a powerful assumption: that by rejecting Westminster's practices, Scotland would automatically create a superior model of parliamentary governance. This belief, still held in some quarters today, has proven to be unfounded. Simply inverting Westminster's procedures has not produced the "world-leading" legislature envisioned at Holyrood's inception. Yet

any suggestion that the Scottish Parliament might learn from Westminster's strengths is frequently dismissed as an attack on Scotland itself.

This reflex reveals a deeper problem. For a significant number of people, Holyrood has ceased to be viewed primarily as a democratic institution; it has become a symbol of national identity, an emblem of Scotland's distinctiveness and, for some, its future independence. Under this symbolic framing, criticism of Holyrood is treated not as institutional analysis but as a cultural affront. To question its effectiveness is to "talk Scotland down," to undermine national pride, or to promote a supposed desire to reinstate Westminster dominance. The rhetoric is often hyperbolic, but its political effect is real: it shuts down public debate.

This defensiveness has serious consequences. When the Parliament becomes a proxy for Scottishness itself, it becomes insulated from scrutiny. Structural weaknesses are minimised or ignored; failings are deflected with the familiar refrain: "But look at Westminster." This comparison is deployed not as a tool of evaluation but as a shield against parliamentary reform, allowing Holyrood's shortcomings to persist unchallenged. The result is a culture in which pride inhibits learning, reflection, and institutional improvement.

The problem is exacerbated by both the thinning of the media landscape and the cultural dynamics that insulate Holyrood from scrutiny. Government communications teams now vastly outnumber political reporters, investigative journalism has declined, and ministerial announcements dominate the news cycle. Without sustained media pressure, institutional weaknesses remain largely invisible to the public, allowing complacency to persist unchecked. In such an environment, structural and cultural flaws within the Parliament continue unchallenged, and citizens are deprived of the information necessary to demand meaningful reform.

This deficit of external scrutiny is compounded by a pervasive reluctance, both inside and outside Parliament, to confront inconvenient truths. Fear of being labelled unpatriotic, anti-Scottish, or hostile to devolution encourages self-censorship: criticisms are whispered privately but rarely voiced publicly. While understandable, this reticence is deeply damaging.

A mature democracy requires the capacity to critique its own institutions without collapsing into accusations of disloyalty. Parliamentarians, in particular, have a duty not to protect national myths but to defend the public interest. True patriotism lies not in uncritical reverence for Holyrood, but in demanding that it performs better, speaking candidly about institutional failures, challenging narratives rooted in pride rather than evidence, and advocating reforms that strengthen the Parliament's capacity to serve the people of Scotland.

Conclusion

Taken together, the dynamics of control, complacency, and pride reveal a Parliament that is no longer operating in accordance with its founding ideals. Holyrood was designed to disperse power, elevate deliberation, and embed scrutiny at the heart of Scottish governance. Yet its practice has drifted substantially from this vision. What has emerged instead is a system in which executive authority is structurally advantaged, party

leaderships exercise an unusually tight grip over parliamentary behaviour, and cultural norms discourage dissent, independent thought, and serious challenge.

The result is a legislature increasingly defined by its vulnerabilities: a Parliament where governments can legislate with minimal resistance; where MSPs face strong disincentives to depart from party lines; where committees often lack the autonomy and authority to shape policy; and where civic voices are amplified or muted depending on their proximity to government priorities. These are not isolated flaws but interconnected features that reinforce one another. A compliant political culture strengthens executive dominance; executive dominance sustains complacency; and complacency is protected by a belief that critique is synonymous with disloyalty.

Holyrood's institutional weaknesses are not the product of bad actors or malicious intent. They are the predictable outcomes of a system whose rules, incentives, and political culture now work against the purposes for which the Parliament was established. But if these trends are predictable, they are also reversible. Institutions can be redesigned. Cultures can be reshaped. Incentives can be realigned. What is required is not nostalgia for a previous era nor resentment toward the present, but a clear-eyed recognition that the Parliament's current trajectory is unsustainable if Holyrood is to function as an effective democratic check on executive power.

Central to this reform must be a rebuilding of committees on principles of independence and capability. Conveners should be elected by secret ballot of the whole chamber rather than installed by party whips, and their remuneration should reflect ministerial levels to attract the most capable MSPs. Committees themselves should be divided between Bill Committees, tasked with line-by-line scrutiny of Government legislation, and Subject Committees with the authority and space to develop their own committee-led bills. A Backbench Business Committee is also essential to ensure that parliamentary time is allocated according to public interest and cross-party demand, rather than hoarded by party managers.

Equally vital is a higher standard of transparency for those giving evidence to committees. Any organisation receiving public funds should declare that relationship clearly when appearing before Parliament. Scrutiny cannot rely on a closed circle of government-funded bodies validating government policy. Parliament needs independent voices, free of financial dependence on the very ministers they are asked to scrutinise. Only with such independence and openness can committees fulfil their proper role as engines of deliberation, challenge, and legislative innovation.

Procedural reform within the Chamber itself is also critical. Speech lengths should be extended to allow genuine interventions and argument rather than rote recitation, while countdown clocks could help MSPs manage their contributions and encourage meaningful exchange. Question deadlines should be moved closer to delivery so that ministers cannot rehearse answers days in advance. Without spontaneity and the possibility of surprise, scrutiny risks becoming theatre rather than accountability. These relatively straightforward adjustments could immediately strengthen the quality of debate and reinvigorate parliamentary engagement, complementing broader structural reforms.

Scotland deserves a legislature that scrutinises rigorously, debates honestly, and legislates wisely. It deserves committees with genuine autonomy, backbenchers with meaningful influence, and parliamentary procedures that reward independence rather than conformity. It deserves a political culture in which MSPs feel empowered to question, challenge, and dissent without fear of marginalisation. Most importantly, it deserves a Parliament capable of self-reflection, and willing to reform itself accordingly.
The path to such a Parliament will not be easy. Those who benefit from the status quo, governments, party leaderships, and institutional insiders, have little incentive to initiate reform. Yet democratic renewal has rarely come from those in power; it has come from those willing to hold power to account. If Holyrood is to become the Parliament Scotland needs, reform must be demanded by MSPs who refuse to accept complacency; by civic organisations that value independence over access; and by citizens who expect a Parliament worthy of their trust.

The case for parliamentary reform is no longer a matter of preference, it is a matter of democratic necessity. Holyrood must be strengthened if it is to serve Scotland with the integrity, rigour, and ambition that its founders envisioned. The time has come for MSPs, parties, and the public to commit to meaningful institutional renewal.

If we want a Parliament that truly reflects the aspirations of Scotland, we must reform it: boldly, urgently, and without apology.

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Towards a Skills-First Scotland: Why Incremental Reform Isn't Enough

By Jonathan Clark

Originally published on 17th December 2025

The latest employment figures for Scotland show another drop in the number of 16-24 year olds in work.

For more than a decade, Scotland has been grappling with a tension at the heart of its post-16 skills and education system. On the one hand, more young people than ever before are staying in education beyond school and achieving higher levels of qualification. On the other, the link between qualifications, opportunity and prosperity is weakening. The graduate premium has been shrinking, productivity is flatlining and both employers and learners describe a system that feels increasingly misaligned with their needs and Scotland's economic realities.

This tension is not new, or unique to Scotland. But as the country enters 2026, it faces parliamentary elections, a new tertiary education and training Bill and a period of political change. With economic pressures intensifying and institutional finances tightening across the board, it has become impossible to ignore the pressures on the skills system. A broad consensus is emerging: Scotland must strike a better balance between a qualification-led system and a skills-first system, one that is more agile, more employer-shaped, more capable of supporting better transitions into work, lifelong learning and more honest about the limits of the current institutional model.

The question for policymakers is no longer whether reform is necessary, but how far we are prepared to go? And whether the new Bill, while necessary, is sufficient to the challenge.

A Skills System Built for a Different Economy

From the Glasgow Athenaeum in the 1800s to the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) in the early 2000s, Scotland has a proud history of innovation in the area of vocational education and training. Our post-16 landscape in Scotland was largely shaped in an era when occupational pathways were more stable and linear, when higher education reliably delivered upward mobility and when the labour market could absorb an expanding pool of graduates.

That world has changed.

Despite relatively high levels of overall employment, Scotland's economy is being reshaped by technological disruption, demographic pressures, globalisation, green transition and the unpredictable impact on jobs at all levels. This is more complex than the hollowing out of mid-skill roles that was once predicted. AI and automation are expected to transform nearly half of all jobs by the end of the decade. Meanwhile productivity lags, low-wage service work expands, and regional labour-market inequalities deepen.

This is a profoundly different context from the one in which Scotland's current post-

school architecture: universities, colleges, apprenticeships and associated qualification frameworks were built. And yet, in important respects, policy and institutional behaviours remain anchored in a world that no longer exists.

How We Got Here: Three Phases of Scotland's Skills Policy

While Scotland's colleges, along with the rest of the education system, have always been a devolved matter, it is only since the Enterprise and New Town (Scotland) Act 1990 that policy responsibility for apprenticeships and training was vested in the Scottish Government. To better understand the crossroads Scotland faces today, it is useful to view the skills system as the product of three overlapping eras of policy since the late 1980s, each reflecting the challenges of its time while unintentionally creating constraints for the next.

1. The Expansion Era (1980s–2000s)

Characterised by rapid expansion of higher education, rising participation and the embedding of Scotland's unique educational identity. This era broadened opportunity but created a structural tilt toward higher education pathways and the accumulation of qualifications. It also saw Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ) more widely embedded, the launch of Modern Apprenticeships (MA) and a move away from the mass youth training programmes of the 70s and 80s.

2. The Human Capital Era (2000s–2015)

The system became increasingly focussed on 'skills utilisation', shaped by the logic of productivity and economic competitiveness set out in "Skills for Scotland", the government's 2007 strategy. Apprenticeships expanded and the creation of Skills Development Scotland combined with college restructuring moved towards a more centralised model. Despite the Wood Commission into the development of Scotland's young workforce, employer leadership remained weak and work based pathways underdeveloped.

3. The Stretched System Era (2015–present)

The system has increasingly faced pressures from a rapidly changing labour market, with automation, rising inactivity, youth mental health challenges and demographic decline. Critically, this era was also marked by pressure on public finances, the impact of BREXIT on EU structural funds and COVID. Colleges, universities and apprenticeships, the pillars of Scotland's post-16 system, now face unprecedented financial stress.

University funding per Scottish-domiciled student has fallen substantially in real terms, several institutions are carrying significant deficits and the international student cross-subsidy model has lost stability. At the same time, political discourse around student contributions remains frozen.

Colleges face similar pressures: reduced real-terms funding, declining enrolments, lower attainment and shrinking cash reserves. Demographic decline in the 16–24 population intensifies competition for learners across institutions, even as employers simultaneously struggle to recruit.

Employer investment in training continues its long-term decline, now around half the EU average. The Apprenticeship Levy has not produced the expected uplift in investment

and apprenticeship demand consistently outstrips available government-funded places.

While each phase has contributed important gains, this era has exposed the limits of a system facing acute funding pressures and an operating model largely designed around linear progression and institutional silos. In the absence of a clear national skills strategy, they now leave Scotland with a system stretched across conflicting purposes and unable to meet the demands of the labour market emerging in the 2020s and 2030s.

Beyond the drivers set out above, there are also less obvious factors shaping our national skills system.

The Pull of Powerful Narratives
One of the barriers to change is Scotland's enduring educational mythology. From the "lad o' pairts" to the parish school to the modern mantra of free higher education, Scotland's self-image is profoundly shaped by stories about social mobility, merit and democratisation through learning.

These narratives matter. They frame perceptions of what success should look like for young people and society more widely. They underpin political commitments, especially free tuition, that are difficult to reconsider even as structural pressures mount. They help explain why widening access has been prioritised over widening choice and why the system continues to channel a high proportion of school leavers into higher education, even as the labour market signals point elsewhere.

Narratives alone don't determine policy, but they strongly influence where political risk is tolerated and where it is not.

Path Dependency: The Invisible Architecture of the System
A core challenge for reform and Scotland's future skills journey is "path dependency", or the way past decisions constrain future choices. Once institutional structures, relationships, funding mechanisms and qualification frameworks are established, they shape incentives long after their original policy intent and context has passed.

In Scotland, this could mean that institutional funding models prioritise organisational survival over the needs of learners, the economy and society. That we reinforce a qualifications-led culture where progression is equated with accumulating certificates. That employer involvement is encouraged but not embedded and we continue to have siloed governance across schools, colleges, universities and apprenticeships.

Recent reports from both Our Future Scotland and Demos recognise that path dependency is one factor putting the handbrake on effective implementation and understanding why incremental reforms repeatedly fall short.

The Crossroads: Why Incremental Reform Won't Be Enough
The pressures now building are structural misalignments, not cyclical or temporary blips. The fiscal reality of public finances and the needs of the labour market are set against a backdrop of accelerating technological transformation, changes to demography and employer investment in skills that will not rise without meaningful co-ownership and a clear national economic strategy as argued for by Sir Anton Muscatelli in his recent paper.

Colleges, universities, apprenticeships and the wider skills system cannot absorb continued real-terms cuts without pivoting and building on their considerable strengths. It is about recognising that the system (largely) designed for an industrial economy cannot deliver the Scotland of the 2030s

Gatsby Foundation's recent paper "Towards a skills-first Scotland: pathways to prosperity", sets out the case for distinct and clear national skills strategy built on the five pillars of:

- making work the central purpose
- aligning the skills system to economic priorities
- employer-led skills development
- rebuilding colleges as the enablers of opportunity
- a flexible skills system

Without a clear vision and coherent, interlocking economic and skills strategies that have broad support, Scotland risks trying to solve tomorrow's problems with yesterday's tools under today's budget pressures. Incremental reform focussed on structures and institutions will not solve the fundamental misalignment between Scotland's policy inheritance and its economic future.

A renaissance in Scotland's skills system needs to harness the experience, commitment and talent of those that work in the sector and leverage more from the £2bn of annual public investment. A skills-first Scotland is a necessary next stage in the evolution of Scotland's post-school system, through which Scotland can articulate and align its economic ambitions, social mobility goals and labour-market needs with vigour and purpose.

Jonathan Clark has several decades experience in economic and skills development. Formerly a Director at Scottish Enterprise and Skills Development Scotland, his work focuses on innovation and impactful strategy. His most recent report for the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, Towards a skills-first Scotland: pathways to prosperity, was published in November.

Fear in the Aisles: Why Retail Crime needs to be tackled by the next Scottish Government

By Ewan MacDonald-Russell

Originally published on 29th December 2025

Abuse and far too often violence. Sexist, homophobic, or racist abuse. Criminal damage. Hundreds of millions of stolen goods. The brutal reality of the impact of crime on Scotland's retail industry.

The statistics tell a terrible tale. According to trade union USDAW 70 per cent of shopworkers have been abused at work, 45 per cent threatened, and 8 per cent assaulted. The official figures are similarly stark. The Scottish Government's Recorded Crime in Scotland 2024-25 data found there were 2,870 common assaults of a retail worker. 406 of those are with injury. However, it's almost certain those appalling figures don't represent the true scale of the problem. It's likely many retailers no longer report abuse at work. Shop workers fear either the police won't respond, or even if they do, and even if the perpetrator makes it through the tortuous criminal justice system, the consequences aren't enough to deter. Even if the Recorded Crime figures are accurate, that would still mean the very best case scenario is nearly eight shop workers a week are being assaulted and injured.

The impact is enormous. Shop workers tell horror stories of being threatened with knives unless they hand over goods. Store owners and managers talk with despair at watching products being carried out the store, knowing if they try to stop the thief then their life might be at risk.

Theft often comes hand in hand with this, indeed is the precursor to abuse or worse. The most recent Recorded Crime in Scotland release found that between 2023-24 and 2024-25 shop theft increased by 16% from 38,674 to 44,730 crimes in the year to the end of September. That is a 57% increase over the 10 year period between 2015-16 and 2024-25, from 28,424 to 44,730 crimes. Or to put it another way shop theft is now at the highest level since 1971. This is an endemic problem which increases costs for shoppers whilst making the shopping experience worse.

This is a visible problem for shoppers as well. According to our Consumer Sentiment Monitor 17 per cent of consumers have seen shopworkers abused, and 19 per cent of Scots have witnessed shop lifting. No one wants to visit a shop which is a crime scene or which is persistently affected by abuse, doubly hitting retailers for no fault of their own.

There are no good solutions for retailers, only trade-offs. Increased security measures such as locked cabinets, valuable items hidden behind tills, security barriers and so forth are expensive and make the customer experience worse, a real issue when physical retail is competing with online. Stores are more expensive to run when you need to invest in CCTV, body-worn cameras, security staff and extra workers to keep people safe. The consequence of this is the the total cost of crime is not far short of the hefty amount retailers pay in non-domestic rates.

Action is desperately needed. To their credit the Scottish Government has made a start.

In last year's Budget they allocated £3 million to Police Scotland, which has been used to create a Retail Crime Taskforce. That's a good start. But the modest number of officers deployed under the scheme must feel like the Spartans at Thermopylae against the hordes of criminals.

But a good start must be maintained. So retailers will be hoping to see increased funding to tackle retail crime in this year's Scottish Budget, due on 13 January. Just as importantly this needs to be part of a sustained multi-year effort to get on top of this scourge. Ultimately the target should be for every incident of abuse to be attended by the Police; an interim step could be committing this year for every violent incident to be attended. That requires resourcing, but it's hardly unreasonable.

Of course there are still challenges even when someone is arrested and there is no dispute on the crime or evidence. The criminal justice system needs both investment and reform, no small challenge. Yet leaving it under-resourced means entering a Sisyphean cycle of the same criminals committing the same crimes with the same lack of consequence. Those reforms would make a huge difference in tackling one of the two main groups responsible for retail crime. The priority for the Police must be organised criminals. We know a significant portion of retail crime is done by gangs, often as an easy way of funding their more nefarious activities. These organisations use a variety of tactics, not least recruiting young people who are less likely to face prosecution and who can be discarded once the police are aware of them.

The second group are those with chaotic lives. People who are unable to manage themselves, or those with addictions. They too cause chaos and distress in stores – but in many cases the criminal justice system isn't really the answer. Government needs to take broader action to help these people – not just to help retail – but as part of a wider strategy to help those who need support.

That leaves just one group. People who are broadly law-abiding but feel in the moment that shouting at a shop assistant or stealing a small item is somehow ok. To those people we need to exert social pressure. One step the SRC supports is the annual ShopKind campaign which promotes good behaviour in stores; reminding people that abuse or poor behaviour has consequences and isn't acceptable. Another step would be dispensing with the term 'shoplifting', which downplays the seriousness of the crime and cumulative impact it is having on the industry, and calling it for what it is: theft.

There are few easy, simple answers to tackling retail crime. Boosting the economy and helping people out of poverty needs to go hand in hand with retributive justice and social intervention. As the Scottish political parties pull together their policy agendas and manifestos for the next Holyrood election they must put ending the nightmare of retail crime at the top of their priorities.

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