

# The prevention agenda in Scotland is a worthy initiative, but the tensions inherent in its execution may yet undermine it

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5/16/2014

*The Scottish government is taking preventative spending seriously and is giving localities the resources and power to design and implement prevention programmes. **Emily St Denny** writes that this initiative recasts local autonomy as the capacity to express local strengths and identity, and to develop responses to local needs. However, the disparity across locales, compounded by the vagueness 'prevention', may yet undermine the Scottish government's bid to introduce a more rational, effective and evidence-based form of prevention policymaking.*



The notion that prevention is better than cure makes intuitive sense. Prevention suggests the preemption of hardships and expenses. In the face of increasing budgetary constraints and a changing and ageing population, preventative policymaking has moved up the political agenda in the UK, with the Scottish government leading the way. The enactment of this new agenda in Scotland is characterized by the alignment of a broad 'philosophy' of prevention with sensitivity to the needs and assets of disparate communities. This has been coupled with the decentralization of capacities to design and implement prevention programmes. Nevertheless, the tensions inherent to translating broad national objectives into particular interpretations of prevention inspiring discrete local projects may yet undermine the Scottish government's ambition to introduce greater rationality, systematism and collaboration into its prevention agenda.

In 2011, the Scottish Finance Committee released its [Report on preventative spending](#) in which is stated a clear preference for holistic preventative and early intervention policy strategies over reactive action. This was followed by the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services, chaired by Dr Campbell Christie, calling for Scotland to make a "decisive shift to prevention" by transferring resources from reactive policies and towards those that seek to defuse, preempt or prevent negative social outcomes. This transformation was to be facilitated by significant public sector reform aimed at improving the quality of services and their delivery by obviating wasteful and short-sighted implementation across disjointed organizations. Furthermore, both committees called for greater engagement with local partners, in order to generate appropriate and place-sensitive services that both respond to the needs of communities and make the most of their existing assets. The Scottish government responded to the Christie Commission by articulating a commitment to a broad philosophy of prevention, and opted to privilege community planning as a means of designing and delivering national objectives at a local level.

Thus, in Scotland, the shift towards prevention is predicated on the development of partnerships not only across services and sectors, but also across the different levels of government. More particularly, localism; the strategy whereby power and resources are devolved to service providers, democratic structures and communities at a local level in order to deliver national policy priorities, is being recast at the service of prevention and joined-up policymaking. Moreover, this 'new localism' operates within a stipulated framework of agreed-upon standards and policy objectives in such a way as to integrate local organizations into new audit, accountability and performance management processes. This evolution fits in with the Scottish government's increasing preference for outcome-based policymaking, with an emphasis on the cost/effective generation of positive social outcomes supplanting a previous focus on policy outputs.

One primary way in which prevention and new localism have been articulated on the ground in Scotland is through the use of Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs). SOAs are detailed plans in which each local authority and corresponding Community Planning Partnership (CPP) set out their strategy for working with partners in the public, third and private sector to deliver the key objectives set out in the National Performance Framework, in a 'place-sensitive' and 'asset-based' manner. In exchange, Scottish government grants greater responsibility and flexibility in delivering the outcomes to local authorities. Moreover, this expansion of autonomy is facilitated by increased funding

coupled with a reduction in ring-fenced budgets, the reduction of bureaucratic red tape, and streamlining of service development and delivery, and by making reporting requirements more straightforward and meaningful. The first SOA were agreed in 2008, after having been proposed in 2002 as part of the Concordat between Scottish government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA). With the advent of the prevention agenda, the new rounds of SOAs have tasked CPPs with presenting their strategies to integrate and translate the government's commitment to prevention into a set of local services and programmes.

The combination of the Scottish government's increasing predilection for outcome-based policy approaches and its commitment to new localism has led the 32 Scottish Local Authority SOAs produced in 2013 to reflect a distinctive mix of similarities and differences. Indeed, on the one hand, all the SOAs demonstrate broad and consistent similarities, particularly with regard to their common pledge to systematically integrate prevention in their community planning, and to reorganize the design and delivery of public services in a manner that privileges bottom-up policymaking, co-production, and collaboration. On the other hand, notable differences appear when local areas turn broad preventative strategies into specific project relevant to their geographies and socioeconomic conditions, and try to give more specific meaning to 'prevention'. Thus, some natural geographic differences produce idiosyncratic aims. For example, while the Highland SOA pays particular attention to the prevention wildlife crime and to the mitigation of the effects of bad weather on hard-to-reach rural communities, Orkney presents a plan to prevent water-related accidents through primary prevention (safety inspections) and early intervention (educational programmes for children and young people). Nevertheless, the most evident diversity among SAOs appears in relation to the discrete projects planned for the prevention or alleviation of the complex inequalities considered to cause costly and acute social and health problems.

Indeed, by virtue of the vast disparity between communities' needs and assets across Scotland, social problems appear to be dealt with in a particularly localized manner. Thus, for, example, East Dunbartonshire, places great emphasis on the rolling out of poverty prevention interventions that have already been shown to work in certain communities within the local authority area, rather than looking elsewhere for programmes to import. Nonetheless, the bulk of the programmes aimed at tackling poverty or deprivation closely resemble each other in aims and/or design. This suggests that, in many cases, local preventative programmes may differ in name only from those undertaken by neighboring CPPs, arguably in a bid to emphasise the programme's place-appropriateness.

Overall, and in the face decreasing public funds and a changing population, CPPs faced with very different community contexts have attempted to translate the broad goals of prevention set by the Scottish government into a series of detailed plans that are considered meaningful and appropriate for their particular area. This 'new localism' recasts local autonomy not just as the expression of local freedom from higher authority, but also as the capacity to express local strengths and identity, and to develop responses to local needs. Nevertheless, the disparity across locales, compounded by the vagueness and equivocality of 'prevention', may yet undermine the Scottish government's bid to introduce a more rational, effective and evidence-based form of prevention policymaking.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Homepage image credit: [Francisco Diez](#)*

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