

We start with hope

We must take this moment to reappraise and reimagine how our systems of support for the most vulnerable should operate in future, writes Inspiring Scotland's Andrew Magowan.

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How we shape and control the world around us is the primary means by which we develop and express our place and role in this world. If we are unable to exercise this control, it undermines the essence of who we are and can be. This is the true nature of inequality and it is personal.

For millions of people, the current crisis has diminished their ability to exercise choice and control, serving to weaken an already precarious existence. For some in this group, the threshold between just getting by and life-shattering emotional, financial and health change has been breached. And for others, COVID-19 has hastened an unrelenting spiral to the margins of society. In this sense, the current situation is not only a public health crisis, it is a humanitarian one.

'Building back' will not be enough. We need to do better if we are not to fail people. However, we start with hope: "*not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out*" ([Vaclav Havel](#)).

Giving back control

What makes sense, is to create and nurture the conditions in which people can comprehend and manage their life in a way that has meaning and is worthwhile. To afford them the opportunity to exercise control over the circumstances that influence their life. The consequences of the removal of this control reverberated through our families, streets, neighbourhoods, communities, and society long before the crisis broke.

This is a lesson not just for now, it is a lesson for perpetuity. But this is not new or radical.

That a person's ability to function effectively in society needs certain elements to be present in their life is reflected in a substantive evidence base¹. What is needed, is the confidence to put this understanding at the heart of our policy thinking. To imagine, design, develop and implement structures, systems and practice that build from the person upwards, not top down as has for so long been the way.

As social creatures, the bedrock for this human-centric approach is unquestionably our connection to others ...

the shared passion for similar interests, words of encouragement, the joy of learning and sharing a new skill, having a shoulder to cry on, sharing a meal, celebrating success, helping each other through disappointment, the hug that says it's going to be ok, accepting and coming to terms with differences, our solidarity with others, sharing the special moments that create memories, to feel wanted and needed, to love and be loved

...these are what shape us and make a life.

For many people however, such interactions are not part of their daily lives. For others, the nature of their interactions is singularly destructive. For both, life is diminished, and their path becomes one of retreat or chaos.

So, creating environments in which positive social interactions can take place is paramount. But careful deliberation about how these environments are set-up, operated and supported, can catalyse an incremental process of change that transforms lives and strengthens communities.

Building the fundamentals for change

Our own [Link Up programme](#) has for nearly a decade sought to enable local people – many amongst the most vulnerable in society – to exercise control over their lives, using this to help themselves, others and their community.



¹ Capabilities thinking, what creates positive wellbeing, social determinants of health, salutogenesis approach, Carnegie's work on kindness and the 'Enabling state', GCPH's work on social capital and resilience, the protective factors around Adverse Childhood Experience.

Embedded workers achieve this by harnessing people's strengths to establish activities they want – creating a safe space in which the types of positive social interactions above can flourish. In doing so, trust and reciprocity grow, creating **supportive relationships**. Through their active involvement and learning and sharing new skills, and volunteering, people also build **confidence** and **self-esteem**.

Once established, these *fundamentals* positively redefine the person's view of their self and the role they play in the life of their family and community. For many, it triggers a reimagining of the future they want and to exercise choice and control over its realisation: improving health and wellbeing; creating a brighter financial future; and, becoming active citizens looking-out for others and ensuring local services and decision-making processes work with and for local people.

The process by which this transformational change happens is important, but arguably of greater significance is the way of working that enables it.

The space in which it takes place needs to be welcoming, without agenda and free from judgement. One where no labels are applied and human - not statutory - needs are prioritised. Where people drive the change for themselves on their terms and at their pace.

It requires workers that are interested in and take time to understand people's lives; supporting them through their pain, loss and anxiety, as well as their triumphs, joys, and victories. Workers that never see people as victims to be saved or issues to be fixed. Workers that are trained to identify and support people who are dealing with trauma, suicidality, loss, addiction, and conflict. That understand change will be slow and never smooth.

Fostering these fundamental human needs of supportive relationships, confidence and self-esteem needs to be a priority. It is a role local social sector organisations are uniquely placed to undertake.

Harnessing the strengths of the third sector

As the current crisis has amply demonstrated, the speed and scale of response by community-focused organisations has been remarkable. This has been possible because these bodies are from and of the communities they serve, giving them deep insights to the lives and needs of local people.

Furthermore, the approach and way of working set-out above are part of the DNA of such bodies. Unfortunately, such work is not always recognised and rarely funded in any sort of sustainable way. This needs to change.

More deliberately, this approach and way of working sits at the heart of several ground-breaking programmes, including: National Lottery's ['Our Place'](#); the [Frome model](#); [Participatory City](#); Nurture Development's [Asset-based Community Development](#) projects; [Healthier Fleetwood](#); Corra Foundation's ['People in Place'](#); and, our own Link Up.

If we take the learning from these initiatives with what we know of the effectiveness of local social sector bodies, the power of this model is demonstrable. We must have the confidence to apply this at scale; to make it the keystone of future policy and how we work in communities.

Progressing towards systemic change

What's more, we need to see the nurturing of the fundamentals at an individual, family, street, neighbourhood, and community level, as setting the foundations for and acting to catalyse a process of societal renewal. One that encompasses change at a social, economic, and ecological level.

This is possible because the fundamentals create the conditions in which a person's life trajectory pivots from 'retreat/chaos' to one of stabilisation, recovery and ultimately, personal renewal. And for a significant number, this self-managed change is accompanied by a growing activism.

If this can be harnessed, a second phase of transformation can proceed; one that operates at a collective level in which local people and organisations (public, social and commercial) collaborate to identify and develop a path to a sustainable and thriving future.

I will come back to this in a subsequent paper. For now, Tessy Britton's paper [Universal Basic Everything](#) (Medium, 30 May 2020), sets-out a ground-breaking vision of this future. I encourage you to read it.

Conclusion

The current crisis is the second shock to our social fabric in just 12 years. All indicators tell us more are to come. So, we must take this moment to reappraise and reimagine how our systems of support for the most vulnerable should operate in future.

The responses need to be structural but in equal measure, they need to be human-centric. But let's be clear, the latter does not reflect new thinking, far from it.

Almost a decade ago, it was front and centre in the recommendations of the Christie Commission. Subsequently, testimonies to regional Poverty Commissions have spelled-out the criticality of understanding and being responsive to the needs of the person, family, and community. And it is emblazoned across our current policy rhetoric; going to the heart of our aspirations to create a Wellbeing Economy. The difference now, is that we must act.

The Social Renewal Advisory Board established on the 9th June offers a powerful vehicle to do so. But it needs to go beyond listening and articulate how we create effectively functioning communities which are not only resilient, but regenerative. It must also harness our – people, communities, public, third and private sector – collective will to see this through.

There is a wealth of evidence to guide our course, but we must start with the understanding that people can only make progress in life when they are able to shape and control the world around them. Consequently, our progress through recovery towards a fairer, healthier, and environmentally sustainable future demands that we enable people, families, and communities to have and exercise this control. It is their right.

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