

Challenges to the Strategic State: Welfare Reform Lessons from a Devolved Polity

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Abstract

The article critically examines the Strategic State approach to social policy as represented by the ‘Scottish Approach’ to policy-making and delivery. The article outlines the defining features of a strategic approach to social policy and critically appraises the Scottish Government’s claim to reflect these principles in flagship welfare reforms. The article considers how far a strategic policy approach has been applied in Scotland and draws upon research exploring the response of local leaders to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to examine what this experience reveals about how ‘strategic’ these actions were. The article concludes that, in contrast to previous slow progress in implementing a strategic approach, the exigencies of COVID compelled innovations in policy making and accelerated practices consistent with a strategic approach. The article concludes with some reflections on what this evidence implies for strategic social policy making and governance.

Introduction

COVID-19 will run like a geological seam through social policy analysis. Future historians will be able to determine at a glance whether a contribution to policy commentary was pre or post-pandemic. The full implications of the crisis will not be known for several years. However, as one of the many reports reflecting on the experience noted, ‘we should not wait for the pandemic to be over to learn lessons and begin to plan a way forward towards social renewal’ (Social Renewal Advisory Board, 2021: 1).

Several studies have noted that responses to COVID reveal a lot about the nature of different national polities and welfare systems (e.g. Moreira and Hick, 2020; Caprano, 2020). It has been noted that ‘crises . . . expose performance deficits, bad governance practices and poor corporate leadership’ (Connolly & Pyper, 2020: 1624). Nevertheless, although the pandemic was a stress test of welfare systems, ‘Responses to COVID-19 prompted widespread innovation and it will be imperative to evaluate which initiatives have worked’ (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021: 1)

This article examines what the COVID emergency suggests about the character and capacity of a particular approach to social welfare under critical conditions: the ‘Strategic State’ approach, as espoused by successive governments in Scotland.

As Cairney et al. observe (2016: 346) ‘The Scottish Government has nurtured a reputation for doing policy differently – the “Scottish approach”.’ This approach to public service development and provision is often contrasted with that taken by the UK government (Elliott et al., 2020: 204). However, as with other analyses of sub-national welfare systems, the Scottish case is relevant beyond parochial national politics (Daigneault et al., 2021). It illustrates how insights may be garnered by exploring territorial variations obscured when analysing unitary nation-states (Henderson et al., 2017: 633), and reveals interesting features about devolved policy-making in smaller and federated states. Furthermore, as the OECD (2013a) has advocated a strategic response to social welfare challenges, the lessons from the Scottish experience have implications beyond national borders.

The article addresses three principal questions: what does a ‘Strategic’ approach to welfare policy involve? How strategic has social policy been in Scotland? And how well has this approach dealt with the challenges posed by the COVID pandemic? The first half of the article describes the key features of the Strategic state, and outlines how recent Scottish Governments have professed to apply these principles in flagship social policies. The second half of the article analyses these claims by considering how far local implementation of national emergency measures reflected a strategic approach. One conclusion drawn from this analysis is that, while an avowed strategic approach has not been fully implemented nor yet produced significant discernible effects in Scotland, the COVID emergency had the effect of galvanising actions that accord with this approach. The final section of the paper reflects on what this experience suggests about strategic social welfare policy.

Research and Data Analysis

This article draws upon research examining the experiences of strategic practitioners dealing with the local effects of the COVID pandemic in Scotland. Strategic practitioners are those in leadership positions ‘who do the work of making, shaping and executing strategies’ in a particular policy area and/or locality (Whittington, 2006: 619). In this case, practitioners comprised 31 key informants from six local authority areas across Scotland, representing a range of rural and urban regions, demographic profiles and socio-economic conditions. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a purposive sample of informants to gather a range of experiences and opinions. Informants included the local authority chief executive, relevant service head, and the

official with principal responsibility for child poverty; the Director of Public Health or regional NHS official responsible for child poverty; the head of the local third sector interface or organisation representing the voluntary and community sector, and a representative of a local anti-poverty or community group.

Interviews gathered participants' experiences of and views on the effectiveness of local measures taken in response to the impact of COVID upon household's living standards and wellbeing. Interviews were conducted online or by telephone between October – November 2020 and varied in length from 30 to over 80 minutes. Approval for the research was secured from the author's School Ethics Committee. Thematic analysis of the interview data was undertaken to highlight significant and systematic similarities and differences among responses and identify recurrent themes and issues (Nowell et al., 2017). Hypotheses were tested by deviant case analysis – iteratively checking the data for confirming and contradictory examples until no new themes emerged. Only issues relevant to the strategic character of social policy in Scotland are considered here.

The Strategic State and Social Policy

The 'rise of the strategic state' has been described as 'one of the key issues in contemporary public policy and management' (George and Desmidt, 2014: 168). A strategic approach is characterised by what President George W.H. Bush described as 'The Vision Thing'; in particular, the pursuit of an explicitly articulated mission and co-ordinating actions to attain shared outcomes (Drumaux and Joyce, 2018: 8). State partners and others collaborate to deliver this vision applying strategic initiatives and sharing resources. The OECD summarises the defining characteristics of a strategic state approach as comprising

a government that can articulate a broadly supported long-term vision for the country, identify emerging and longer term needs correctly, prioritize objectives, identify medium- and short-term deliverables, assess and manage risk, strengthen efficiencies in policy design and service delivery to meet these needs effectively, and mobilize actors and leverage resources across society to achieve integrated, coherent policy outcomes in support of the vision (2013b: 58)

This describes an ideal rather than any actually existing state. Nevertheless, a state organised to achieve an explicit overall long-term outcome through co-ordinating actions can be described as operating strategically (Johanson, 2009: 873). In contrast, a non-strategic policy approach functions without any explicit co-ordinating vision and operates in an *ad hoc* incremental manner.

Strategic management in government has been described as a synthesis 'of the laissez-faire practices of the liberal state and the centralized state planning of communist societies' (Drumaux and Joyce, 2018: 3). More specifically, a strategic state eschews both traditional policy administration and New Public

Management (NPM) in favour of a New Public Governance (NPG) approach to policy making and delivery (Osborne, 2006). Whereas a traditional approach to public policy and administration involved the ‘direct design and delivery’ of services, NPM employed a ‘managerialist approach’, applying a variety of adapted business sector mechanisms, such as performance targets, inspection and audit regimes and quasi-markets (Elliott, 2020: 285). In contrast, NPG involves collaboration between inter-organisational networks overseen by partnership governance arrangements and a ‘shift away from ... contractualism and managerialism’ (Lindsay et al., 2018: 319).

Although these differences are matters of degree rather than radical demarcations, nevertheless, there are important contrasts between these approaches in culture, governance and ideas about effective policy making and implementation (Lindsay et al., 2014: 195). Strategy is not the same as instruction, and a strategic approach does not impose centralised command and control systems nor standardised operations in the manner of some older state welfare systems and bureaucracies (Elliott et al., 2019: 384). Rather, the role of the state and public institutions in a strategic approach is ‘to steer, lead, orchestrate, and deliver on objectives’ (OECD, 2013b: 28). A strategic approach involves the state operating as ‘a partner, catalyst and facilitator’ orchestrating public services to attain a general outcome (World Bank, 1997: 1).

Interest in a strategic and outcomes-based approach to social policy emerged partly in response to the challenges posed by persistent welfare problems and new social risks, and the failure of ‘unco-ordinated departmentalism and silo working’ to address these effectively (Drumaux and Joyce, 2018: 5). The approach reflects the view that ‘Complex or wicked policy challenges exceed the conventional structure and routine processes of government ... Responding to such policy challenges requires a strategic, cross-sectoral approach’ (OECD, 2013a: 4). Advocates of a strategic approach argue that there is neither a single solution nor a simple response to these multi-dimensional ‘grand challenges’ (Mazzucato and Dibb, 2019: 30). A strategic state approach also recognizes the limits of centralisation, and attempts to achieve policy coherence in a context of bounded rationality by setting the direction of travel without pre-determining each step towards the aspired outcome (Cairney, 2022).

This approach relates to but is not equivalent to ‘mission-oriented’ policy. Missions involve ‘setting concrete directions’ and have a degree of granular operationalisation which is more tactically precise than strategic co-ordination (Mazzucato, 2018: 805). A strategic approach does not constitute a single standardized ‘technocratic, mechanistic, [nor] strictly linear process’, but is a culture and set of behaviours (Bryson et al., 2010: 498). There is also more than ‘one type of strategic state ... [and] countries and governments may find their own path in developing strategic capabilities that work within the national context’ (Elliott, 2020: 286).

The 'Scottish Approach' to Strategic Social Policy

Among the countries described as adopting 'a whole-of-government strategic approach' in areas of social policy are Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Scotland (French and Mollinger-Sahba, 2021: 377). Several commentators suggest that this approach has been espoused with particular enthusiasm in Scotland (Elvidge, 2011; Cairney, 2022). What has been described as the 'Scottish Approach' to policy and government (Lindsay et al., 2018: 323) is certainly 'a distinctively different approach to that adopted in the rest of the UK' (Elliott et al., 2020: 199). In particular, 'The Scottish Approach aspires to be an exemplar of the New Public Governance, which seeks to be more responsive and creative than classic Public Administration, while being more democratic (participative and collaborative) than the New Public Management paradigm' (What Works Scotland, 2019: 12).

However, although 'the Scottish Government has claimed to have developed a form of "strategic state" ' this should be critically examined (Elliott, 2020: 285). The Scottish Government's capacity to diverge from UK social policy is conditioned by the complicated division of reserved and devolved powers. Despite this, a distinctive Scottish approach to public policy has developed through cumulative reforms since the Scottish Parliament was reconvened in 1999, so that there are now notably distinct UK and Scottish social policy systems and welfare cultures (Coutts and Brotchie 2017: 1; Pfau-Effinger, 2005). Although political divisions are widening within an increasingly disunited kingdom, other UK authorities are studying potential lessons from Scotland's strategic approach to welfare (Round and Longlands, 2020). Nevertheless, the extent to which policy making and delivery in Scotland is genuinely strategic merits analysis.

Enthusiasm for a strategic approach in Scotland was accelerated following the 2011 *Commission into the Future of Public Services* (Sharp, 2018: 18). The Christie Commission, as it was known, argued that a new collaborative culture was required to adapt public services to expenditure cuts (Parry, 2012: 256). The Commission recommended improving public sector partnership working, which was inhibited by separate budgets and multiple accountability systems (Cairney, 2017: 502). The Scottish Government agreed with the principles and accepted the main recommendations of the Commission, which informed the strategic approach it has officially embraced. This approach is characterised by three features: firstly, a central vision, shared with stakeholders and articulated through interconnecting aims, strategies and targets; secondly, a National Performance Framework (NPF) which underpins an outcomes-based approach to policy; thirdly, a relational governance system, promoting partnership working, policy co-ordination and integrated services, alongside a commitment to community engagement and participatory policy-making and delivery. Each of these features is considered in turn.

The national purpose which the Scottish Government claims is at the heart of its strategic approach is inclusive economic growth (Slee, 2019: 156). The various components of government are collectively charged with working towards this goal (Scottish Government, 2019b). Underpinning this shared strategic objective is a National Performance Framework (Scottish Government, n.d.) with associated indicators and targets (Elliott et al., 2019: 303). The Scottish Government introduced its first NPF in 2007, and claims that ‘it had a significant impact. It helped to give the public sector, and individuals and organisations across the third and private sectors, a very clear vision of the kind of country we wanted to create’ (Scottish Government, 2021). The NPF is intended to ‘embed outcomes based working across Scotland’, and embody ‘a whole-of-government outcomes framework seeking to establish a unified governmental purpose and monitor progress towards national social objectives’ (French and Mollinger-Sahba, 2021: 381). The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 made the Performance Framework a statutory commitment and obliged Scottish Ministers to consult on and develop revised national outcomes every five years. The Government also created a National Performance Unit. The NPF update in 2018 extended the NPF beyond government to include wider policy partners and promote a ‘whole-of-society approach’ to national progress, and the NPF was renamed ‘Scotland’s Wellbeing Framework’ to reflect this extended responsibility (French and Mollinger-Sahba, 2021: 381).

The Scottish Government argues that there is ‘a “golden thread” linking [its] strategic approach through to delivery’ which is reflected in nested layers connecting the overall vision with stated aims, corresponding strategies and outcome targets in relevant policy areas (Coutts and Brochie 2017: 7). For example, the overall ‘Vision’ outlined in the *National Transport Strategy* ‘is underpinned by four Priorities, each with three associated Outcomes. The Vision, Priorities and Outcomes are at the heart of the Strategy and will be the basis upon which we take decisions and evaluate the success of Scotland’s transport policies going forward’ (Transport Scotland, 2020: 5). Similarly, all 32 local authorities in Scotland agree Local Outcome Improvement Plans with the Scottish Government outlining how they will contribute to ‘the NPF’s overall vision and strategic objectives, but with local government discretion to determine the balance between a range of priorities and how they will meet these objectives’ (Cairney et al., 2016: 338).

To realise its strategic vision through the NPF and outcomes planning, social policy governance in Scotland is relational, in two senses. Firstly, reflecting NPG principles, policy making processes and organisational relationships are characterised by ‘network governance and distributed leadership’, involving cross-sector and multi-level partnerships (Elliott, 2020: 285). Local authorities and Community Planning Partnerships in Scotland are responsible for about 65% of the activities and outcomes in the NPF, including many of the more complex

and intractable social challenges (Social Renewal Advisory Board, 2021: 4). The strategic approach espoused in Scotland to address these demands involves both ‘a *plural state*, where multiple inter-dependent actors contribute to the delivery of public services and a *pluralist state*, where multiple processes inform the policy making system’ (Osborne, 2006: 384, emphases in original). Strategic relational governance involves partnership working to ‘move on from siloed systems of government, encouraging more joined-up, cross-sectoral working’, addressing national priorities by pooling resources and sharing accountability at the local level (Coutts and Brochie 2017: 2).

The second sense in which strategic governance in Scotland is relational is the prominence accorded to ‘a consultative and cooperative style’ of policy-making and delivery (Cairney et al., 2016: 333). This applies to relationships both between policy-makers and with service users. In relation to the former, French and Mollinger-Sahba remark upon the ‘relational basis to coordinate activity on the presumption of trust and the absence of formal inspection or accountability regimes’ which the Scottish Government has promoted with key policy institutions (2021: 379).

Engagement with civil society and service users is also claimed to be a defining characteristic of both a strategic approach to government and NPG (Drumaux and Joyce, 2018: 4; Lindsay et al., 2014: 195). Reflecting this, the Christie Commission proposed that public services should be redesigned around users’ needs rather than the remits of government departments or other institutions (Ferguson, 2015). In response, the Scottish Government created an Office of the Chief Designer to develop and disseminate a ‘Scottish Approach to Service Design’. This included enabling more community and user involvement in service design and delivery, rather than regarding people as the ‘passive recipients of services’ (Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services, 2011: 27). The resolution that policy should be ‘designed with and for people and communities’ was another statutory duty enshrined in the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act and avowed in the *Programme for Government* (Scottish Government, 2015: 9). Testifying to this official commitment to partnership and engagement, a former Scottish Government Permanent Secretary (the highest ranking public official in the country) claimed that ‘we put a real premium on the idea of co-production, with services designed and delivered with service users and organisations’ (Housden, 2014: 67). The Scottish Government claims that these features of a strategic approach are evident in flagship social policies, some of which are now briefly discussed.

Applying a Strategic Policy Approach in Scotland

The report from the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on the UK (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019) reiterated the

view of the Poverty & Inequality Commission that ‘the Scottish Government is taking a different approach to tackling poverty and inequality compared with the UK Government’ (Scottish Government, 2019a: 9). Reflecting this, opening the Parliamentary debate on ‘Tackling Poverty and Building A Fairer Country’ in June 2021, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice declared that ‘The eradication of poverty and building a fairer more equal country must be a national mission for government’ (Robison, 2021). This declaration is examined here in relation to two key pillars of social policy in Scotland: the commitment to end child poverty and the application of new social security powers.

The Child Poverty Act, 2010 passed by UK Parliament included a commitment to end child poverty within 10 years which was effectively revoked by the 2016 Welfare Reform and Work Act. However, even before being repealed, the UK government’s approach to child poverty was neither strategic nor mission-oriented, in that it neither outlined a route towards this ostensible commitment nor developed a relational governance delivery system to implement it.

In contrast, within three months of the Scottish Parliament passing the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act in 2017, the Scottish Government published the *Every Child, Every Chance* delivery plan. This is the first of what will be three consecutive strategies to meet specific child poverty targets by 2030, with interim targets in 2023 (Scottish Government, 2018). This delivery plan builds upon the Scottish Government’s 2014-17 *Child Poverty Strategy*, which was a statutory requirement of the 2010 UK Act. That previous *Strategy* was an important milestone in the development of a strategic approach to child poverty in Scotland, as it adopted an outcomes approach and included logic models which ‘articulate how a policy activity is expected to lead to intermediate outcomes that need to be achieved to enable delivery of the desired ultimate outcome(s)’ (Scottish Government, 2014:13). The 2018-22 strategy extended this approach by focusing on three key drivers of child poverty and orienting national and local policy to address these, using a battery of indicators in a new Child Poverty Measurement Framework to monitor activity and outputs (Scottish Government, 2019a: 10). The 2017 Act requires the Scottish Government to report annually on progress towards the final and interim targets, and obliges local authorities and regional health boards to publish joint annual Local Child Poverty Action Reports (LCPARs) outlining how they are contributing to national outcomes. A new statutory Poverty and inequality Commission advises on and oversees the process. Therefore, by declaring a national mission, setting outcomes and time-specific targets, outlining a logic model and invoking multi-sectoral partnerships to address a ‘grand challenge’, it appears that there are elements of a strategic approach to child poverty policy in Scotland (Mazzucato and Dibb, 2019: 2).

The Scottish Government has also emphasised the importance of understanding what poverty ‘means to those actually living in poverty. How does

it affect their lives? What sacrifices do they have to make?’ (Scottish Government, 2013: 14). There has been a tradition of stakeholder involvement in social policy making in Scotland since devolution in 1999 (Sinclair and McKendrick, 2012). For example, the Scottish Child Payment introduced in 2021 was informed by ‘roundtables with key stakeholders – with CoSLA [the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities] and local authority representatives, and with third sector and anti-poverty organisations, academics, and representatives of priority family groups’ (Scottish Government, 2019a: 69). Similarly, the Scottish Children’s Parliament was involved in the development of the *Every Child, Every Chance* strategy; and local authorities and health boards have a duty under both the Community Engagement Act and Child Poverty Act to involve residents and communities in the development of LCPARs.

A participatory approach to policy making has also been evident in the implementation of the additional social security powers that Scotland acquired in 2016. The Scottish Government committed to passing a Social Security Bill that would take ‘a Scottish Approach to important social security matters’ (Scottish Government, 2016: 13). A declared feature of this Approach was involving service users and stakeholders in the design of a new social security system (Scottish Government, 2015: 20). The development of the new benefits was informed by input from Experience Panels, providing insights from more than 2,400 volunteers with personal experience of the UK benefits being replaced (Social Justice and Fairness Commission, 2021: 66). The subsequent Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 included a Charter that specified service users’ rights and the guiding principles of the new system.

Therefore, it does appear that the distinctive Scottish approach to child poverty and social security policy has some strategic properties. However, this approach has faced a number of long-standing issues and encountered exceptional challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, both of which raise questions about how strategic a social policy system can actually be in practice.

Testing Strategy Under Pressure

To paraphrase a well-known military aphorism: no strategy survives its first engagement with the enemy. An urgent, almost unprecedented global emergency is a daunting enemy of any strategy, and the COVID pandemic tested the resilience and uncovered the character of welfare systems across the world. The following analysis considers how four of the features which distinguish the strategic approach to social policy espoused in Scotland fared in responding to the initial COVID emergency: a commitment to a shared vision, partnership working, an outcomes orientated approach, and engaging with communities and service users.

One potential anomaly of the strategic approach, as it has been applied in Scotland, is that it requires commitment to an over-arching vision (and associated outcomes) alongside partnership working to deliver tailored local responses. The Scottish approach therefore entails a potentially challenging balance between conformity and flexibility. The evidence indicates that the first requirement at least appears unproblematic, and that local stakeholders support the national child poverty strategy and related social policy initiatives. Illustrating this, one local authority official with lead responsibility for child poverty policy interviewed felt that both their more senior council colleagues and elected members were now more engaged with child poverty issues than before the 2017 Act was passed:

I genuinely sensed a shift from when we took the first [Local] Child Poverty Action Report . . . I felt there was a definite shift in interest. What I mean is, obviously poverty and inequality in general, has [sic] always been on the agenda. But that specific focus about, “Let’s target this specifically to look at children and families”, I certainly felt a shift in attitude, you know – more questions, getting a lot more involved with colleagues from education about how we support children in schools, and things like that.

This embrace of the national child poverty agenda contrasts with the response of several local authorities in Scotland to the 2010 UK Child Poverty Act. That Act imposed no statutory duty upon Scottish local authorities (unlike those in England and Wales) to prepare local strategies, and engagement with this agenda was correspondingly patchy (Sinclair and McKendrick, 2014).

A second feature of this approach is the endeavour to work in partnership and ‘break down silos’ to address complex social problems. Effective collaboration between service areas and across sectors is a perennial public policy challenge. Numerous studies testify that partnership working is a ‘messy process’ that requires considerable investment in time and resources to build effective relationships and new operating procedures (Coutts and Brotchie 2017: 15). A former Scottish Government Permanent Secretary acknowledged that ‘This new way of working places both gives more opportunities to and places greater demands on front-line staff. In this environment, a care worker for example needs to be able to work flexibly and responsively as part of a spectrum of support orchestrated by the user’ (Housden, 2014: 73). However, analysis of the first annual LCPARs undertaken by Poverty & Inequality Commission concluded that in some reports ‘only a passing reference was made to partnership working’, and that while not definitive, this apparent absence suggested that tackling poverty was not yet regarded by all local stakeholders as a shared and equal responsibility (2019b: 4).

However, one interesting finding from the research into local responses to the pandemic was that the emergency conditions it created prompted rapid innovations in local policy and practice, some of which accelerated partnership

working. As one third sector representative interviewed explained, ‘We have moved quickly during COVID and we’ve done that because we’ve put risk aside and collaborated, and I think that’s a really important lesson’. The speed of events and scale of the challenge compelled organisations to revise some of their decision-making processes, which improved collaboration between local partners. One local authority child poverty lead official described the local response to COVID in Scotland as ‘community planning at its absolute best’. This sentiment was echoed by a representative of those with direct experience of poverty, who said ‘It was the best partnership project I’ve ever been in . . . There was no bitching and it was brilliant for the sake of the people who needed it – the end beneficiary. And that is a good thing to say. It was really, really top notch’.

One factor contributing to improved local collaboration was the need to reduce potential delays that might impede an effective response. As one local official explained

There were decisions that were made a lot quicker. So, previously, internal structures, like any big organisation, are a big juggernaut in here. And at times there’s about a thousand committees and management meetings to get anything through any various levels. We just cut through that. Because we had no time for that. So, there was delegated responsibility given to all of us that was working on the whole response, just to get on with it. That was the message that came through loud and clear. The message was, “Get on with it, make it happen, get it done”. So we were like, “Okay!”

A corresponding feature of this accelerated and intensified partnership working was greater delegation of responsibility to front-line service providers. Decision-making was de-layered and discretion devolved during the first phase of the pandemic, and some staff remarked on how refreshing it was to be trusted and empowered to act; as one local authority child poverty lead explained

Things that previously you would have to have written a paper, you’d have had to submitted recommendations, you’d have had to do your costing, you’d have had to identify what budget it was coming from, and you would have then went [sic] through various committees to get things approved – it never happened. It was delegated responsibility – you’ve got responsibility to make something happen with food, “can you go and do that?” So, we just went and done that

This view reiterates a recommendation of the Social Renewal Advisory Board that ‘Teams must be empowered to have more autonomy and choice, be able to take decisions and act quickly and flexibly to solve problems.’ (2021: 8).

A third feature of the strategic approach to welfare supposedly developed in Scotland is that provision should be directed to meet specific outcomes rather than inputs or outputs. Evidence gathered about the local response to the COVID suggests that the extraordinary conditions required an urgent response, which facilitated shifting to an outcomes focus. For example, one local authority

official described how local partnership governance had been revised to focus on measurable deliverables:

This was specifically focused to hold us internally to account and what were we doing. “Is it working? Is it making a difference? How do we prove it? How do we demonstrate it? How do we evidence it?” And we introduced a child poverty tracker under the three main drivers where we would have every single intervention project that was happening internally: “What driver was that linked to? How much funding was attached to that?” so that we could track the money

A related feature of the emergency was agreement among some local partnerships that responses did not have to be flawless but simply sufficient to meet urgent requirements. As one third sector representative put it, ‘We just had to be agile, we just had to make it work’. Another third sector representative interviewed affirmed that the focus was on responses which were satisficing:

Our thinking was primarily informed by “What is the fastest, good enough project that we can do?” Which, interestingly, I’m told is how software developers now work – you know? Develop the minimum, basic criteria that you can and get it out and then develop on top. So we found that by ourselves!

The sense of freedom to improvise and the clarity of purpose the crisis generated was described by one local authority head of service:

Everything just vanishes and it’s all [about] make new missions and get food in. There’s just a few things that you concentrate on. We were a reduced war cabinet and didn’t need to concentrate on all these other things! That’s kind of what happened. It was refreshing, you know?

The final feature of the strategic Scottish approach considered is community and stakeholder engagement and co-production of policies. Understandably, the pandemic reduced opportunities for face-to-face engagement with service users and other stakeholders, and disrupted some formal feedback channels. However, the extent of engagement with and co-production of social policies in Scotland was questioned even before this. Involving experts by experience has been promoted by successive Scottish Governments and championed by numerous civil society organisations. Nevertheless, questions remain over how widespread the commitment is to genuine co-production and power sharing. For example, the Poverty & Inequality Commission expressed disappointment at what it interpreted as a lack of involvement of people with direct experience of poverty in the development of local child poverty action reports, observing that ‘the views of people with direct lived experience are often used to illustrate a point, rather than to shape agendas, explain or increase understanding of the key issues relating to poverty. It also is not always clear what impact involving people with

direct lived experience has on policy and practice' (2019b: 9). These experiences have interesting implications for a strategic approach to social policy.

Discussion and Conclusions

There are recognised challenges relating to governance, responsibility and delivery in applying a strategic policy approach (Brown, 2021). Implementing strategies and executing missions requires organisations to work in new ways, and 'a significant shift in managers' activities and accountabilities as they move from leading organisations to leading systems, and a greater reliance on collective and distributed leadership to engage multiple stakeholders' (Elliott et al., 2020: 200). Collaborating to deliver a strategy obliges organisations to trust one another with information, resources and shared responsibility, and take risks to innovate where necessary to attain outcomes (Mazzucato and Dibb, 2019: 8). Some organisations may be unwilling or feel unable to share capacity when accountabilities remain unchanged.

One particular challenge that a strategic approach must face is effective community engagement and co-production with service users (Loeffler & Timm-Arnold 2021: 116). The Scottish Government attests that 'The vision for the Scottish Approach to Service Design is that the people of Scotland are supported and empowered to actively participate in the definition, design and delivery of their public services' (2019b: 6). However, evidence from the local response to the COVID emergency reaffirms long-standing criticisms that the rhetoric about community and user involvement in service design and delivery has not matched reality (Hastings et al., 2021). The disappointment expressed by the Poverty & Inequality Commission about the limitations of the involvement of experts by experience in policy has been reiterated by other commentators: 'Communities are only incorporated in the planning and design of the initiatives, once the boundaries of the programme have already been decided . . . and consequently their capacity to influence and decide is limited from the beginning' (Elliott et al., 2019: 305).

In contrast, another aspect of a strategic approach to policy was not only evident in the response to COVID in Scotland but was actually enabled by the exigencies of the emergency. The disruption caused by the pandemic, and the imperative to respond urgently, compelled innovation in how some policies were developed, governed and delivered. The COVID emergency galvanised action and accelerated working practices which accord with a strategic approach to social policy. Delivering national responses to COVID required local partnerships to work across demarcation boundaries and share resources and responsibilities, innovate more agile services responsive to users' circumstances, and focus on outcomes rather than inputs and activities. However, these features

were not unique to a distinctly Scottish approach, but evident in areas less publicly committed to strategic social policy (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021).

Although there is evidence of general support for a strategic approach to social policy in Scotland, and several of the components of this have been institutionalised, nevertheless both its implementation and effects remain partial. In particular, ‘there is little evidence that Scottish policymaking differences have produced major differences in policy outcomes’ (Cairney et al., 2016: 340). For example, despite the measures taken in relation to the 2017 Child Poverty Act and the application of new social security powers, poverty rates in Scotland have followed similar trends to those in the rest of the UK. As the Poverty & Inequality Commission observe, this ‘may lead to the conclusion that the different path the Scottish Government is taking is not yet having an effect’ (Poverty & Inequality Commission, 2019a: 11). There has never been an entirely uniform nor monolithic UK welfare state, but its internal differences are now greater than at any point in the modern age. The strategic state approach developed in Scotland is partly responsible for this divergence. However, social policy is as much – if not more – about outcomes as processes, and there is little substantive merit in appearing to be different if this does not produce significantly distinctive outcomes. OECD commentary on the strategic state notes the crucial ‘importance of effective implementation of strategies and policies in support of positive outcomes and impacts for a country’s economy and society’ (2013b: 7). In this regard, what has been described as ‘Scotland’s Achilles Heel’ – poor implementation – undermines and calls into question the seriousness of the commitment to a distinctive and effective Scottish approach (Creegan and Lang, 2021; What Works Scotland, 2019: 4-5).

Over a decade after the Christie Commission reported, it took a pandemic to really accelerate application of some of its central principles and recommendations, such as breaking down ‘silo working’. It seems that a shared strategy is not in itself enough to change inter-organisational relationships, accountability models and working practices (Elliott et al., 2019: 311). No matter how laudable, a vision must be implemented by effective mechanisms, as ‘Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory’ (Sun Tzu).

An emergency is, by its nature, extraordinary and urgent, and these circumstances both require and enable rapid innovative responses. However, such conditions rarely apply to chronic problems in less urgent circumstances nor to the wicked grand challenges which may require a strategic response. In more mundane cases, outcomes may be less clear while mistakes may appear more visible and deemed less forgivable. In such circumstances, disrupting quotidian practice is perceived as a risk best avoided, even if this fails to meet outcomes or tackle the underlying causes of problems. Changes compelled by necessity may therefore be transient once a crisis has passed. The challenge facing social policy makers in Scotland, and others who advocate a strategic social policy approach, is

how to sustain and extend what has been learned from the COVID emergency? There 'is a difference between "learning" and "changing".' (Connolly & Pyper, 2020: 1627). Therefore, while welcome, the 'Call to Action' from the Scottish Leaders' Forum Child Poverty Action Group (2022) that there should be no return to what was the previous ineffective normality should not be merely a call but become a compelling commitment.

It appears that a Scottish approach to policy making is not sufficient in itself to address the challenges which COVID highlighted and intensified, but did not generate. More fundamental changes are required, including bold decisions about tax revenue and reallocating resources to widen opportunity (Social Mobility Commission 2021: 129). Such reforms should build upon rather than reject the essential principles of the strategic approach, including a national commitment to an ambitious vision, enabling partnership working and innovation across sectors, and empowering communities to co-produce the services in which they are expert. If this were to happen, then there would be a truly distinctive and valuable Scottish approach to welfare and social renewal.

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Conflict of interests

None.

Competing interests

The author declares none.

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