

Lynn Sharp: Welcome to this Improvement Service series on the Christie Commission. Over three videos we'll be hearing from Elma Murray, Councillor Alison Evison and Professor James Mitchell on their perspectives of the impact of Christie. 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. In this first episode we'll be exploring the origins of Christie, and in the following episodes we'll look at if the panel feel we're progressing towards Christie and finally how we can bring the Christie Principles forward over the next 10 years. We'll start now with some introductions.

James Mitchell: I'm James Mitchell, chair in public policy at University of Edinburgh and I was a member of the Christie Commission.

Alison Evison: Hello I'm Councillor Alison Evison, I'm President of COSLA and chair of the Board of the Improvement Service.

Elma Murray: I'm Elma Murray, I'm the Interim Chair of the Accounts Commission for Scotland and I have a number of other charitable roles, chair of Young Scot, deputy chair of development young workforce, and I'm also a board member of Scotland's Rural College. At the time of the Christie Commission published through I was the chief executive of North Ayrshire Council and I was very excited about it, it resonated with me and what I was trying to do in my local area at the time.

Lynn Sharp: Why do you think we still talk about the Christie Commission 10 years on?

Alison Evison: I think that's mainly because we know it makes sense. Because we know that the recommendations that Christie made have to be at the heart of a fair and equal society. I first became a councillor in 2012. And all that time I've been a councillor, I've heard officers, I've heard councillors talking about the importance of Christie, and what it tells for the way we must do business. So from that, it's clear that people know how important the recommendations are to not only social renewal, but also to economic development, because obviously, by looking at social needs for fair and just society, we'll also be tackling economic need as well and helping with employability and helping drive that economic development we need across Scotland too. Those four pillars, people, prevention, performance and partnership, are so integral to everything that we're doing in local government, across Scotland. And I think we know they have to be the way forward. I think it's also talks about though, in a negative sense, because we know we haven't delivered, because even though we know it's important that we put these things in place, we know we need these pillars, we know we need to respond to them. We haven't done that in a systemic way. We have got great examples locally, of individual times when Christie has been put into practice. But we haven't grasped the nettle to do the whole thing and move forward with everything. And it's also important that we talk about it, because the context driving Christie is also still there. He was talking about increasing demand for public services, in a time when there was reducing public resources to spend on public services. And that context is still there, perhaps it's even greater as a result of COVID. And what we've seen through COVID, as well. So that sense of

getting the best from our public resources is still there. That sense that we do need to drive prevention, in order to help better serve our local communities is also still there. And I suppose the other learning from COVID, as well, is the importance of collaboration, which was a key part of what Christie was talking about as well. And we've seen what can happen when people are empowered, and fiscally resourced to collaborate, we've seen the difference that can make to our communities.

Lynn Sharp: So can you tell us more about what brought about the setup of the Commission?

James Mitchell: The catalyst that brought about the commission was the report of the independent budget review group. This was a group of three people who were asked to look at budgetary matters, and then reported in July 2010. And amongst their many recommendations was one that we needed to look at the delivery of public services, they recognized that we were moving into difficult period, we were in a difficult period in terms of budgetary politics. But there was also the issue of whether we were delivering services as well as we might. And the background to that, the deeper background to that was that we'd had a long period of real growth in public spending that coincided with the early years of devolution, for the first decade or so the annual average growth rates, real term growth rates and public spending was like 5%, which is phenomenal growth that's greater growth in spending annually than any time outside wartime. But that's come to a juddering halt with the great recession. And so there was a question as to what what do we do now? But also and I think crucially, the second part is important, too, is that over that period of 10 years, lots of policies had been designed, announcements made, and so on, so forth. The question was, were we delivering? Were we actually delivering because it's very easy to pass legislation to make a policy pronouncement by Minister wherever in Holyrood, but it's meaningless, unless and until it's delivered on the ground. So the there was a kind of combination of factors coming together. But the real catalyst undoubtedly was the report of the IBR.

Lynn Sharp: How did councils feed into the commission's work?

Elma Murray: We did feed into the thinking. And I mean, Campbell Christie took a very inclusive approach to developing the work of his commission and the commissioners were out talking to people and hearing evidence and all the rest of it. I think, though, the way councils fed into it was as a follow up more certainly that was, if I think back, that was more of what I saw, like, first of all the reception to it, and then, "Right, what will we do with this, because it says the things that we would want it to see, we believe in this way of working, we believe in this way of delivering services we want to do to do all of this. So how can we take that forward? How can we make some of that happen?" So I felt there was quite a lot of feed in afterwards, in terms of trying to make things happen.

Lynn Sharp: Can you tell me a bit about what the initial reactions were to the recommendations, where people were receptive to it?

James Mitchell: Well, the work of the Commission deliberately and consciously went out of its way to try and build consensus and to find consensus. And there was a big effort. I think, some of the earliest meetings we had were with politicians from all the different political parties to make sure that whatever it was recommended that it would win broad support. And of course, at that point in time, when we're set up, we were looking at the election that was coming forward in a number of months time, and it wasn't clear at that stage, who was going to win, the SNP in the end ended up winning, you know, an overall majority. But that wasn't clear in the latter part of 2010, there was polls suggesting that Labour would win. And so, you know, we wanted to write a report that would have the endorsement support, regardless of whoever was in power, because we were due to report after the 2011 election. And I think that worked, that worked. There was broad support for it.

Lynn Sharp: As a council chief executive of the time can you think about the initial reactions to recommendations were like?

Elma Murray: So Christie was one of these reports, or was one of these outcomes if you like, the report was the outcome from a significant piece of work that they did, which was universally accepted in a way that other reports hadn't. So there had been a few reports in the preceding years, which hadn't been as well received. And it wasn't that they got a bad reaction or anything like that. It's just that they were as seen as such a kind of universally agreed way of taking things forward. The other term that we associated or attached to Campbell Christie's piece of work was that it was a blueprint, a blueprint for how we should be taking forward the reform of public services in Scotland, and I say public services in the widest sense, because we spent quite a bit of time talking about not just being about local government, but about the wider voluntary third sector, potential private sector, but all of us that were involved in delivering services in Scotland. So the four pillars that Christie outlined people, performance, partnership, and prevention, were all absolutely accepted. When when I talked about it, I added a fifth pillar, fortunately another P actually, which was about place. Because when you look at all of those other four pillars, place becomes really important. And you know, how people feel about where they live, where things are happening, what role they've got, what control they've got in that place. And I thought, certainly, with that, Scottish government level, local government level, generally people were very supportive and the third sector as well, in fact, so supportive that COSLA then went on into for that piece of work, which was around the Commission on Local Democracy to take it that stage further, and to look at what the democratic implications of taking some of that forward, which was also, again, a really, really good piece of work. But as I say, it resulted in something else, and there was a lot of activity afterwards around public service reform as well. And I suppose one of the underlying aspects of the Christie Commission which has landed and persevered over that period has been people talk about prevention and the desire to create prevention and creating the distinction between early intervention and prevention. And this whole concept about stopping bad things happening, which is what prevention was all about.

James Mitchell: So it was a real consensus around that across parties, between local and central government, third sector, private sector, and the vast range of different policy areas. So there was no serious opposition. Which in a sense should worry us, because when everybody's agreeing, that's

usually maybe not saying very much. But there was a consensus there with the odd kind of gripe being expressed.

But, you know, I say it's difficult to think of any serious criticism. And that was, I mean, I must say that was a bit worrying for me, because, in a sense, that report was really deliberately designed to stimulate debate, it wasn't the final answer. It could never be the final answer. And I think, for me, in retrospect, one of the weaknesses was that there wasn't a critical engagement with it. There was too many people, too many people were saying, Yeah, we love this, and we should do this. But nobody's saying, you know, what are the problems of doing this? How do we do this? That's what I had anticipated would happen. And I guess, in retrospect, I'm a bit disappointed that that didn't happen. Because, you know, doing something that really needs to be done is usually not easy, and involves some challenges. And, you know, perhaps in retrospect, we should have been a bit more challenging.

Lynn Sharp: So just thinking is, you know, anything in the commission, in the report that you could have taken further, in retrospect?

James Mitchell: I think one of the things I would have emphasized to a great extent is there, but I mean, I guess, sometimes it's been lost sight of is that the four key principles that were outlined. These were supposed to be seen as a whole, you know, and not to be kind of, it's not like a menu where you pick and choose what you want. And that's what we've seen happening, you know, there's been a focus on one or other, but not the package, there's been no awareness of the importance of the package, and also, the challenges that comes with that. Because I mean, frankly, if you're aiming for a more efficient service, and you're aiming for great public engagement, these two principles can clash. And so we need to find a way around that. And we need to address that. And so I think sometimes there's been a kind of willingness to pick and choose.

Lynn Sharp: Can you think of any other reports or commissioners that have complimented or added value to the initial report?

James Mitchell: Oh, I think there's been a series of I mean, it's difficult to kind of know where to begin, but that have been so many and, in a way, I wouldn't see Christie as a starting point. Christie is just one of numerous efforts to kind of raise these issues that have been some that focused on specific policy areas. You know, we've seen, you know, the Care Review and so on, I think all of these things have been part of a story. What I think Christie tried to do was to kind of at that time to encapsulate all of that kind of thinking and kind of distill it into a single report. And as I say I think that much that has come since from a range of different bodies has said very similar things, and some have gone you know, specifically into it particular policy areas. So I don't see Christie as necessarily the starting point or even the central point. And I often say, you know, there's nothing novel in the Christie report. That is not it's not, you know, brain size, it's not just came up with how we found the Eureka. We found the the magic bullet. However, what it did was to distort existing good practice, a lot of stuff we talked about, had been done in many, many places, as you see, we're real pockets of it. And the question is, how do we, how do we kind of learn from that and encourage similar kind of, I wan to say similar, not the same. That's the thing, because one of the things we've

been very conscious of is that there could be no blueprint. This is what you must do here. And when I'm sitting in North Berwick must be the same as it's done in Lerwick or Inverness or Glasgow, or wherever. Local conditions require to be taken into account. And that's why it can't be a blueprint. And that's why also, I think some of the what has been going on in local communities is hugely valuable. And I think it links to, even if and will often be the case. Those who behind it have never heard of Christie and have never read the report. Doesn't matter. It's the thinking that's there. And it wasn't ours to start with, it was out there. We just tried to bring it together.