Balancing Westminster-style democratic accountability with institutional and service-led accountability: the case of prevention policy in Scotland

Abstract

Like Westminster, the Scottish Parliament is part of an apparently simple accountability process: power is concentrated in the hands of ministers, who are accountable to the public through Parliament. As in Westminster, this simple picture of ministerial accountability is increasingly misleading. The Scottish Government plays an overarching role in policymaking but encourages institutional accountability: it sets a broad strategy and invites a large number of public bodies to share responsibility for its success. Ministers devolve most day-to-day policymaking to civil servants. The Scottish Government has moved from the production of short term targets to long term outcomes measures which go beyond the five-year terms of elected office. It encourages localism, respecting the competing mandate of elected local authorities and encouraging them to work with other public bodies through community planning partnerships. It encourages the ‘co-production’ of policy with service users. In that context, the Scottish Parliament struggles to perform an effective role, to identify the kinds of policy choices for which it can hold ministers directly responsible, or form a more direct relationship with public bodies. We use the recent case study of ‘prevention policy’ to take lessons from the positive response of its Finance Committee to this problem.

Introduction

In the lead up to the referendum on Scottish devolution in 1997, the new Scottish Parliament was at the heart of debates on political reform. Elite support for devolution - articulated by political parties, local governments, and ‘civil society’ groups - was built on the idea of a crisis of legitimation, linked to an image of top-down Westminster politics, the concentration of government power and marginalisation of Parliament and ‘civil society’. ‘Old Westminster’ provided a dated and ineffective form of democratic accountability (Scottish Constitutional Convention, 1995; Cairney and McGarvey, 2013: 11-13).

Devolution was accompanied by an electoral system designed to diffuse power among parties, and measures to help put the Scottish Parliament at the centre of new forms of participative and deliberative democracy. The Consultative Steering Group, a cross-party group set up by the UK Government, with members drawn from ‘civil society’, articulated the principles it would seek to uphold: ‘the sharing of power’ between government, parliament and ‘the people’; accountability of government to parliament and the people; accessibility; and, equal opportunity (Scottish Office, 1998: 6).

Devolution had an important impact in key areas - producing a more transparent legislature, coalition and minority governments, and increasing the representation of women. It had a
limited impact on ‘power sharing’ and accountability. The Scottish system remains part of the ‘Westminster family’, with a traditional focus on the accountability of ministers to the public via Parliament (Cairney and Johnston, 2014). The Scottish Parliament also shares with Westminster the sense that it struggles to hold the government, and wider public sector, to account. It remains a powerful body at the heart of accountability on paper, but not in practice (Cairney, 2011: 56).

Nevertheless, there has been no major debate on the role of the Scottish Parliament since it was established in 1999, and no major reforms have taken place. This lack of attention seems significant for three reasons. First, Westminster has engaged in modernisation before and after devolution. Second, the lead up to the referendum on independence in 2014 seemed like an opportunity to revisit its role within Scotland’s independent or further-devolved political system. Yet, if people have discussed the Scottish Parliament, it is largely to confirm that they have no plans to reform it (Scottish Government, 2013; Cairney, 2013). The report of the ‘Smith Commission’ (2014) also recommended the further devolution of powers without considering properly its impact on accountability to the Scottish Parliament (Cairney, 2014).

Third, the Scottish policy process has changed. The focus of the Scottish Government and its partners has changed markedly, towards the importance of ‘outcomes’, rather than ‘inputs’, as the key measure of government success. This has been the approach of the Scottish Government at least as far back as the National Performance Framework (NPF), established in 2007 to provide a strategic framework for policy outcomes and invite a range of public bodies to share responsibility for them.

The Scottish Parliament has the potential to respond. For example, it can shift its activities towards a focus on Scottish Government policy in broader terms, through the work of inquiries in general and its finance and audit functions in particular. Until very recently, it has only considered how to respond and reform (Johnston and Cairney, 2015). Its procedures and activities are still generally focused on inputs to the political system. Its main role is to scrutinise draft Scottish Government legislation as it is introduced. Its committees have devoted two to three months per year to the scrutiny of the annual budget bill. This scrutiny has a very narrow focus, with a limited emphasis on pre- or post-legislative scrutiny, and its value is unclear.

One notable – but very recent - exception is the role of the Finance Committee, when examining the issue of ‘prevention’ or ‘preventative spending’ and how it fits into the NPF. Prevention policy is a key example of the Scottish Government’s shift towards setting broad strategic priorities and inviting local authorities and public bodies to design their policy delivery. The Scottish Parliament prompted and anticipated some of this agenda, and has responded by developing new ways to scrutinise the Scottish Government budget process, moving from a focus on spending and outputs to assessing outcomes. This has given it the potential to engage in a much broader examination of the Scottish Government and public sector. Yet, it has very limited resources to devote to this process, and the outcome of its efforts is difficult to gauge.
In this context, we examine the extent to which the Scottish Parliament can perform an effective role in relation to accountability: is it at the heart of, or peripheral to, the accountability process, and what other mechanisms are in place to supplement its role? First, we consider, in broad terms, the practical limits to ministerial accountability to Westminster in complex systems, highlighting the UK’s historic response to provide context for the Scottish experience. In many ways, the modern history of Westminster displays repeated attempts to balance traditional forms of democratic accountability (of ministers to the public via Parliament) with newer mechanisms to encourage institutional and user-driven notions of accountability. Second, we identify how the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government have interacted since 1999 to balance those images of accountability. Third, we present the case study of prevention policy, outlining its origins and implications for public service delivery. Finally, we identify how the Scottish Parliament has responded to that agenda. We outline the work of the Finance committee to show the potential for the Scottish Parliament to focus on Scottish Government policymaking in a more meaningful way.

Balancing the Westminster model of democratic accountability with complexity

At the heart of the ‘Westminster model’ is a simple normative message about democratic accountability, based on concepts such as representative democracy, accountability through free and fair elections, parliamentary sovereignty, unitary state, majority party control, collective cabinet responsibility (CCR), and individual ministerial responsibility (IMR): power is concentrated in the executive, or in the hands of ministers, who are accountable to the public through Parliament. A reliance on representative democracy and parliamentary supremacy combines (in the UK) with a plurality electoral system, which tends to produce exaggerated single party majorities, a strong ‘whip’ to allow that party to control Parliament, the power of the prime minister to control cabinet and ministers, a politically-neutral and hierarchical civil service making decisions on the anticipation of ministerial wishes, and the absence of a separation of powers between executive/legislature/judiciary, to produce a centralised system (Richards and Smith, 2002: 3; Duggett, 2009).

With this model, power and responsibility go hand in hand since, if you know who is in charge, you know who to reward or punish in the next election. Until then, you know who to hold to account. In Westminster systems, the ‘parliamentary tradition’ - of the transmission of electoral opinion and consent to the executive via a representative institution - has persisted over time as the foundation of the British state (Judge, 1993: 5). In a system ‘with a dominant executive and without legal checks provided by a constitutional court’, ministerial accountability to Parliament is the main way in which the government legitimises its actions (Woodhouse, 1994: 3). The ‘presumption of the ultimate authority of Parliament’, delegated to ministers, allows a government to portray its policies as ‘authoritative’ and ‘binding’ (Judge, 1990a: 29-30; 1993: 2; Norton, 1990: 178).

Consequently, Parliament is always in the back of the minds of ministers, or civil servants acting on their behalf (Judge, 1990b: 55). To ensure the legitimation of policies made within government, the executive must follow a set of rules or conventions outside it. For example, the convention of IMR shapes the ‘psyche’ of ministers and civil servants and the hierarchical
organisation of government departments (Judge, 1993: 144-5; Madgwick and Woodhouse, 1995: 146). The requirement for the government to account to Parliament helps maintain the convention of CCR, in which the government is expected to coordinate policy across departments and maintain a ‘united front’ when making and defending decisions (Judge, 1993: 142-3; Madgwick and Woodhouse, 1995: 122-3).

This understanding of Parliament contrasts with studies of ‘the policy process in a post-parliamentary democracy’ (Richardson and Jordan, 1979), ‘governance’ (Rhodes, 1997; Bache and Flinders, 2004; Marsh, 2008; Kerr and Kettell, 2006: 11), and ‘complexity’ (Cairney, 2015), which may be used to reject, empirically, important aspects of the Westminster model:

1. Ministers are not accountable to Parliament in a meaningful way because they are not in control of the policy process. Instead, they: can only pay attention a fraction of the issues for which they are responsible; inherit responsibility for a huge public sector which continues by routine; devolve most policymaking to civil servants, public bodies and interest groups in policy communities; operate in an environment that is largely not in their control; and, largely reinforce dominant ways of thinking about policy problems in government.

2. No Parliament can hope to monitor the entirety of the policy process over which it has official control. To focus on ministerial action is to pay attention to a tiny fraction of the public sector or the issues for which they are ostensibly responsible. To go beyond this focus requires resources that no Parliament possesses.

In some ways, policymaking systems are complex systems, which seem to have ‘self-organising’ abilities and/ or produce outcomes that seem to emerge in the absence of central control (Cairney and Geyer, 2015; Teisman and Klijn, 2008: 288; Bovaird, 2008: 320; Mitleton-Kelly, 2003: 41). Consequently, a large section of complexity theory suggests that policymakers should give up on the idea of central government control, to embrace interdependence with a large public sector (and networks of non-governmental actors), and to pursue more pragmatic solutions based on increasing the freedom of local actors to learn and adapt to their environments (Cairney, 2012: 353-4; Geyer and Rihani, 2010: 7; 32–4; Haynes, 2008: 326; Sanderson, 2009: 707; 2006: 118; Little, 2012: 16; Geyer, 2012: 32). Yet, this conclusion is unsatisfactory because it is inconsistent with the Westminster model of accountability, and the ‘fundamental perception’ among the public that ‘the representative system is legitimate’ (Judge, 2005: 138).

Consequently, since 1979, we have seen a raft of reforms by governments to balance the Westminster principle of democratic accountability with a sense that many aspects of the political process do not come close to the ideal (although see Flinders and Kelso, 2011 on the tendency to expect too much from Parliament). We can identify two main elements of government reform: (1) to try to reassert central government control through reforms of the public sector; or (2) to provide a different narrative, built on institutional accountability, by delegating policy delivery to public bodies and using targets and regulations to manage their performance, and user-focused accountability (Gray, 2000: 283–4; Goldsmith and Page,
New definitions of accountability have allowed governments to modify IMR somewhat, to move further away from the historic idea of ‘sacrificial responsibility’ (ministers resign when something goes wrong in their department) towards a suite of responsibility mechanisms in which ministers redirect queries to other bodies, keep Parliament informed routinely of public body activities, explain problems, or promise to intervene (Woodhouse, 1994: 28; Judge, 1993: 137). Yet, ministers are still under pressure to intervene, on an ad hoc basis, when something goes wrong, even in public bodies headed by chief executives (Gains and Stoker, 2009: 11; Judge, 1993: 146).

At the same time, Westminster began to reform itself to address (at least implicitly) the idea that ministerial and civil servant anticipation, underpinning IMR, increases with the perceived effectiveness of Parliament (Judge, 1990b: 55). The new (1979) select committees marked a response to the government’s inclination to make policy through networks as well as primary legislation (Walkland, 1989: v). The reforms were based on the need for MPs to, ‘become better informed’ and ‘better placed to do their job of holding the executive to account’, by scrutinising its activity outwith the confines of the adversary system of government (Baines, 1989: 14). The new select committees were based on departmental arrangements, to provide ‘continuous and systematic’ scrutiny, and replaced the existing, ‘patchwork of Select Committees which had evolved piecemeal during the 1960s and 1970s’ (Nixon and Nixon, 1983: 334; 331). Such reforms would not allow for the scrutiny of all government policy (Drewry, 1989: 349; Rush, 1990: 145). Rather, the idea is that they raised the possibility of any issue coming up at any time, which ‘concentrates the minds’ of ministers and civil servants when done on a sufficient scale (Giddings, 1989: 373-6; Lock, 1989: 327). Importantly, committees were also able to contact directly the accounting officers of departments, Executive Agencies or other public bodies (Judge, Hogwood and McVicar, 1997: 109-114). Since then, Westminster has seen further reforms to, for example, elect the chairs of committees to remove party whip patronage (Russell, 2011; Kelso, 2009).

Ministerial Accountability to the Scottish Parliament: the response so far

Scotland does not share all elements of the Westminster model but it remains part of the ‘Westminster family’ and has upheld many of its traditions or inherited many of its constraints (Cairney and Johnston, 2014). It inherited the assumption that ‘the government governs’ and that democratic accountability to the public takes place regularly through the relationship between ministers and Parliament, and periodically through elections. The Scottish Parliament committees have combined standing and select committee functions with many ‘powers’ (permanent and specialized committees with a proportional (by party) number of convenors selected by a committee, committee deliberation both before the initial and final plenary stages, the ability to initiate and redraft bills, invite witnesses, demand government documents and monitor pre-legislative consultation – Cairney and McGarvey, 2013: 91). Yet, as in Westminster, the ability of the Scottish Parliament to scrutinise government policy is
limited, while mechanisms other than elections for direct, popular participation are marginal to the policy process (Cairney, 2011). As in the UK, most policy is processed in ‘territorial policy communities’ (Keating, Cairney and Hepburn, 2009). Although its electoral system is more likely to produce minority or coalition government, periods of coalition majority (1999-2007), minority (2007-11) and single party majority (2011-) government have all reinforced the sense that the government governs.

Scotland also inherited a large and complicated public sector landscape, consisting of government agencies, quangos, local authorities, health boards, and service delivery organisations in the third and private sector. While it has an extensive regulatory and audit function to address this proliferation of bodies and arrangements (Cairney and Mcgarvey, 2013), there is little clarity about what is responsible to who in any meaningful sense. There is no simple diagram to visualise the public sector accountability landscape. Instead, as in the UK, we can identify Scottish Government attempts to develop a strategy to balance potentially contradictory aims:

1. To maintain Westminster-style democratic accountability, through periodic elections and more regular reports by ministers to the Scottish Parliament. This requires a strong sense of central government and ministerial control.

2. To further the role of institutional accountability, through performance management measures applied to the chief executives of public bodies, such as elected local authorities and unelected agencies and quangos.

3. To advance the idea of shared ‘ownership’ of policy choices. The Scottish Government has developed a reputation for consultation with a wide range of bodies to generate support for its policy choices (Cairney, 2014b; Keating, 2010). Further, it has fostered ‘community planning partnerships’ to bring together local authorities, public bodies, and stakeholders in local areas.

4. To develop user based notions of accountability, when a public body considers its added value to (and responds to the wishes of) service users, or public bodies and users ‘co-produce’ and share responsibility for the outcomes.

This is a difficult balancing act, to recognise the realities of ‘complex government’ over which ministers have limited control (Cairney, 2015), but take responsibility for how they address this problem. The pursuit of institutional accountability could help clarify the responsibility of public bodies, or produce a fragmented public landscape in which no one seems to take responsibility. A move away from hierarchy and central targets, to focus more on the value of public services to users or the ‘co-production’ of services with users could promote user-based accountability and/or diminish a sense of democratic accountability (Gains and Stoker, 2009). A focus on community partnerships could diminish the sense that we can hold any of the individual actors to account.

Many of these issues could be addressed by a Scottish Parliament focused on holding ministers to account and developing direct relationships with public bodies. Yet, the evidence
to date suggests that Scottish Parliament committees have limited resources to scrutinise policy and question ministers effectively. They rarely engage in meaningful or direct contact with civil servants; they struggle to gather information on the work of public bodies; and, local authorities generally argue that they are accountable to their electorates, not Parliament (Cairney, 2011: 56).

**Case Study: the National Performance Framework and Prevention Agenda**

The Scottish Government (2007; 2014a) has, since 2007, maintained a broad policy framework, the *National Performance Framework* (NPF), based on a ‘ten year vision’. The NPF has a stated ‘core purpose - to create a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth’. It seeks to turn this broad purpose into specific policies and measures of success in two main ways. First, it articulates in more depth its national approach via a ‘purpose framework’ - linked to targets gauging its economic growth, productivity, labour market participation, population, income inequality, regional inequality and (emissions based) sustainability - and five ‘strategic objectives’:

1. Wealthier and Fairer - Enabling businesses and people to increase their wealth and more people to share fairly in that wealth.
2. Healthier - Helping people to sustain and improve their health, especially in disadvantaged communities, ensuring better, local and faster access to health care.
3. Safer and Stronger - Helping communities to flourish, becoming stronger, safer places to live, offering improved opportunities and a better quality of life.
4. Smarter. Expanding opportunities to succeed from nurture through to lifelong learning ensuring higher and more widely shared achievements.
5. Greener. Improving Scotland's natural and built environment and the sustainable use and enjoyment of it.

These objectives are mapped onto sixteen ‘National Outcomes’ and fifty ‘National Indicators’. It works with local authorities to produce ‘Single Outcomes Agreements’ (SOAs). The SOAs are produced in line with the NPF’s overall vision and strategic objectives, but local authorities can determine the balance between a range of priorities and how they will meet these objectives.

The spirit of the Scottish Government’s Concordat with the Convention of Scottish Local authorities (COSLA) suggests that the former will not seek to micromanage local authorities or use external scrutiny and funding to produce compliance with short term targets (Cairney and McFarvey, 2013: 139-40; Cairney, 2011: 130; compare with McAteer, 2014). Instead, the Scottish Government encourages local authorities to cooperate with a range of other bodies in the public sector, including health, enterprise, police, fire and transport, via established ‘Community Planning Partnerships’ (CPPs), which encourage ‘community engagement’ and engagement with the third and private sectors, to produce a ‘shared strategic
vision for an area and a statement of common purpose’ and meaningful long term outcomes (Cairney and McGarvey, 2013: 139-40; Keating, 2010: 123-4; Matthews, 2014).

The Scottish Government uses this approach to further its commitment to ‘achieving a decisive shift to prevention’ (Scottish Government, 2011). ‘Prevention’ is one of those terms in good currency, internationally, partly because it is vague enough to generate widespread support (Cairney and St Denny, 2014). ‘Preventative spending’ and ‘prevention’ are used by many governments, and in many policy studies, to describe a broad aim to reduce public service costs (and ‘demand’) by addressing policy problems at an early stage. The argument is that too much government spending is devoted to services to address severe social problems at a late stage. The aim is for governments to address a wide range of longstanding problems - including crime and anti-social behaviour, ill health and unhealthy behaviour, low educational attainment, and unemployment – by addressing them at source, before they become too severe and relatively expensive.

At this abstract level, prevention can appear to generate widespread and long-term consensus, to bring together: groups on the ‘left’, seeking to reduce poverty and inequality, and on the ‘right’, seeking to reduce economic inactivity and the costs of public services (Billis, 1981: 367). A ‘decisive shift to prevention’ is only meaningful if attached to a more detailed vision – as provided, to some extent, by four principles produced by the ‘Christie Commission’, established by the Scottish Government (Commission of the Future Delivery of Public Services, 2011: vi):

- **Reforms must aim to empower individuals and communities receiving public services by involving them in the design and delivery of the services they use.**
- **Public service providers must be required to work much more closely in partnership, to integrate service provision and thus improve the outcomes they achieve.**
- **We must prioritise expenditure on public services which prevent negative outcomes from arising.**
- **And our whole system of public services – public, third and private sectors – must become more efficient by reducing duplication and sharing services wherever possible.**

The Commission’s aim is to examine how reduce social and economic inequalities, improve ‘social and economic wellbeing’ and spend less money, in the context of limited success on all three measures since devolution. To do so requires: redirecting spending towards preventative policies in a major way; changing its relationship with delivery bodies; addressing a lack of joint working in the public sector, caused partly by separate budgets and modes of accountability; and, engaging ‘communities’ in the design and delivery of public services, rather than treating them as ‘passive recipients of services’.

Christie recommends a ‘bottom-up’ approach to policy delivery, encouraging local public bodies to work with ‘communities’, ‘personalise’ service delivery by encouraging service
users to negotiate the details of their care, training ‘kinship’ carers, to reduce the need for
cared-for people to use expensive public services, foster social networks to address the
mental health effects of isolation, create partnerships with specialist third sector bodies, and
explore the value of organisations such as community development trusts.

The Scottish Government (2011: 6) response was positive, signalling ‘a decisive shift
towards prevention’ and ‘a holistic approach to addressing inequalities’. It sought to turn this
broad agenda into specific aims and projects, by: listing its existing prevention-led projects;
announcing three new funds, representing £500m ‘investment in preventative spending’ from
Scottish Government and public body funds; and, outlining its specific priorities up to 2016.
Within this broad approach is a set of specific priorities based on ‘hard choices’, such as to
focus on 16-18 year olds rather than the older population when applying prevention
principles to employability, and funding only ‘vocational’ rather than ‘lifestyle’ college
places. To some extent, this element of ministerial choices allows for the separation of
accountability mechanisms: the Scottish Government is responsible for strategy, and priority
setting, and it shares responsibility with the public sector for the delivery of policy.

The Scottish Parliament response: agenda setting by the Finance Committee?

Without a Scottish Parliament response, these developments have the potential to further
undermine the Scottish Parliament’s role. It already lacks the ability to gather information
independently of government. While it can oblige Scottish ministers to attend meetings to
provide information, it does not get enough information about what is going on locally.
Scotland lacks the top-down performance management system that we associate with the UK
Government, and a greater focus on long term local outcomes removes an important and
regular source of information on public sector performance. Local authorities push back
against calls for information, arguing that they have their own elections and mandates. More
administrative devolution exacerbates this tension between elected local and national bodies
and, when unelected bodies are given more powers, between democratic and institutional
accountability.

For example, Community Planning Partnerships are not directly accountable to anyone.
Instead, local authorities have their own claim for legitimacy, through their accountability to
local populations via elections. Yet, they are expected to cooperate, in a meaningful way
(such as by pursuing jointly resourced projects, money and staff), with public bodies
accountable directly to the Scottish Government. Local authorities work in partnership with
other bodies - they do not direct their activities or hold them to account. The Scottish
Government may direct many of the public bodies within CPPs, but also pursue (to some
extent) a hands-off approach to encourage local level partnerships. In this scenario, local
authorities are responsible to their electorates for their contribution, public bodies are
accountable to ministers, and stakeholders report to their members or profession (a problem
that may be addressed by the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill 2014). Audit
Scotland is taking an interest in their activities, but does not have the power to direct them.
The need for parliamentary reform, to respond to such developments, has been a recurring theme in the Scottish Parliament, with Finance Committee reports in 2001, 2003, 2005 and 2009 calling for a move towards the scrutiny of outcomes and performance rather than inputs (Johnston and Cairney, 2015). However, it has only begun to introduce a new approach recently. This began with an inquiry on prevention, the NPF and outcomes measures. Indeed, unusually, prevention is an area in which the Scottish Parliament seemed to anticipate and, to some extent, set or reinforce the government agenda.

In June 2010, the Scottish Finance Committee (2010) released its report on the 2011-2012 Budget Strategy Phase. This report evaluated how the public sector in Scotland was preparing to face a period of reduced public spending. It stated that, despite the tendency for longer-term spending initiatives to be hardest hit in periods of fiscal retrenchment, the Scottish Government should continue to consider co-ordinated preventative approaches to public spending. It focused on the cost-saving potential of prevention, which was presented as a possible solution to the problem of spreading cuts fairly and effectively. It argued that preventing problems, rather than alleviating them when they manifested themselves, would reduce individuals’ dependency on expensive reactive services. In this way, preventative spending was portrayed as a sustainable and effective cost-saving strategy with which to complement budget cuts amounting to more than £332 million (2010: 12).

While the Committee emphasised the belief that prevention and early intervention were the right things to do, it also noted the difficulties involved in deciding what to fund and what to cut. Preventative spending is a way to of redistribute scarce resources. To help identify where and how best to save costs, it made two recommendations. First, it called for more attention to be paid to longer-term public spending approaches and, in particular, for more research into preventative spending strategies (2010: 31). Second, it recommended the Scottish Government establish greater links between spending priorities and outcomes, and develop clearer reporting on the achievement of these outcomes (2010: 24). These two recommendations were to form the basis of parliamentary oversight over longer-term Scottish Government approaches to spending and policymaking.

As attention to the issue increased over time in the Committee’s budget phase reports, so too did the Committee strengthen its commitment to pushing preventative spending as a key Government policy strategy. It first expressed its pursuit of the prevention agenda by widening its operational remit to scrutinise the Scottish Government’s annual budget drafts, to include a commitment to examining and reporting on preventative spending (2010: 23). It recommended that all future documents on the Scottish Government Draft budget include an evaluation of progress being made on spending and collaboration towards prevention in each policy area.

It argued that the success of preventative spending in Scotland hinged on the establishment of clearer links between policies and outcomes. This change would require an ‘outcome-based approach to public service management’ and improving measurement and reporting capacities, to facilitate scrutiny and evaluation (2010: 31). Thus, in addition to fundamentally rethinking the allocation of resources over the long-term, it presented the shift towards
outcome-driven interventions, informed by evidence of ‘what works’, as indispensable to effectively delivering prevention. To identify ‘what works’, and to develop appropriate tools with which to assess and report outcomes, it would also be necessary to lead inquiries into the opportunities and challenges facing the development of a meaningful and effective preventative spending agenda in Scotland.

Throughout this discussion, it portrayed both the Scottish Government and Parliament as bodies to provide the necessary leadership to guarantee accountability on spending decisions. Additional Finance Committee reports reinforced the ascendency of preventative spending as a policy priority. It led an additional inquiry into prevention as part of its 2011-2012 Budget Strategy Phase. This inquiry was intended to ‘assist the Committee in its on-going work to understand more clearly the links between spending and outcomes’ and focused on ‘how public spending can best be focused over the longer term on trying to prevent, rather than deal with, negative social outcomes’ (2010: 31). The inquiry produced its Report on preventative spending in 2011. Preventative spending – which remained largely undefined and broad – was considered principally in terms of its potential to curb and prevent negative social outcomes (2011a).

The Committee’s agenda was a key part of a growing prevention policy agenda in Scotland. At the same time as it was developing its position on outcome-based and preventative policy making, the Christie Commission called for a ‘decisive shift to prevention’. So, unusually, when the Scottish Government (2011b) produced its response it was to both the Scottish Parliament and the Christie Commission.

The Scottish Parliament’s evidence gathering – to develop knowledge on ‘what works’ in prevention, cast the net wide for examples of effectiveness and best practice in prevention, while addressing Scotland’s unique socio-economic situation - also influenced the Scottish Government’s agenda. To some extent, it treated Scotland as a place with specific and historically enduring trends in health and inequality. As a result of some particularly poor social outcomes (especially with regards to alcohol dependency, violent crime, and poor health as a result of sedentary lifestyles), unsustainable strain was being placed on public services at a time of austerity politics and budget cuts. Yet, in the absence of a body of knowledge in Scotland, the case for prevention was made with constant reference to ‘what works’ elsewhere. Comparison and lesson-learning was presented as a crucial way to develop a clearer understanding of how particular outcomes can be achieved through prevention. Thus, in addition to examining evidence submitted or presented to it during its inquiry, the Committee commissioned a study on how other countries were dealing with fiscal retrenchment in response to the recession. McLaren et al (2010) looked to Sweden, Canada, Finland and Ireland to recommend how the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities could plan for long-term recovery and the prevention of social problems, as well as maintain and expand current prevention activities.

This report singled out certain areas and countries as examples of best practice. In particular, references to the Netherlands and the Nordic countries were ubiquitous with regards to early years interventions, universal services and care for the elderly. Closer to home, it drew on
examples of effective preventative spending from a range of local authorities throughout the UK. Similarly, the Committee (2011a) identified, for example, Nottingham city council’s ‘zero-to-100’ agenda, which aims to introduce preventative measures throughout the ‘life course’ and considers prevention to be relevant for all age groups. In addition, it identified Glasgow’s Early Intervention programme, which combined universal and targeted interventions to reduce negative social outcomes from childhood onwards, as an example of best practice which should be developed, supported, observed and replicated elsewhere. It identified the principle obstacle to the successful rolling out of successful programmes as the lack of reporting and evidence establishing clear and strong links between interventions and outcomes.

Throughout their discussions of preventative spending, the Committee (2011a; 2011b) and Scottish Government both paid particular attention to the related areas of early years intervention, health (including care for the elderly) and, to a lesser extent, violence and crime. The special emphasis on early years intervention rests on a perception that it is the most effective type of preventative spending in light of the evidence but, within this broad statement, is the need to define more precisely what it is and what kinds of projects should be funded. For example, the Committee (2011a) considers early years interventions to be projects that ‘aim to provide support for children, including through their families, at as early a stage in their lives as possible, including pre-birth’. It praised the Scottish Government’s Early Years Framework (EYF), introduced in December 2008 as a sign that the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) were jointly committed to improving and protecting a key period in individual’s lives (0 to 8 years), partly to help break the generational cycles of inequality.

The Committee also called for more effective implementation of the EYF. It recommended a ‘radical step change in the existing approach’. In particular, it identified the difficulty with finding a balance in the partnership between the state and local government. On the one hand, stakeholders called for a strong steer from the centre, for fear that certain local authority areas would not achieve the stated goals. On the other, it raised concerns over the impact of state intrusion on community and local authority empowerment.

This is a wider problem linked to the Scottish Government role. It seeks to devolve power to local authorities and community planning partnerships, to encourage community solutions to local problems, but also gather evidence of success to ‘scale up’. Should it act primarily as a hub for information exchange or provide detailed guidance for public bodies to follow? Its broad approach may suggest the latter, but the Westminster model of accountability may suggest that it retains a central role, to remain accountable for cross-government success.

This Finance Committee agenda continues, albeit slowly, with further moves to entrench an outcomes focus in the annual budget process. Its report on the Draft Budget 2014-15 recommends four principles of financial scrutiny:

- Affordability – the wider picture of revenue and expenditure and whether they are appropriately balanced.
• Prioritisation – a coherent and justifiable division between sectors and programmes.

• Value for Money – the extent to which public bodies are spending their allocations well and achieving outcomes.

• Budget Processes – integration between public service planning and performance and financial management.

The Finance Committee plans to focus on affordability and budget processes and ask the subject committees to focus on prioritisation and value for money (Johnston and Cairney, 2015).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The Finance Committee’s dual focus on a prevention inquiry, and an annual outcomes-based scrutiny process, provides a model for Scottish Parliament activity but also highlights the limits to its role. To some extent, it has helped set the Scottish Government’s agenda in a key area – or, at least, it has reinforced a desire within the Scottish Government and public sector to shift from the kinds of relatively expensive and reactive service delivery which often help reinforce social and health inequalities.

A key political problem, at the heart of slow progress, is that prevention is difficult to incorporate within a manifesto for political parties (at Scottish Parliament and local levels). The broad language of prevention attracts widespread agreement, but the desire to shift resources from services such as hospitals to public health, from high schools and Universities to pre-schools, or to give up on a lost generation to focus on the next, is difficult to articulate in an electoral environment. In that context, the Scottish Parliament’s construction of new measures to hold the Scottish Government to account provides a new way of examining these issues. The prevention agenda may be part of a long term ‘enlightenment function’, and we should not gauge Scottish Parliament success in the short term, or with reference to periodic elections.

Yet, there are clearly limits to Scottish Parliament influence that should temper our expectations. In particular, it has an unclear role when the Scottish Government seeks to devolve powers throughout the public sector. Its main role is to hold Scottish ministers to account, but not all of its procedures are outcomes focused (it focuses on inputs such as legislation and the budget bill) and it struggles to extend scrutiny to the wider public sector. In particular, it struggles to hold local authorities to account, since they have their own electoral mandates and accountability procedures. These problems are compounded by new partnership arrangements, in which CPPs are not directly accountable to Parliament via ministers. Instead, only certain public bodies account directly to ministers, while local authorities pursue a local mandate, and stakeholders may report only to their members.

The Scottish Parliament’s role is partly to help clarify the ‘hard choices’ made by the Scottish Government, to interrogate ministerial statements (and the manifestos of governing parties), and ensure that these can be separated from a focus on shared responsibility for the delivery
of public policy. It uses a broad focus on outcomes to further its broad oversight of the public sector. It uses a focus on topics such as prevention to determine who wins and who loses when Scottish ministers make choices. In other words, the Scottish Parliament role may be to influence the ways in which the Scottish Government shifts modes of accountability, to make sure that new forms of institutional, stakeholder and user-focused accountability are consistent with Westminster-style democratic accountability.

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