

This speech was delivered to delegates at the 2006 VOCAL conference: it was directed to Directors and elected members.



Having been a local government officer, an elected member, a private consultant to local authorities, and a government adviser, that qualifies me very well as someone in need of some serious career advice.

It has, however, allowed me the benefit of different perspectives on local government that I hope bring an understanding and empathy of their role and work.

Having worked in these various guises in and with local government I alternate from being completely inspired to completely scunnered by the experience. I don't foresee that changing – it's the nature of public service.

I think we're at a good time just now – not an easy time, it never seems to be that – but there are opportunities and, I believe, things will get better. But for that to happen fully and successfully local government will have to change working practice and staff skillsets.

I believe the cultural agenda is fundamentally different now to that which existed three years ago – and its course has been set largely during this Executive’s tenure. The system of rights, standards and entitlements is a different philosophical starting point for cultural provision that demands an ambitious response and changes in structures, budgets and, hardest of all, mindsets.

It will be an evolution, quite distinctive in Europe, achieved incrementally - and in twenty years time when our sons and daughters are addressing this conference they will be doing so over a cultural landscape in Scotland that will be more equitably distributed, will be more efficiently run, more effectively planned, and will have more participation from the people who are paying for it.

Some might suggest the history of support for this sector from the Scottish Executive might mitigate against this, that it has been one of delayed expectation – I don’t agree, that is only a partial truth – and anyway even false dawns shed some light.



These various steps of policy exploration have been accompanied by a steadily increasing budget - increased investment that is often either forgotten or given little credit for.

Any amount of spending on culture in Scotland by the Executive is always welcome, but will never be enough. And I don’t mean that in a ‘but-if-you-give-us-£100m-it-will-be-enough’ way. It won’t be enough because the Executive are only one player

in this game and are never able, nor should be expected, to shoulder the bulk of the responsibility.

Local government is absolutely pivotal to cultural change and development in Scotland – it is utterly vital – and, because of that, it is utterly vital that local government gets it right. That is not a declaration that many of us, hand on heart, could make at the moment, despite the many wonderful examples of good practice that exist.


In the period prior to, and during, the Cultural Commission the expectation of those involved was always that the burden of responsibility for creating a sea-change of provision and delivery in Scotland would fall on local government's shoulders. Not only are you significant players in your own right, you are the direct intermediaries and the intersecting point between all the other players at national and local level. A vital and unique role.

I think the challenge is profound for local government in this new agenda and, looking from your unenviable vantage point, I wouldn't be surprised to see some heads shaking in despair. An uncertain political complexion locally and nationally post-May, potential local government reform on the horizon, and Bord na Gaidhlig looking for you to prepare a Gaelic Language Implementation Plan for Selkirk. What else can possibly happen?

We have just heard from David Brew, the Minister's representative, what we can expect. Here's my brief reinterpreted summary. The two main things that will happen are legislation and a change in the support structure at national level. I'll come back to the latter as I think it needs to be designed in such a way that it supports changes that will be expected from local government to implement the former.

The legislation, as we've heard, will ascribe a responsibility to prepare national standards and local entitlements. Standards will be nationally prepared guidelines of good practice. I think you should be involved in setting these guidelines as you will be responsible for their practical implementation – they are, however, ostensibly the specialist end of the professions – museums, libraries, arts – getting together and agreeing aspirational targets for their sectors.

Anyone who has seen the SLIC guidelines for libraries will not, I suspect, be too astonished at the format and content these standards will eventually take. I'm involved in an exercise at the moment for Scottish Museums Council with colleagues from PMP and Bishops Law looking at establishing a framework for quality assurance standards in museums provision as a basis for setting cultural entitlements. This is an embryonic approach that is only just going out to consultation but is indicative of current thinking.



Development matrix

	Organisational Development	User Experience	Learning	Collection
Level 1				
Level 2				
Level 3				
Level 4				
	Economic Development	Access	Local Community Planning Themes	Social Justice

It looks at establishing a matrix of measures and signifiers which are, along the top, relevant to the profession i.e. quality of collections and visitor experience, and of those pertinent to public sector partners and funders along the bottom, i.e. aspects of social and economic impact.

The boxes then contain the criteria that are required to be ranked at each level. The stiffer and more sophisticated the criteria become the higher up the grid the museums are ranked. What an approach like this can do is level the playing field of dialogue between museum provider and funder. A local authority area, or indeed the

country, can say we have X museums at level 1, Y at level 2, Z at level 3, and we want to increase each of these categories by 10% over five years. The detailed measures to do that – the standards – are set out in the matrix and can therefore be more clearly costed.

Then the iterative process begins with government or other funders where they say 'we can only afford to give you enough to raise by 7% over 10 years' – and so the usual arguments begin. But on a much clearer shared understanding of what each party is getting out of it, and with a much clearer opportunity to take a strategic developmental approach by both local authority and national government.

That's standards. Entitlements are the local interpretation of standards – the service level agreement you undertake of specific actions to implement the standards in each of the areas - arts, museums, libraries. If you say it quickly enough, it's that easy.

With a possible entitlement for each standard won't there be a lot of them?

- Yes.

Won't that make it a helluva guddle particularly in the early years to set meaningful entitlements?

- Yes.

Is this the hard part for local government?

- Yes.

Does it get harder?

- Er, yes. Because you are likely to have to establish them jointly with partners from the local cultural sector, voluntary and private sectors, and colleagues from other parts of the public sector.

Are you talking about a mini-community-planning-partnership with a couple of extra seats at the table?

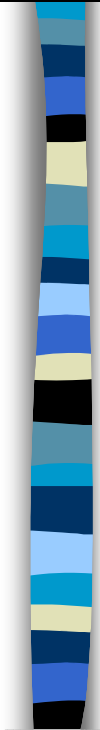
- You got it.

That sounds like a pure nightmare.

- It's called good working practice.

OK – this might work on paper, how will it actually work in practice. Change and development do not exist in a vacuum, they do not arrive fully formed, and they are

often resisted by those who are most essential to their successful implementation. So what are the conditions for cultural development that need to be in place for it to be successful?



Conditions for success

- Sustained political will and motivation
- Desire of the community to be involved
- Infrastructure
- Structures to deliver
- Resources to deliver

- Inspirational people -

Let's look at the first of these. Who is going to spearhead the local cause, champion it in the chamber, lobby for it with colleagues, negotiate with national politicians for increased recognition? There is a job of work for councillors to do. For too long there has been, in my opinion, a lack of effective resistance in the chamber, sometimes no resistance at all, at the persistent cutting of a service that invariably starts off from a position of weakness anyway in terms of overall Council budget.

That is not necessarily the Member's fault. They need the right ammunition to convince colleagues. I remember as chair of CLS of the first Highland Council I had to oversee the systematic dismantling of most of the development work and posts I had built up as an officer some years earlier. That was the saddest, most dispiriting experience of my career. In retrospect it showed that political will and motivation are

not enough to carry arguments – they need the stronger ammunition of legislation and evidence.

A couple of months ago at the VOCAL seminar in Stirling I argued for a return to gut-based politics away from evidence-based stuff. I cited work I'd been doing in Newcastle-Gateshead where I spoke to the head of Leisure for Gateshead Council and asked him what evidence he'd managed to amass to convince his members to invest in three of the most significant and iconic developments in the UK in the last ten years – the Angel of the North, the Sage and the Baltic Centre. He looked slightly embarrassed, "Well, none, they just felt it was right". Hooray! Commonsense and instinct beats the bean-counters! Would that it was always that easy.

The truth is that every aspect of service provision will be looking to find more and convincing reasons why the limited public investment monies available should be allocated to them, rather than you. So your arguments better be convincing and largely based in hard fact. Unless you go to work for Gateshead.

This creates a problem – there are no longitudinal studies that show direct causal links between participation in culture and, for instance, improvements in health. There are a growing number of anecdotal studies that show connections and pretty convincing trends, but no smoking ballet pump that provides conclusive evidence.

Some Members and Ministers, however sympathetic in theory, will only ever be convinced in practice by such evidence. This is where the national support structure should assist you – helping provide the ammunition you require. A couple of years ago the Executive produced an impressively researched collation of available literature. It's very handy – how many of you were aware of it, have read it, find it useful? The Executive and existing and planned national bodies need to work with you to provide the arguments and research you require – it will cost money, and I believe it is their collective obligation to provide it - but they need a steer from you on what is required to convince.

Sustained political will and motivation at national level is a prerequisite as well of course, and I wouldn't embarrass the Minister or her representative by suggesting that that is anything other than the case. And of course we should not underestimate

the importance of having a First Minister who has taken such an active and genuine interest in this sector. That has not always been, nor will always be, the case.

Let's look at the second condition, 'the desire of the community to be involved'. It is perhaps a cliché to state that the people of an area are its greatest resource, but that doesn't mean it's not true. And engagement in cultural activity is a way of maximising the potential of that resource. But if folk don't know about it, or if they think they don't want it, you're not being effective or efficient. I'll come back to that.

Local authority cultural provision is hugely important, but the voluntary sector is arguably even greater.



In the Highlands and Islands the voluntary sector provides...

- 30 independent museums; 1,300 sports clubs; 2,000 arts organisations
- Over 5,000 events, performances and festivals each year that attract 1.5 million people
- Arts and sports organisations involve 31,500 local people, generate £65m per annum and create 1,600 full time jobs, 3,000 part-time, and 2,100 fte's
- In Orkney over 10% of the population participate in the arts alone. Almost 60% of Highland adults participate in sport.
- Highlanders attend music events three times more than the rest of Scotland, and contemporary art exhibitions twice as often

Here are some statistics from one local authority area in Scotland – the one I live in. Yours will reveal a similar story I'm sure. No public sector body, not even the local authority, can hope to attempt to match this level of provision – nor should they – the voluntary sector are, I believe, equal partners in local cultural development and it

would be negligent not to have them at the table when provision and delivery is being discussed. A comparatively small increase in investment here might release proportionately greater levels of provision.

The user is key – customer, voter, participant – however you describe them. It's important to have information about users and (particularly) non-users, about lifestyle trends, about population trends for your area, and the demographic projections for your communities. Good market research is expensive. Providing services that people aren't that interested in, in places they don't want to go, is far more expensive and wasteful of resources. You need to make the investment. This more methodical approach will also provide some of the much-needed evidence you require to convince colleagues with regard to the local demand for cultural services

We've all talked for too long about lessons we should learn from the private sector but rarely introduce them. The private sector approach is not a panacea and we should be selective about what we learn from them. But there are obvious ways in which we should emulate their approach to gathering and using information on users and non-users, in anticipating and also setting trends for use, and in the efficient use of space within buildings. In this the local authority has a distinct advantage over the private sector – its staff are usually far more committed to helping the customer and user and believe in the ideals of public service. Paradoxically this belief does not always transfer into an effective front-of-house manner with people. Emulate the best – look at a retailer whose staff have a customer-facing style you admire – Marks and Spencer? – and ask if they'll develop a staff training programme with you.

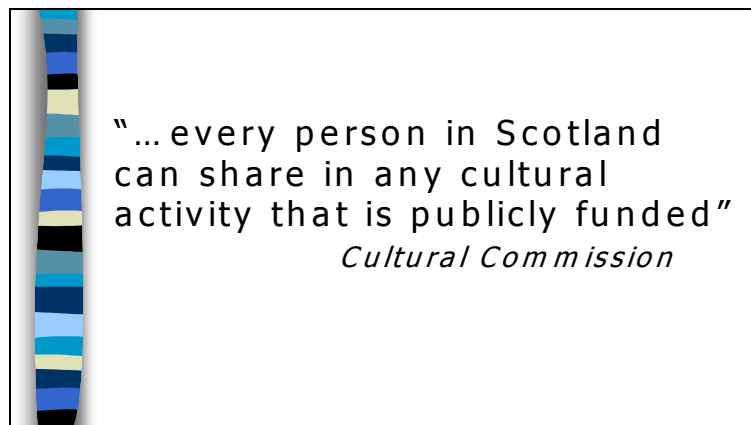
You need the infrastructure to deliver. Public assets need to be maximised, not tolerated, or operated on historical grounds. Alternative methods of governance such as trust status need to be investigated more seriously and more quickly. In many, possibly most, cases this will turn out to be the more cost-effective and efficient manner to deliver services – unfortunately politics have prevented some authorities analysing these options in depth. For example, only recently in South Ayrshire where a one-vote majority changed political hands, has the trust option become a live issue.

Members will need to address this urgently. A change in governance status does not mean Members, and by extension the public voice, abdicating all responsibilities, it means evolving those responsibilities. It means you're left with a more strategic, managerial overview of services in your area while somebody else has to worry about the sticky operational end of the lollipop. Nor does it mean lessening your current financial commitment – it does mean maximising it in a way that would not be possible under current methods.

There needs to be a methodical and considered long-term strategy taken to the development of assets. Building stock, particularly libraries and museums, needs to have a radical re-think. Here we are 10 years after the last local government re-shuffle and most authorities still cannot provide an authoritative list of the culture and leisure properties they own, their value, and their condition. This is a basic prerequisite for any careful owner to develop their assets.

There is a line in the Cultural Commission's report right at the start that I feel was overlooked and underplayed by both the Commission and by its readership

"The Commission believes that the aspiration of the First Minister for access to culture should be distilled into one ambition – that every person in Scotland can share in any activity that is publicly funded. That is truly access for all."



In achieving this ambition local government has a dilemma, very clearly expressed in the culture and leisure service – the provider-enabler schizophrenia. What will emerge when the new legislation is in force is, I believe, the recognition that your

key responsibility is to ensure equitable delivery, and that to achieve this you have to look at the entire picture in your area and coordinate delivery. The deliverers will be national companies, local companies, new touring companies that emerge, voluntary sector, private sector, and then - in service areas where gaps remain - you. The local authority will eventually become the deliverer of last resort. There is no shame in that, by the way. Play to your strengths – bureaucracies are good administrators and coordinators, they are not always great cultural deliverers.

The implication of this approach is a sea-change in perception by Members, officers and staff of what they do, not why they do it. Whatever impulse drove you and colleagues to do what you do remains – what evolves is the manner in which you achieve it, and ultimately the ability to do it more successfully.

After that change in perception you actually have to change what you do to match this. This implies re-training to develop the appropriate skills. The current array of cultural services contains a range of professionals who are rightly proud of their specialist training. That doesn't make them great managers – usually it makes them very frustrated managers who're too busy clearing bureaucratic sharn from their desk rather than doing what they're qualified for, such as developing music or interpreting heritage.

Local authorities collectively (and this is where VOCAL could play a very important role) should investigate the future shape of the ideal local government cultural worker – they will have several generic skills: research, good community liaison manner, fund-raising and negotiating skills – and they may have a specialism in, say, archives or information services. Later in their career they may re-train to acquire another specialism and enable them to be deployed across the department. VOCAL, working with the unions and with training providers, HEIs and tertiary education, could provide a vital national service here.

The last condition for successful cultural development is inspirational people, and it needs them at all levels in the process. It needs them at Member and officer level within the authority, it needs them within the local cultural community and elsewhere in the local public sector. And it needs them in the business sector and the local media. The Authority's role then becomes identifying and helping support these

people and, importantly, not feeling threatened that others are sharing the limelight for the success. Some Members and officers, in my experience, are not always generous in this regard.

So can things change? In our risk-averse society engagement in cultural development is not always reassuring as it often involves uncertainty, creativity and the unexpected. Not qualities usually clasped to the bosom of the public sector, although paradoxically conditions within which politicians operate on a daily basis.

We can manage the institutions, the money and the procedures but we are unable to control the outcomes. For an active culture that is how it should be. For a local authority that is a position which is difficult to justify to electors.

Can local authorities actually change? To be honest, I'm not sure. Let's suppose – indulge me for a moment – that you actually agree with some of what I'm saying, when are you actually going to get the chance to put it into practice? The reality of working in local government is that an awful lot of shuch continually lands on your desk and has to be dealt with – with the stuff you're legally obliged to do taking precedence, the stuff the Chief wants you to do coming next, then what you want to do, and putting up a pretence of doing what your Chair wants further down the line, and so on. So the chances of anything I say having any effect get dimmer and more distant the closer you get back to your office again.

We are talking substantial cultural change and that's not easy – and it needs at least three things: first, like the Californian light bulb, you must really want to change – unless that initial commitment in principle is in place nothing's going to happen. Then you need a realistic timescale to do it within – incremental changes are generally the way that local government works best so set yourself a realistic timescale – change 5% of working practice and budgets a year for five years, 10% a year for the following five, and in ten years you have significant change. Third – seek help. This is where the new Creative Scotland could and should, I believe, come into its own. There is a role for an agency with a national remit and overview to work with authorities on developing bespoke solutions. A single support agency that can help you identify best practice, current trends, work with you on specific development projects. An extension of what you do, a genuine partner.

The Executive is taking in the national companies alongside the national institutions – these national bodies need to find new ways of engaging with local authorities, particularly those outwith the geographical authority areas they're located in. Perhaps Creative Scotland can be the conduit that brings the two parties together – nationals and local government – to work strategically.

This can work. Local government works, and it can work very well indeed when given the opportunity. I believe it is being given the opportunity – not through being given a blank cheque, that's never going to happen, and it would be naïve to think that sticking your hand out to the Executive is the answer.

But if local government does not take to this new agenda, decides to resist it, then it and the opportunities will fail. Similarly the Executive must involve local government more in its decision-making process – the current Working Group on Guidance will hopefully be a good and productive start. But some work exchanges between the two governmental tiers would help immensely at breaking down misconceptions about roles, and open some eyes about the pressures of turning legislation into reality.

This whole politically-inspired exercise, started by the First Minister, has a single aim – to increase the opportunity for people to feel the spark that comes from engaging in cultural activity. Yes, we invariably focus on ourselves and our structures at times like these, but our starting point must in each case be, will this decision or action make it easier or less easy for the user to benefit. That will remain, as it does just now, as the biggest challenge to success.

Bryan Beattie

Creative Services Ltd

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