

Lynn Sharp: Welcome to this Improvement Service series on the Christie Commission. In this episode Councillor Alison Evison, Professor James Mitchell and Elma Murray explore where progress has been made toward the four pillars of Christie - prevention, performance, participation, partnership, and share their perspectives on why we haven't seen more progress.

Where in the current landscape, can you see the Commission's lasting impact?

Alison Evison: I think we can see it partly in our own aspirations, you know that we talk about tackling inequalities, each council has its tackling poverties action plan. And they know that they need to work on this. And they're making good progress in that. We have the aspiration to empower our communities. And we see different ways that's happening through community asset transfer through participatory budgeting, and place based approaches. So our aspiration is to empower our communities. And that's come about as a result of Christie as well. And we've also got a real focus on outcomes now, which which maybe wasn't so much the case in the past as well, because we do know that meeting the right outcomes, it's important to develop that fair and equal society. And I think it's also present in our sense of knowing what we should be doing in terms of, we've had the National Performance Framework, for example, we've had the development of just the other week, but partnership for recovery and how we work together on that across Scotland. So I think Christie is clear there in our aspirations. But it's also clear in the current landscape in terms of our actions, and over the last few months, in particular, we've seen an awful lot of Christie in action in our local communities. We've got many tangible examples of that. Just last week, I was at a meeting in my own Council in Aberdeenshire, where we were talking about holistic family support as part of the work on delivering on the Promise, after the independent care review, we've got huge developments everywhere across Scotland in terms of delivering early learning and childcare and 1140 hours. Now, that's part of the Prevention Agenda, as well as part of that landscape, Christie. And we've also seen as a national level things like the schemes to end homelessness together. And all the work that's gone on listening to what's needed to do that, working on a multi agency approach, and delivering at a local level. That is as well Christie in action in many ways. And just another example, is local governments formal employability partnership with the Scottish Government, driving local employability partnerships, using Prevention Agenda, to combat poverty, to tackle those persistent inequalities in all their forms to ensure households are able to meet their needs in a better way. And obviously, that work is increasingly person centered place based, as well. So again, that is an important part of the Christie landscape that we can see developing in individual ways right across Scotland.

Elma Murray: So I've talked a wee bit about prevention. Now, I still think we haven't, we haven't really cracked prevention, that's been a really, really hard one, to reengineer as it were, because we're still very focused on services being delivered on a functional basis, almost as opposed to thinking about it from the person's perspective from the person receiving the services from from what they need at that point in time. And, but I think the whole concept of prevention had not really been talked about very much prior to Christie and, and it is very widely talked about, and there is a lot of discussion about how we can do that better. So that's one lasting impact.

James Mitchell: The biggest impact is obviously the terms of the language and the rhetoric. And that can be important. Because if people are saying they are in favour of these principles, then we can at

least check out to see if they're actually living by these principles. So in that respect, that's been that has been handy. I think, otherwise, you got to look around Scotland, and you will see individual examples, I think, you know, I can think of a number of services and specific communities, for example, which really taken on board, those principles. I have to say that in many cases, these things were happening anyway. And the commission had nothing to do with that whatsoever, what the commission did, however, was give them ammunition. Many people who wanted to do these kinds of things anyway, finally had some ammunition that they could take to government, local government, central government, whoever else to say, look, we're doing this, this is Christie. And that's been really, I think, useful.

Elma Murray: And I'm gonna kind of talk about something here, which which wasn't done because of Christie, but it had a degree more resonance because of Christie, which was in a piece of work called Local Government Benchmarking Framework, which was created with the Improvement Service, but by councils for councils, to allow them to look at their performance and to, I think we use the term 'can openers' to allow us to talk about how we could be better and how we could learn from each other and what was fundamentally different in the way that some councils did things from other councils and was that relevant to our context and could we learn from each other and create that learning environment which was about improving on reporting performance as well. I think Christie give that you know, looking back I think the Christie Commission gave that more impetus, more momentum. And so while the work has started before Christie published, I think, the publication of Christie gave that a greater priority and that's still there. And we're now developing onto another phase. So it feels to me that that's definitely a lasting impact. One of the areas that I think has developed since Christie quite well has been community planning partnerships as well. So at the time that Christie published, community planning partnerships at that stage, were still very much led specifically by councils and others came to the table because they thought it was the right thing to do. But there wasn't an awful lot more to it than that, that that has moved on. And there is more collaborative working. And there's more partnership working than there ever was. And community planning partnerships have a real strategic role at a council level in terms of how a council and all of its partners, both other parts of the public sector and the voluntary and third sector work together to do things in a better way. So that's, that's been a lasting impact as well.

James Mitchell: But I think, you know, if you look around, I think probably one of the areas where we've seen the biggest the most dramatic change has been in policing. And because back at the outset, Police Scotland's view was that they didn't do prevention, you know, they weren't, they were a kind of a an institution of 'on with their job'. I think we've we've seen real movement, not just in the rhetoric, but a real movement to embrace collaboration, to embrace prevention, and efforts to engage and empower communities that they've been involved in. And obviously, fire and rescue has, as has been doing that all along, in fact, and in fairness, you know, that they didn't need the push. I think, well, there's been real disappointment in health. Health's been just, frankly, just has not taken this seriously. Of course, you can identify elements within health, which is, but it's a broad, and the broad picture of things. Health, this is the big nut that we've still got to crack in terms of delivering public services. That's not to say that people working the service are poor, they're working well, and delivering reasonably well, despite the system. And that's the issue that needs to be addressed, I think.

Elma Murray: And the other area that I think and this is about community empowerment. So it's about I suppose national legislation, first of all, to establish what community empowerment should be about. Do I think that the government would have brought forward legislation around community empowerment if there hadn't been Christie? I don't know, is the answer to that. But certainly the Christie Commission, I think, was the the kind of the predecessor to that thinking. So yeah, that I think has afforded a bit of a lasting impact as well.

Lynn Sharp: In things like the Community Empowerment Act, the report mentioned it and said about how it needed to do more than just asset transfer, and it did put participation requests in. Do you think that that is enough?

James Mitchell: No, it's nowhere near enough. And again, coming back to it as if I've got a thing against health but mean, you know, it hasn't affected health. I mean, it's, it's been designed to to address local government only. And I think I have a worry about community empowerment, if it operates on its own. Because for far too often, it's a way of dumping a problem in a community. And it's a way of saying oh aren't we doing well. And too often also, it's we have central government trying to bypass local government. We've never really addressed the relationship between local representative democracy, i.e. councils, and a more participatory democracy with communities that's a big problem. And it's been a problem that's been, you know, addressed over the years. Over the centuries, by many, many people, it's not an easy one. I worry that there's a sense in Scottish Government that all we've done that we can tick that box and we're doing so well here, let's pat ourselves on the back. I don't think that's true at all, I think we've got to do some truly big things. We're not empowering communities, you simply can't empower communities by robbing them of resources. And so again, you know, that that gets to a crucial part of the report is that we have to address inequalities. I mean, that's part of the fundamental objective. But you're not going to do that by dumping a problem in a community, but not giving them the resources or the local authority the resources without allowing for encouraging, incentivizing good working relations, say, between government and our communities. So Scottish Government, on the one hand, you know, doing something, but another hand, doing the opposite. And I think is that that's what I was referring to earlier when I've talked about the kind of the kind of pick and choose bits and pieces. And there's just too much rhetoric around. It is a bit disappointing, frankly.

Lynn Sharp: If we think about areas where we haven't seen a lot of progress, can you think of any and maybe why we haven't seen any progress?

Elma Murray: We haven't seen enough partnership working, we haven't seen enough collaborative working. And that's, that's quite hard. And we see some really good examples of it, and some really powerful examples of where that works, but it's not happening right across the whole of Scotland. Some of that just down to, I suppose, individual relationships and personalities. And that, that feels sad that something as important as collaboration and partnership working should depend so much on relationships and personalities. But in working in local government a long time, I actually haven't seen it not depend on that. So it's maybe something that we need to accept, and therefore work on

what those relationships and personalities need to be to create the best conditions for collaboration and partnership.

Lynn Sharp: So you mentioned how you haven't seen a lot of progress in health. Why do you think that hasn't been much movement?

James Mitchell: Well, health is one of the most tricky areas to reform. I mean, it's a very complex area. And there are lots of vested interests. And politicians are terrified to touch the National Health Service. They're terrified of being accused of undermining the National Health Service. NHS in this country is more like a religion than anything. It's something we believe in uncritically. But, you know, you can believe in it. And you can believe in its founding principles and believe in reform. In fact, I would argue, reform is essential. The other factor is, frankly, there'll be no leadership. I mean, no one has, frankly shown leadership on these issues. We're not getting it from the top other than, you know, the rhetoric here and there. And ultimately, you need someone to champion these principles within different services. And it's been absolutely absent. I mean, no minister can be I mean, think of who would you say, as a minister or a politician whose lead on this, I can't think of anyone. And that's going to be reflected also further down, and through the Civil Service, and so on. So I think, you know, it's a range of factors, it's never some one single factor and as I say we shouldn't pretend it's easy. It is incredibly difficult to reform, particularly something as big. I mean, in terms of collaboration, the health service has always been, you know, pretty poor in this area. Prevention, not at all good. Having said that, historically, health, public health has done remarkable things, achievements in prevention, things we take for granted.

Elma Murray: There was also at the time Christie talked about quite a lot of fragmentation, and also about top down approaches. So in terms of fragmentation about lots of different ways of doing things across Scotland. Now, there should be lots of different ways of doing things across Scotland, because Scotland's a very diverse country, that we have very different types of geography, but we have people living in very, very different circumstances. So the meaning of deprivation, for example, can be very different in an area of Glasgow, and how it affects people to an area in the rural Highlands. So there should be differences, but there also should be similarities. So there are things that we could be doing that could be very, very similar. And I was struck recently, by some of the work that Aberdeen City Council had been doing around their core services, and how they identify core services that can be done by a central team, if you're like, that are looking particularly at how services are delivered from a customer perspective. And then there are operational delivery services if you like that are delivered directly and very face to face type services, and they've done a lot of work on trying to separate the two. And it seems to me that that kind of core service delivery is something that's probably could be done in quite a similar way right across Scotland. But we don't all share that as well as we could. I also mentioned top down as being quite a concern from Christie and that linked in to empowering not just communities but councils and others to get on and do the things that were best for them. And we haven't had enough, we haven't had a move away from that in being quite I suppose frank about it, that there's still a lot of central control. And in fact, if we look back to what was centrally controlled in 2011, to what's centrally controlled in 2021, my sense is that that is greater now. So that aspect of Christie's, the ethos of the Christie Commission about empowerment, and letting people do the right things in the right place for people with very much a

citizen focus I think has been not followed through. And we need to give a lot of serious thought to that, particularly as we start to look at new initiatives and proposals around things like the National Care Service.

Alison Evison: I've given some individual examples of Christie in practice, and there's many more of those across Scotland, but we haven't got yet a whole system approach right across Scotland. And I think that is something that we need to grasp and address as soon as we can because it is of growing importance that we do. We haven't yet got the whole system approach we want. And part of that stems from an unwillingness to develop fiscal empowerment, fiscal empowerment to our local areas, to our local councils is essential if they are going to deliver locally on the approach outlined by Christie, our councils are still very much dependent on the settlement from the Scottish Government, for example, Scottish Government decides the parameters around council tax. And we haven't been given the ability for councils to raise their own money in other ways either. And, and that really sets back progress of the whole development of Christie. In general, there's there's a lack of financial backing up for aspirations as well, there's still far too much short termism, we still get far too many small pots of money throughout the financial year, which means planning and that long term strategic development that Christie spoke about, it's not possible when you're dealing with small funds of money, each with their own accounting systems behind them. It would be much better if we could move to the system of multi year budgets. And that'd be a better way of ensuring that we can address those four pillars of Christie. We also have fights over finance in where we have, you know, small pots of money put forward and various people having to put forward bids for that finance, that doesn't mean that the money is going to where it's needed most, it means it's going to the people that are better prepared to bid for it, have the better resources in place to make that bid. And maybe we're not addressing those needs to meet that fair and equal society. And until we get over that bid funding approach as well, we are not going to deliver on Christie and make the progress we need to do either. We also haven't got enough functional empowerment, you know that that is absolutely key to the development of Christie as well. There's still barriers preventing people working together in terms of their own budgeting requirements, their own aims and objectives for different public sector organisations, their own accounting systems as part of that as well. And also individual goals within that, you know, we need to get that whole systems approach. And we can only do that if we fundamentally work better together and develop that functional empowerment. And all of this means, of course, that people are not yet at the center. And despite a knowledge that we need to put people at the center, that person centered approach is essential if we are going to meet the outcomes of Christie and develop that society that we're looking for. Unless we get over these financial and functional limitations, we are going to still be failing to make the progress that we need to make on Christie.

James Mitchell: I think one of the great problems we've seen, and really has undermined Christie has been dramatic cuts to local government. I mean, it really has devastated local government. And what we find, inevitably, is that services, which local authorities are obliged, by law to provide continue to be provided. But if the total budget has been cut, it is the other services that will feel the cuts. And that includes, you know, as you say, the community dimension, includes things like libraries, sports centres, all of which are really important community assets, but they're also important in terms of public health, in terms of physical and mental health. And the problem we've got at the moment is the as we're seeing cuts imposed on local government, disempowering local government, it is having an impact on our local communities. And you know, that central control,

which isn't about sharing, it isn't about collaboration. I think it's been a real weakness in the last 10 years, it really has. I mean, ultimately, what Scottish Government has been doing has been some good things, but it's been overwhelmed by the bad things they've done. So on balance I don't think Scottish Government has been a help at all.

Alison Evison: I think there still exists a lack of trust, and an unwillingness to let go and actually move forward with empowerment. And I think we need to overcome that and realize we can trust people I think we've seen through the pandemic we can trust. I think there's still a fear of trying something new. There's too many eyes on parliamentary arithmetic rather than on positive outcomes. And I think that's important that, that we do try and get people to recognize good ideas have worked together, or those good ideas. And maybe that's somewhere where local government can show leadership as well, because we've seen that COSLA, you know, very often, we have agreement across leaders meetings when there's a good idea, and we've had fewer and fewer votes, to be honest, because people across the political spectrum have made comments to improve things. But I've been working together to get progress and that good development, and it'd be great if we could see that elsewhere across the spheres of government as well. I think something else that's prevented progress at the moment is a democratic deficit that we currently have. We have in Scotland, far fewer locally elected democratic representatives than our colleagues across Europe. And I think we need to actually increase our local representation, not work on decreasing it. In Scotland, the European Charter of local self government gain support across the Scottish Parliament across everyone across the Scottish Parliament. And despite the problems at the moment, with, with the supreme court judgement and the issues that will arise, we have still haven't seen any, any wish, really, any action, I suppose I should say the action towards putting its principles into practice at the moment where they can be put into practice. And I think you know, that's something we've agreed is important. So let's work on it where we can, let's, let's look at the possibilities even with the supreme court judgement and drive it forward. And I think as well reason why we haven't seen progress is there's a lot of emphasis at the moment on talking to the national representatives of communities of interest, talking to people that step forward and volunteer to represent particular views or consultation panels, that maybe doesn't reach out to all our local communities in the way it should. And again, that comes back to increasing the diversity at the decision making table and make sure that our elected members and our democratically elected councillors can support the decision making in a way that really supports everyone across our local communities. And a final comment that maybe reflects on what other people have said as well. I think another reason why we haven't seen progress is we are still insisting in many ways on counting and measuring the wrong things. I'm still sitting at various council meetings at committees where I am being given figures about the number of pupils support assistance in the local authority. Well, that doesn't tell me whether we're addressing need anywhere. It tells me how many we've got, it doesn't tell me whether that's enough for in relation to needs identified in the community. And given take us about how many computers have been bought by a local authority or even bought by the Scottish Government. But I'm not seeing from that, whether there's an improvement in digital literacy or digital access. You know, I think many ways we're still counting and measuring the wrong things to get the outcomes we want. So they're my quick summary of why we haven't got progress but also they're all things that can be changed and developed so that we can get the progress we seek.