

RSE POST-COVID-19 FUTURES COMMISSION: COMMENTS FROM ROGER CROFTS

I am delighted to see that the President and the CEO have set up this group with a wide range of experience and expertise. Just what the RSE is for: to focus on issues of the day and the future without fear or favour and hopefully to make clear recommendations for plans and actions.

Context

The inquiry should not just focus on Post-COVID-19 futures, but context its thoughts on the existing frameworks in Scotland and globally. I hope that it will place its work in the context of the Global/Local Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals and the twin crises of the Climate Emergency and the continuing loss of Biodiversity. Within Scotland, the Scottish Government has published in its annual Programme of Government and specific policy documents. An important one under review and revision at present is the National Planning Framework which will influence action on the ground for years to come (see comments from the Scottish Section of the CIEEM for interest written before the COVID-19 pandemic¹.)

Specific issues

I note a series of issues which I hope that the Commission will cover. They are not meant to be comprehensive, but reflect on my personal interests and experience.

1. Further developing 'foresight' approaches

Post COVID-19 issues

We are told that epidemic and pandemic planning exercises were undertaken a few years ago in the UK, but clearly the lessons were not put into action planning for the future.

UK Government and devolved administrations claim to be acting on scientific advice, but this is not open to external scrutiny and many experts are excluded from the inner circles of advisers.

Wider context

The old saying that 'the world is becoming more complicated' is perhaps even more true than ever. However, too often issues are addressed in isolation when cross linkages are needed. We cannot, for example, divorce dealing with the climate emergency from addressing poverty and inequality, environmental degradation or human health or future location of settlements etc. There is an increasing need for horizon scanning and analysis to inform public discourse and aid decision makers. While there are a number of independent Scottish based initiatives, none have the imprimatur of a national academy whose aim is 'to make knowledge useful'. We have the unique opportunity of having a national academy with membership across all subjects and knowledge areas that can operate 'without fear or favour' in enlightening discourse..

Debating point

Now is the time to establish independent, objective, and rigorous 'foresight for the future' approaches. These need to be as wide as possible and ensure that linkages across knowledge areas and thinking approaches are made, and the thinking helps to stimulate informed public debate.

¹ <https://cieem.net/resource/national-planning-framework-4-call-for-ideas-response/>

I hope that the RSE Commission will develop a *Foresight for the Future Initiative* as a critical outcome of its work, and that a Standing Commission is formed within the RSE for the foreseeable future. It should ideally have funding independent of government, or least not be fettered by government.

2. Rethinking settlements for the future

Post COVID-19 issues

Close proximity living in urban areas, especially in high rise complexes, are problematic when families are faced with lock down and social distancing. Yet, this is seen has the solution for meeting housing need when land prices are high and land in urban areas is in scarce supply. Lack of open space for exercise and contact with the outdoors is also limited in many settlements, especially in the central belt.

Wider context

Household formation rates are higher now than in the past, with many more single person households; this may continue to rise. But, there has been a consistent failure to make the necessary provision of dwellings in scale, in location and in site planning and development that best fits the needs of citizens. Given the two countervailing forces of wishing to build on urban brownfield sites to protect the natural capital of production land and the proven health benefits of pleasant surroundings in which to live, there should be a dilemma of where provision is best made.

There is evidence to suggest that access to 'green space' near to where people live has a beneficial effect on body and mind, but despite many initiatives the provision is still extremely poor, most especially for poorer families.

Additionally, infrastructure provision usually lags behind housing provision, especially of social and community facilities. Top down approaches from the government have not been successful in dictating how many houses each local authority has to provide within a given period of time. Designs of housing and their surroundings cannot exactly be described as providing distinctiveness and a real sense of place. We now need more fundamental issues of design and space for living to be addressed, rather than being led for example by what house builders have in their land banks and design studios.

These and other issues call into question the current focus of the town and country planning system as a development enabling system rather than as originally envisaged as a balancing between economy, society and environment, as we would now phrase it. Now is the time to redress this balance to deal with the unusual circumstances that the future is likely to hold.

Debating points

Should there be new settlements developed with human wellbeing as a central focus? In other words, new green settlements of high energy efficiency, low GHG emissions, space for all, access to the outdoors, and economic, and cultural/social infrastructure as part of the development.

Can brownfield site development really provide access to intangible services for residents by re-engineering localities to make them physically attractive and safe in all respects for residents?

Are high rise buildings to accommodate families in particular an appropriate recipe for safe living in the future?

How can settlements be re-engineered to accommodate a greater 'working at home' culture?

3. Stimulating demographic diversity through migration

Post COVID-19 issues

Post COVID -19 there might be a perception that Scotland, and the UK more generally, are not necessarily safe places to move to.

Quite rightly, restrictions have now been put into place on non-residents travelling by ferry to the islands. Residents fear that visitors, seeking a safe place during the pandemic, will bring the virus with them and infect otherwise virus free locals.

Wider context

In recent years, in-migration has been promoted to provide a larger work force and to rebalance the demographic structure from a top heavy retirement cohort. This has proved to be particularly valuable in agriculture and horticultural crop harvesting, in the health services and in universities.

There are still rural areas with static or declining population totals, and an increasing proportion of the elderly due to retiring in-migrants and ageing of residents (the Northern and Western Isles and the more remote parts of the mainland, for example). Often second homes are purchased for holidays and subsequent retirement, reducing housing supply, increasing the prices for locals and forcing outmigration.

A more specific unresolved issue is the need for modern ferry services to the islands: modern in ships, modern in operation of companies, and equitable in its treatment of the islands and their long term residents. The latter point is particularly problematic because those mainland residents, mainly visitors, have subsidised fares to the islands on the same basis as residents, whereas what was originally styled as the Road Equivalent Tariff was meant to equalise costs for islands dwellers and island based businesses. Funding for replacement ferries and for capital maintenance of the existing fleet is nothing less than a public scandal. And yet the privately owned and operated, and unsubsidised ferry from Caithness to South Ronaldsay makes a profit and has just procured a new, modern style vessel (a catamaran) from Vietnam.

Debating points

Recently EU citizens have been returning home as a result of the uncertainties of their residency post Brexit. Will the UK Government policy hinder Scotland's desire to attract more migrants having left the EU and what can be done to moderate the UK policy?

Are we clear what sort of migrants we particularly wish to attract, beyond the obvious seasonal workers in agriculture and horticulture where there is a reluctance of residents to perform these tasks and , and in key health and education sectors where they have proved so beneficial as service providers and new minds respectively?

Should we be thinking about stimulating a redistribution of population from urban/semi urban to rural areas within Scotland? This would, on the one hand could improve demographic structures, particularly for example in the Highlands and The Hebrides, but it could place a strain on the limited social and health services existing there.

Radical changes are needed to improve the state subsidised ferry services. The Commission should propose some solutions.

These questions bear directly on how the economy will recover post COVID-19 and what jobs are available and where.

4. Rebalancing the economy

Post COVID-19 issues

Will the threat of breakages in long supply chains cause a rethink in location of manufacturing and supply industries back to the UK? Will there be opportunities for greater development of indigenous economic activity to reduce dependence of overseas links? Will there be more interest in smaller scale, locally owned businesses?

It is possible to see that risks associated with overseas travel will stimulate locally based tourism, but is this really a recipe for viable communities and viable businesses in the future? The grab of local houses for second homes might extend. The 'place full' signs and roads full because of heavily promoted tourism trails is hardly of social and environmental benefit to residents.

The substantial reduction in energy use could possibly drive the balance of energy sources towards renewables more quickly. But, what about the use of hydrocarbons for non-energy uses which society still demands, such as polymer based goods, and what is to replace them?

Wider issues

For many decades Scotland has moved from a primary and manufacturing based economy to a service sector economy. With many jobs in the public services, especially in certain rural areas for example, and the preponderance of financial sector jobs especially in Edinburgh, and the growth of recreation and tourism related jobs. The business formation rate remains reasonably good, but the longevity of new businesses is poor. Investment in enterprise development through SE and HIE and through the Business Gateways is high, but what is the real effectiveness? Given the Scottish Government's consistent top priority since 2007 of economic sustainability (whatever that means), Scotland still lags behind other parts of the UK and is below the UK average.

Debating points

Is reliance on the service sector the way forward post COVID-19? Given the knowledge creation in our research institutions and universities have we in place the appropriate stimulants to translate research into development and demonstration and on into viable enterprises?

What lessons can be learned from the innovations of the oil sector in Aberdeen in diversifying into new territories and new markets?

Are the range of incentives available and the role of the two enterprise agencies and the local council business gateways really effective or are more innovative machinery and support systems needed?

Is this not a time to refocus from the tertiary sector approach and the emphasis on the tourism part of it in both cities and rural areas, and address what can Scotland provide by way of modern, far sighted industrial production stimulated by the research enterprises, for example in genetics and engineering, and supported by wealthy entrepreneurs?

What is the future of the hydrocarbons sector, especially for production of materials as well as energy, when the Scottish Government does not wish to undermine the Northern North Sea industry and the Scottish based downstream petrochemical industry lacks diversity of ownership?

5. Reducing the attainment gap at school level

COVID-19 issues

What the home schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic is telling society is that the inequality of educational attainment is widening between the provision made by private schools and that made by state schools, and within the state sector between different socio-economic groups. Use of outmoded technology, concerns about data security, how to motivate those poorer performing pupils, and arguments between local education authorities and the two government agencies – Education Scotland and the SQA, do not provide the support that parents of children in the state sector struggling with home learning remotely really need while doing their own jobs.

Wider context

The Scottish Government has been incredibly defensive on the quality of state schools education, but has been forced to accept an independent review under the auspices of the OECD. By their nature, these reviews pull no punches. Serious questions remain about the validity of the Curriculum for Excellence, as well as the lack of an implementation plan and resource provision for class room teachers. Many now question the balance between skills and competencies based learning compared to more knowledge based approaches. Teachers state that the government mantra of ‘closing the attainment gap’ is not working in the classroom and is considered to disadvantage the middle of the road pupils and especially those pupils who are very disadvantaged and very disturbed and need special attention.

The schools’ curriculum is slow to change to help pupils address the issues of the modern world in an interdisciplinary manner, such as migration, floods and droughts and their consequences, climate change and energy for example.

Debating points

Is it time to radically reconfigure the curriculum to ensure that pupils are taught how to gain knowledge and use it to understand the issues of today and the future?

Is our present system of state comprehensive and segregated religious schools really fit for the future?

Is teaching all abilities together working in practice?

Is there a way of redressing the private/state school provision in the cities equitably to benefit pupils?

6. Better safeguarding of nature and natural processes

Post COVID-19 issues

Shortage of money might suggest doing nothing to look after nature, lessen budgets and reduce safeguards for protecting the natural environment to allow the economy to recover. Proximity to and engagement with nature has been promoted as good for people when they are locked down.

Wider context

RSE has clearly stated what is required in the post Brexit environmental arena², but the Scottish Government has been much more cautious in its proposed approach. Nature based solutions have risen in prominence recently as the way forward³.

Recently published State of Nature reports for Scotland show that biodiversity continues to decline. At the same time, government policy suggests that commercial forestry should be expanded with more planting which, despite safeguards, is being done in an environmentally damaging manner. The future of agriculture and the underpinning policy is static in Scotland. There are opportunities for more radical approaches to address the 'public good' arguments. And there are challenges on whether livestock production is justified in view of GHG emissions, relatively low consumption of beef and lamb in Scotland and likely more difficult access to EU markets.

Flood management measures are being developed at key locations, such as Hawick and Musselburgh, but trying to persuade the engineering led teams to focus on working with nature, through 'natural flood management' approaches, is proving difficult (see RSE seminar report on flooding⁴). This is not helped by a lack of forward thinking on agricultural land use and particularly the proper use of flood plains and the sealing of land by development for housing and economic development.

More regional and locally approaches to management of the environment and natural resources would help to reduce the uniformitarian national approach and to stimulate local interest and engagement and reflect better the diversity of Scotland's nature. Some agencies have done this for their own work, such as SNH with its Natural Heritage Futures approach established 20 years ago⁵. Attempts to develop Regional Land Use strategies have not been strongly supported by the Scottish Government, despite positive interest from some areas. Transfer of land ownership from private owners to communities, supported through the Land Fund, does necessitate more locally based decision making.

Two recent Scottish Government backed reports on grouse moor management and deer management have concluded that action might be needed in the future in the management of these issues. Due to lack of consensus among the participants no firm conclusions are provided despite the weight of evidence in favour of action now, respectively, to licence grouse moors as a means of stopping illegal persecution of protected birds and to radically reduce the number of red and roe deer.

Debating points

Beyond the initiatives arising from access legislation and the work of Paths for All, what more can be done through revised local council plans and funding for example to encourage greater public access to the countryside and to provide greater engagement with nature?

How can more locally and regionally based approaches to determining the future use and management of land be realised?

² <https://www.rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Brexit-Environment-Paper.pdf>

³ <https://www.rsgs.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b08cab0f-06fb-4ef0-b7df-b3e04ffc308>

⁴ <https://www.rse.org.uk/event/can-learn-live-floods-challenges-science-management-conference/>

⁵ <https://www.nature.scot/about-snh/our-work/natural-heritage-futures>

How can we ensure that Scotland's most important sites and areas for nature now and in the future are safeguarded from detrimental policy and activity?

What should a radical plan for agricultural land in 20-30 years' time look like and how can it be promoted?

7. Extending understanding of animal/human virus links

Post COVID-19 issues

The generally held view is that COVID-19 began in bats subsequently sold for human consumption in a market in Wuhan where it spread to humans. Other corona viruses have apparently had a linkage. While we do not usually sell wild animals live for public consumption, there are lots of animal/human interactions through domestic pets for example and in the wild.

Wider context

The food hygiene regulations of the EU have resulted in significant benefits to human health and it is hoped that these will continue.

We readily understand that there are many uncertainties about pathogens, but the more able scientists we have exchanging knowledge with each other from different disciplinary backgrounds and outlooks, the better informed our medical advisers and in turn politicians should be of the risk and the possibilities of dealing with future pandemics and epidemics. This would hopefully ensure that the public is better informed of the certainties and uncertainties.

More specifically, we are not clear of the total number of bats in the different species in Scotland; they are strongly protected by statute. I failed in my SNH days to get my scientific advisers to give me objective guidance on population numbers and biological viability, never mind pathogen transfer!

Debating points

What issues about animal/human interaction and disease transfers need further research?

Should the Scottish Funding Council stimulate the establishment of a virtual institute for pandemic research and animal/human interaction investigations to ensure that the government and the public are better informed?

Specifically, do we know sufficient about the bat population in Scotland in terms of numbers needed to provide a biologically viable population and to ensure that disease transfers are minimised?

8. Developing appropriate governance

Post COVID-19 issues

The First Minister has taken the lead throughout the public presentation of the Scottish Government's position and presumably internally within government as well. Other ministers and advisers have been in secondary positions. Although the two Scottish Government COVID-19 public papers espouse consultation and public engagement, it remains largely a one way flow.

Wider context

We have observed the centralisation of government in Scotland over the last decade and a half, partly as the mode of operation of successive Scottish administrations. This takes leadership and initiative away from local government and its accountability to local residents and from government agencies set up with a mandate to offer advice to everyone. In a world where 'localism' is becoming more important, there is need for a new accord between central government and other administrations of public policy and action which are closer to the ground and should be better able to understand local issues and circumstances than a centralised bureaucracy and a politically dictatorial approach. It is well known that an approach appropriate for Shetland, cannot be the same as for Clydesdale, or even for Orkney or the Western Isles.

There has been concern about the lack of forensic scrutiny of government policy and legislative proposals through the committee system of the Scottish Parliament, despite changes resulting from a recent review. Presumably, the unicameral system is here to stay, but more power to the committees, less adversarial approaches and less party political control would be a step forward. The work of the Audit Commission is very valuable, but how can the government be made more accountable through the parliamentary system?

Debating points

How can public bodies more effectively work together to plan the future of local areas and regions?
A 21st century version of Regional Reports perhaps?

How do we stimulate more public engagement in futures planning throughout the contrasting parts of Scotland?

What further changes are needed to strengthen the parliamentary scrutiny of government policy and legislation? Can there be greater input from experts through bodies like the RSE?

9. Aiding charities to survive and thrive

Post COVID-19 issues

The third sector plays a vitally important role in Scottish society with active volunteering in many activities being the bedrock, along with financial donations and legacies. But there is evidence of reductions in financial support which might well threaten the continuation of many bodies.

Debating points

Should the government put in place special arrangements to ensure continuation of the important work undertaken by charities, including short term operational support?

Have we too many charities with overlapping remits and competing for the same scarce resources?

Do the various lottery and other government related sources provide useful support or are they too controlling on what should be done and too administratively cumbersome for small bodies to cope with?

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