

Lynn Sharp: Welcome to this Improvement Service series on the Christie Commission. In the final episode of this series Professor James Mitchell, Elma Murray and Councillor Alison Evison share their thoughts on how we can bring the Christie principles forward over the next 10 years. All interviews were recorded in 2021, around the time of the 10th Anniversary of the Christie Commission report publishing and against the backdrop of over 18 months in the COVID-19 pandemic.

So thinking about current and upcoming crises facing public services, things like the climate crisis and the renewal from the pandemic, how do you think the recommendations of the Commission can help local government adapt and respond?

Alison Evison: Yeah, I think it's really important given the current crisis of the climate crisis and the need to have social renewal from the pandemic. I think it's really important that the Christie commission proposals recommendations are indeed the way forward. But there was a premise in the question that I do want to comment on, I think the question was about what can local government do? You know, I think local government can do a lot, but local government isn't going to be effective if it's just local government. I think the key point that is local government needs to adapt and respond. But so too, does the whole of the public sector. And we need to do that together in a collaborative way, as well all respond on all adapt so we can better meet the recommendations of Christie and therefore through that better serve our communities. It needs crucially to be the whole of the public sector, and the spheres of government in Scotland as well, that adapt and respond to meet the demands of social renewal from the pandemic. And also to deal with the crises we've got as a result of climate change. Talking about climate change itself, of course, that that's a really important issue at the moment. Local leadership is crucial for that, you know, and I think that's something that comes through Christie as well. The Christie principles of a place based approach, working together in a holistic way. And, and having that local leadership as well, to help drive those efficiencies forward. I think it's crucial. And if we think what we can deliver on at a local level through local government, supporting the development of 20 minute neighbourhoods, for example, are an excellent way forward to do what we can at a really local level, to help address climate change and the crises that we're currently facing.

Elma Murray: I think the renewal from the pandemic needs to be bound up in an approach to the climate crisis. I don't think, and this is not specifically about Christie, but I don't believe that we can have a renewal from the pandemic without seeking to address climate change as part of that renewal. I just don't think it's possible with the urgency and the necessity to do both. But also think if local government and councils and the rest of the public sector can go back to the principles of Christie, the four pillars are as solid today as they were 10 years ago. Can we wait another, and this goes back to my point about thinking forward, thinking to the future, can we wait another 10 years to actually get real traction with those and momentum, and to really, really change the way in which public services work? No, we can't. Now for me, there's a really, really other important reason why we can't wait those 10 years, the last 18 months have been absolutely horrendous for loads and loads of people, if not just about everybody. Everyone's life's been turned upside down, completely disrupted. There have been people who have been the most incredible heroes over that time, whether it's local members of their community, whether its staff working in councils and health boards, and we need to hear them, we need to show that we've seen what they've been through. And we need to make the recovery recognize all of that. And for me, thinking about the Christie principles, again, the four pillars, will allow us, will help us do that. So it does seem to be there's a

real a real role to pull that together and an opportunity to to not quite relaunch Christie, but get it back up there and not on a pedestal because you wouldn't touch anything that's on a pedestal. But get it right back in the front of our minds as what we're all aiming for.

James Mitchell: I think the the crises that we are in ought to be concentrating minds. And I think if there was leadership, if there was leadership is a crucial part, then, you know, this crisis could used to advantage. And using the principles to really push for big changes. I have to say though, what will be required, and this is, I think, something we're not very good at confronting in Scotland is that some difficult choices will have to be made, some painful decisions will have to be made, there will have to be losers. We love to think that all decisions will result and everybody winning, you know, everyone can win. In truth, it certainly in the short term, maybe in the long term, that's true, but in the short term there will have to be losers, or have to be people who will have to pay the cost for these changes. If we are serious about tackling inequalities. I'm not convinced that we are in Scotland, I think we're in Scotland, we're too keen on the rhetoric. And as I've said recently, you know, we talk the talk, but we don't walk the walk.

Lynn Sharp: And just thinking about the kind of local governance review, and I'm not sure when that's due to end, but do you think it could build on the work of the Commission?

James Mitchell: The local governance review, which I've had some involvement with, I think it's a good initiative and I'm glad that it has the support of both Scottish Government and COSLA. COSLA has put forward its proposals and, and in broad principle they seem to be acceptable, and they are talking about empowerment, or empowerments.

Alison Evison: The Christie recommendations themselves are very central to the work we did on the local governance review. And I think taking that forward is a crucial part of what we're thinking about and how we're moving now, that clearly recognised that there needs to be three empowerments delivered together, that fiscal empowerment, I've mentioned already, that functional empowerment, able to draw these public sector bodies together to truly work together in partnership, and also community empowerment. So we can work with our local communities, and work with them to develop place localism, and really make the best use of the resources we have to deliver on local needs. There's pilot projects already up and ready to be put into practice just waiting for to be given the go in terms of local governance review, given the go to actually go ahead and start working on how we can actually drive this change forward.

James Mitchell: It's empowering local communities. It's about empowering the institutions. So we need some alterations in the institutional structure. And it's about empowering them financially. My worry is Scottish Government's really only interested in some of that. And if it doesn't understand that we need to do all of that, then it's not going to succeed. And I think it's an opportunity. In truth, what it will have to involve is sharing power. You want to actually go back to the foundation of the Scottish Parliament, the parliament itself, the consultative steering group that set up, set it principles as well, one was sharing power, sharing power between the parliament executive, and

indeed, the people and our communities. What we've got to see is whether they're actually going to do that with this review. So local government has to share with its communities, central governments have to share as well, it cannot be the kind of top down approach we've had.

Lynn Sharp: Looking ahead to the near and distant future. What do you think the next 10 years could look like in terms of public sector reform?

James Mitchell: If the last 10 years are anything to go by, then I think we'll see some progress in some areas that ultimately will be, you know, patching up the problems, it won't be really getting to the root of the problems. If the last 10 years are anything to go by, in other words, I think we'll see more rhetoric here more rhetoric, but see little action, we'll see some action but not a lot. Unless of course, some crisis forces action, that can happen. And then I guess the pandemic has highlighted the some major problems that will have to be addressed. And, you know, I think it's interesting that we're seeing the proposal coming from the Labour Party now by the SNP on, on on our national care service. That's interesting. But again, it comes down to what will that involve? What will that look like, it's easy to use the rhetoric of the national care service. So it's no surprise that NCS seems like the NHS. I mean, that's, that's clever. And, you know, but politics, politicians are too clever, frankly, in terms of spin, substance needs to be there as well. So we'll have to wait and see what the substance is, we'll have to see, for example, in this area, whether we can do something as bold as radical, as the National Health Service, not just give it a name, that sounds like it, but give it substance, but substance for 2021, of course, and looking to the future. So I think there are opportunities there, there are challenges there.

Elma Murray: So if, if I had my rose tinted spectacles on, it could be incredibly transformative, particularly and I have to say that my focus now is on outcomes, outcomes for the people that live in Scotland. So a reduction in inequalities a reduction in child poverty and services working collaboratively to achieve that, an improvement in how we think about health and wellbeing, and I guess, a huge amount of respect across all of the different spheres of government, but all the different spheres of the third sector as well, and how we all work together, so that there's real equity, because if we can have equity of how we work with each other, why do we think we're going to deliver equitable services for people in Scotland because, you know, one thing doesn't translate into the other for me, so, so I would like to see that have a very different look and feel at the end of the next 10 years that but that very, very specifically, we have reduced levels of poverty, we've reduced inequalities significantly. And we have empowered a lot of people, not just to allow them to be the best they can be but to be more resilient, to be able to help themselves, to help others who need a wee bit of a help as well. And just for people to be valuing everyone else a bit more. No, that's that's very rose tinted spectacles, motherhood and apple pie. I absolutely accept that. Do I think it's possible, though? I do think it's possible with really, really strong leadership, and really committed leadership. And that requires leadership not just from MSPs and Scottish Government and UK Government, but from councils and council leaders and council senior officers, and everybody, actually, and some of the best leadership you ever see is when I don't know, youth services workers, community development workers, people like that are just out there doing brilliant things in their communities, helping an allotment get set up and running a community shop and stuff

like that. I mean, all of those things are absolutely incredible. And they just go on and do them. And seeing a lot more of that happening.

Alison Evison: At the moment, our focus has to be on partnership for COVID recovery. And having been involved in discussions about this with the Scottish Government and with other partners, I really do think there's the will to work together to achieve economic and social recovery, to achieve real social renewal at the moment, I think the will is there in a way that I haven't seen it for a while. And this is a result directly from the pandemic. I think, you know, I'm optimistic. And you know, I think as we're working together on recovery, the realization will come, we need more of this, it can't just be temporary built around recovery. It needs to be our inspiration to drive this forward and realize that we can make better use of scarce public resources, we can better meet the demographic challenges we're facing, we can better develop that fair and equal society, we can develop a people based approach and look at the development of places right across Scotland. We can all do that. And I think, well, I'm optimistic that through our work on COVID recovery, that realization will become more part of what we are doing and help us in the longer term as well. I think it's significant than in 2011, Christie said there was an urgent need, you know, his recommendations, he said in 2011, were urgent. I think here in 2021, there is an even greater, urgent need. And we do need to act now. And I think, if nothing else, the COVID pandemic has focused our minds and also demonstrated in the work we've seen throughout our communities across Scotland. What can happen, we've seen that when local councils and their partners in the community and public sector locally, are empowered and given the resources they need, they can make a difference and that is a crucial background to starting our recovery work. And if we build on that, you know if people are empowered, if people are resourced and have the financial support to do things as well, they can deliver in a better way. So I'm optimistic that we can keep repeating that important learning and see change as a result of that. I think how we will have got to where we want to be in 10 years time, if we look back is we will have achieved diversity in elected office. So there's more voices in the decision making table, you know, I think that is as crucial as everything else to what we're doing, to put people at the heart to, to have that voice of lived experience, not something else that you you consult with, you know, but that voice of lived experience is there, whenever a decision is made, I think we need to, we need to get to that stage, I think in 10 years time, we need to look back and realize empowerment, is no longer just a word that we use, empowerment means something, and we've actually empowered people and places to deliver. And I hope that when we look back over the last 10 years, as well, we see that what also developed was more willingness across the political spectrum to support a good idea when it appears, you know, I draw the example of the work around the period poverty products bill last year, and how that was agreed unanimously across the Scottish Parliament, and how parties came together to support that. Because they knew it make a difference. They knew it was important, and there was really effective cross party work. Now, I hope in 10 years time, when we're looking back, we see more of that kind of work, where there's a good idea. It's supported unanimously across the piece. And I also think that when we look back, when we're standing in 2031, looking back to 2021, something else we see is that proper partnership work has developed between the spheres of government and the third sector. We talk about that now. We have a protocol of understanding about the what we need to deliver. But I hope that when we look back in 2031, we see spheres of government, third sector, working in proper partnership, because we know the benefits that can bring if we really collaborate and work in partnership. So I think, you know, if I'm standing in 2031, looking back, it's a diversity in elected office, I can see is there. I can see empowerment happening everywhere. It's just there. I can see good ideas been accepted across the political spectrum,

because they're good ideas. And I can see it proper partnership work with the third sector developing as well.

James Mitchell: I keep coming back to it, but leadership is required. And I think, you know, I think the next 10 years, you know, the problems are mounting, you know, they're not going away. The situation today is much more challenging than it was 10 years ago, you know, the economy's not as healthy as we'd like it to be. And that has a huge impact. Truth, the matter is, you know, the best preventive policy is full employment, you know, people in good well paid secure employment, that makes a huge difference to the health to across the board to just about everything. And of course, now that the Scottish Parliament needs that booming economy, for the tax, the extra pay for the services in a way that it didn't 10 years ago, that makes it even more important. So in a sense we've got more challenges before us, you know, looking the demographics going elderly population. So we've got all sorts of issues there. And I hope to goodness that we can we can address them.

Lynn Sharp: How important are COSLA and the Improvement Service in supporting public bodies to deliver on Christie?

Alison Evison: Yes, I think I've stated how important I think local government is and local councils are at the forefront of empowering our communities, and helping transform how people can participate in decision making locally. And obviously through its work. It's our local government, our local councils and our councillors who enhance community wellbeing and help to empower our local communities and give them that voice that they need. And obviously, that work is supported and underpinned in a great way by our bodies, by both COSLA and the Improvement Service. COSLA is the national voice for the work of our councils. It helps create that that environment, a partnership working, and how can help build that whole systems approach too. It supports the development of new ways of working, like, very recently, we had the heralded Joint Investigative interviewing work, which is very much a partnership approach with COSLA, with Social Work Scotland, with the police working together to really develop the right way of interviewing our young people in criminal cases. COSLA can be there. It not always is at the moment, but it can be that right at the start of formulation of Scottish Government policy as well. And I think we've seen from experience how important that is that the difference that can make when that voice from COSLA representing local government is there at the table when there's just a nugget of a policy idea to help drive it forward in the right way to get the best outcomes for people right across our communities. COSLA also obviously also has a key role in creating the forums at which ideas can be developed, you know, it can bring together elected members, it can bring together council officers, but it can also bring together as professional partners as well those experts in their fields, and those professional organizations, and crucially, the representatives of our workforce. So they can help together to drive ideas forward. And also help through that to share good practice. COSLA is really important as the voice of our national Democratic local government leadership, and it's a national voice for our local communities. And the Improvement Service as well has an absolutely crucial role. And particularly, I think, around the areas performance and partnership. Improvement Service has a really important function at producing and analyzing the data that can help us with our benchmarking, and help us look at good progress and how to drive things forward. It has a really important function at getting the systems in place, so that councils can get on deliver. So they don't have to worry about the

digital aspects, the Improvement Service has a key role in supporting the digital transformation of our local councils so they can do their work of delivering locally, and the Improvement Service as well through its overarching function of training and development as an also a really important function of driving improvement, and helping deliver that improvement across the ground. So I think, you know, that is a different role than COSLA, but a crucial one, and one that needs to be recognized. And a final aspect I'll draw out of the importance of the Improvement Service work as well is supporting partnership, all that work on Equally Safe, that the work to eliminate the violence against women through the partnership work there, you know, there's a huge role for the Improvement Service and all that work and they've been heralded nationally for for the good work they've done in those particular areas. So just to conclude this, you know, local government is key to, to working on Christie, working with our partners across the public sector to deliver but local government provides a democratic link through which people can directly influence policy development and how things are moving forward. COSLA supports that as a national voice and the Improvement Service helps to make sure that improvement can be driven forward.

Lynn Sharp: So how important is the role of the Accounts Commission if public bodies are to deliver on Christie?

Elma Murray: So the Accounts Commission has been thinking about this as well, not so much specifically about Christie, but pretty much about the recovery and what that means, and the last 18 months have deepened and broadened inequalities. So people that were managing to get by are now not managing to get by, and families that were just ok are now really struggling. The relationship of different types of equalities, so the intersectionality of inequalities, I think is better understood now than it ever was before. But what it also tells us is that there needs to be a much more personalized approach to supporting people and to help people live the best lives they can. So the Accounts Commission has been given that a lot of thought, and we are very, very focused on inequalities and what the body that we're auditing and supporting with improvement, because we do see our role as being very much about that joint role of audit for improvement, inspecting for improvement. And we want to see how councils are taking forward a role in tackling inequalities, how they are dealing with community empowerment to allow communities to be the best they can be, how they're empowering those those communities. And those are the sorts of things that we will be looking for, and looking for opportunities to highlight really good practice, and where it's not working so well to highlight to those councils where they can go to get good practice. And I also think that's why the strategic alliance that the Accounts Commission formed, launched with the Improvement Service earlier this year, is really, really important to help take that forward now. So I couldn't think of a better change for us to have launched it, I can't, but it just seems it's just at the right moment.

Lynn Sharp: How important are elected members if public bodies are to deliver on Christie?

Alison Evison: Elected members are crucial. They are the democratically elected voice of our communities. And local choice can only really operate if there's local decision making, and a transparent way of listening and responding to all local voices. And that has to be through the

democratic local system. Getting things right at the local level is the way to ensure the most effective way of using scarce resources, and also the most inspirational way to engage with our local communities. And make them feel that they can be an engine for change, they can drive that change, as they see it in their local areas as well. I think it's really important that our elected members are part of their communities, they step forward from their local communities, many of them have experience in working as volunteers across their communities before they stand for election. And they also continue to work in their communities in a way that no other sphere of government across Scotland does. In many ways, they are the embodiment of place. I would just stress though, that I will be the first to say that it's crucial that we increase the diversity of our elected members, we need to make sure that the voices at the decision making table represent the whole range of our local communities. And at the moment, we have too many underrepresented groups. I think the answer is for us all to work together to encourage people to step forward to stand for election. We've got local government elections next year in 2022, to stand for election in those elections, either as an independent or a member of a political party, and therefore represent your community far better as well. That, increasing the diversity is an agenda that takes all of us to address. It takes us all to support a change of culture, in our in our government system across the UK and all spheres of government to change that culture. So people feel more supportive and more welcomed if they do step forward. And people have more sense that they will be part of a positive network that's based on developing communities and developing that place based approaches and tackling the agendas that we've already talked about. So a plea that everyone joins together to increase the diversity of our elected members.