



Public Service Reform

Introduction

Governments and opposition parties appear to have rediscovered public service reform. From policy speeches to legislation the subject is rarely out of the news. In this briefing, we outline the ideas and suggest that most proposals are sticking plaster solutions to short-term financial pressures. Long-term reform is needed to address the underlying challenges facing Scotland and the UK.

UK Reforms

The UK Government has announced a series of reform measures for English public services, although the Barnett consequential could impact Scotland, and they seek to address similar challenges.

Successive governments have promised the reform of social care. More radical proposals have typically been exploited for short-term political gain by both Labour and the Conservatives. The UK Government has now [announced](#) a funding boost and immediate reforms to the social care system, alongside the launch of an independent commission investigating how to improve adult social care in the long term. The short-term measures include increasing the use of care technology, supporting care workers to take on further duties to deliver health interventions, expanding the national career structure and a digital sharing platform. These are all sensible, but the commission will produce its final report in 2028, just before the next general election. Given the evidence already published, it is hard to understand why it takes four years to produce [another report](#), which is likely to face the same political problems.



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Not-for-profit care homes run by local authorities that don't have to make huge returns for private equity, an end to six-figure salaries for their 'chief executives', decent pay and conditions for their workers. Just a few suggestions for the Casey review there.

This is closely linked to NHS reforms. The UK Government plans to create seven-day hubs, surgical centres, direct referrals, AI technology and incentives for GPs, and choice of provision using the NHS app. Again, these are mostly sensible short-term measures, although they require extra

capacity, which is currently not there and takes years to build and train. Using the private sector is not extra capacity as they use the same NHS doctors.



Clive Peedell @cpeedell · 21h

Wes [#Streeting](#) thinks patient choice via a revamped [#NHS](#) app is going to bring down waiting lists. However, choice requires excess capacity in the system, which is precisely what the NHS doesn't have! Stop listening to the Tufton street clowns

The reform principles suggested in the Darzi [Report](#), include:

- moving care from hospitals to communities
- making better use of technology
- focussing on preventing sickness, not just treating it

This report was produced in months, not years, mainly because of previous work and a broad consensus on the above principles. The challenge is to deliver the funding. The last budget was a welcome boost but barely plugged the current funding gap.

The more fundamental criticism is that these are top-down plans, driven by Treasury domination, that [some argue](#) hold back growth and stifle creativity. Others [point to](#) a culture of compliance, which fails to allow autonomy, cultivate competence, and help public servants fulfil their purpose.

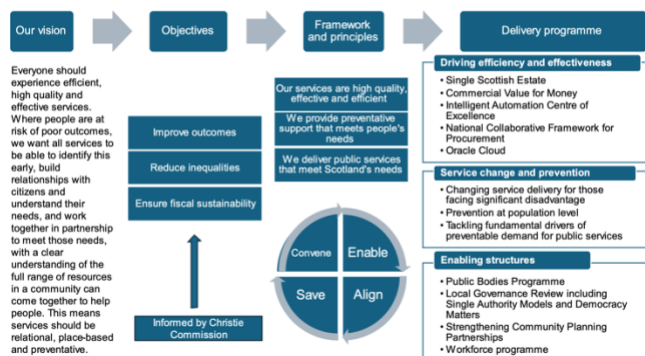
This is reflected in the English Devolution [White Paper](#), described as 'a generational project of determined devolution'. In practice, they are a Whitehall [vision of localism](#); they are not the work of localists or believers in organic change. Local services are to be centralised in the hands of a mayoral system imposed by Westminster. And difficult decisions over funding reform are ducked in favour of short-term funding.

Scottish Reforms

The Scottish Government has also been talking about public service reform. The minister, Ivan McKee, [saying](#) that government should be tighter and leaner, with £280m [savings](#) over two years.

In his letter to the Holyrood Finance Committee, he sets out the vision and details of the public service reform [programme](#).

Figure 1: Summary Strategic Overview of the PSR programme



This is underpinned by the principles set out in the Christie Commission [report](#), which still has cross-party support. However, the Christie Commission reported 13 years ago. Little has been achieved on preventative spending, silo working or enabling structures. The latest local governance review has been dragging on for six years.

Audit Scotland [regularly](#) makes a similar point, “ It’s critical that the Scottish Government moves at pace to reform the design and delivery of public services.”

The Scottish Labour Leader [has said](#) there is an urgent need for public sector reform that would deliver value for money. He recently focused on quangos costing the taxpayer £6.6 billion every year. While he is not wrong about quangos, reform is [challenging](#) until you identify alternative ways of delivering the services. Cutting the number of health boards may work for acute provision but not for community health services.

Fundamental Reform

The fundamental problem with both governments' reform programmes is that they are focused on the short-term, are underfunded, and progress is [glacial](#).

Short-term efficiency savings are not reform. The Christie Commission described 40% of public spending as due to ‘failure demand’. If we used preventative spending, that failure demand could be eliminated, and we could create a more equal and productive society, breaking the cycle of inherited poverty.

The Jimmy Reid Foundation has published a series of [reports](#) on public service reform. A key element of those papers was strengthening local [communities](#) by decentralising powers and empowering the workforce.

9 PRINCIPLES FOR PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM IN SCOTLAND

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| <p>1. DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY</p> <p>Democracy is what defines public services in contrast to private sector delivery. Democracy is about more than elections. It includes a wider engagement where citizens have a meaningful say over public services.</p> | <p>2. SUBSIDIARITY</p> <p>Ensuring that decisions are taken at the lowest practical level. National standards and guidance should not be used to stifle local innovation or differences. Services should be designed with and for people in communities.</p> |
| <p>3. TRANSPARENCY</p> <p>Participation in democratic processes requires access to information to hold decision makers accountable. All organisations who deliver public services must be covered by Freedom of Information laws.</p> | <p>4. EQUALITY</p> <p>Public services focused on reducing inequalities. With preventative spending to reduce demand, and funding through progressive taxation. The less powerful have an equal voice in service design and equal access to services.</p> |
| <p>5. EFFECTIVENESS</p> <p>All public services should make the best use of resources. This includes spending the skills of staff and appropriate equipment and facilities. It also means avoiding wasteful spending on activities like PRs.</p> | <p>6. PUBLIC SERVICE ETHOS</p> <p>A common ethos for all public services and those who deliver them based on enabling, empowering and improving the lives of people and communities and well as the traditional values of integrity and openness.</p> |
| <p>7. FAIR WORK</p> <p>People deliver public services so we should recruit and retain the best people, reflecting the diversity of our communities. This means fair pay and conditions, job security, and real engagement in decision making.</p> | <p>8. INTEGRATION</p> <p>Public service delivery has become fragmented with too many providers. There should be a common set of values and the single public service writer concept to help break down organisational and professional silos.</p> |
| <p>9. OUTCOMES</p> <p>Public services should be focused on achieving outcomes, while recognising that services need resources and process matters. They should take a long-term view that should not be disrupted by the short-termism of the political cycle.</p> | <p>These principles are detailed in the Jimmy Reid Foundation paper 'Public Sector Reform in Scotland' written by Dave Watson.</p> <p>The full paper can be downloaded at: http://reidfoundation.org/2017/01/public-service-reform-policy-paper-launched/</p> |

The Jimmy Reid Foundation http://reidfoundation.org

Devolution was not intended to stop at Holyrood. The Scottish Constitutional Convention envisaged that government would be nearer to the people, to prevent the concentration of power at the centre. They also emphasised the importance of participation – local government by local communities, not of local communities. These issues have now been [championed](#) by Building a Local Scotland.

Conclusion

A former Labour minister recently [told](#) the new government, ‘tinkering is not enough’. He warned about the threat to democracies if meaningful change is not delivered. Andy Burnham has [called](#) for key services to be returned to public control. It may sound odd for a think tank to say we don’t need more reports, but the solutions are already out there; what’s required is delivery. Institutional inertia may be part of the problem, but short-termism is also rife in business, the media and political parties. 2025 must be the year of real change.

Jimmy Reid Foundation

The Jimmy Reid Foundation is a think tank which brings together different voices from across Scotland to make the case for economic, environmental, political and social equity and justice in Scotland and further afield.

<https://reidfoundation.scot>

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