

# SCOTTISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM AND INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC INSTRUCTION

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## SYNOPSIS

Research concerned with Scottish local government reform has largely ignored the implications for one aspect of education provision – instrumental music instruction. This paper attempts to focus on this area through exploring the main policy issues with regard to the delivery of this service during a period of change. It is argued that the experience of music tuition under Scotland's new unitary authority structure is an example of how local government can misinterpret its responsibilities towards the local community and, in doing so, threaten its continued influence over the formation of education policy. It is suggested that the administration of music instruction could supply local authorities with the opportunity to strengthen local democracy through empowering communities in the policy formation process. However, inadequate delivery may lead to the intervention of central government and councils' losing control over an area of their education provision.

## INTRODUCTION

Ever since it was first proposed during the early part of the last decade, the concept of Scottish local government re-organisation has acquired extensive analysis (see for example: Fairley, 1995a; Lang, 1994; McCrone, Paterson and Brown, 1993; McVicar, Jordan and Boyne, 1994; Midwinter, 1993; Midwinter and McGarvey, 1994). This comprehensive deliberation is entirely justified, as the creation of 32 unitary authorities by the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994 represented a momentous transformation of Scotland's local government system, bringing numerous implications for the most prominent public services that were to be administered by the new local authorities (Fairley, 1995a). The education sector was not spared a degree of disruption in this process of re-organisation. After all, 9 regional authorities and 3 unitary Island administrations had previously controlled this service. Following local government reform, 32 single-tier authorities managed Scotland's system of publicly funded education. Such a large-scale transformation was inevitably going to result in certain changes to the operational procedures of the education service (Strathclyde Regional Council, 1993).

However, as Bloomer (1999) has indicated, it could be argued that the education service was in fact spared the very worst of any serious modifications. While it is true to say that education did experience transformation at the level of local authority central administration, individual schools encountered little in the way of severe disruption. This was largely down to what Bloomer (1999) has labelled the 'hierarchy of priority' (p.161) that emerged as the new unitary authorities were forced to protect their key services in response to central government imposed financial constraints. Education was understandably viewed by most councils as their most important statutory function, placing it at the very top of the priority list. Although certain changes did occur in schools, these modifications could be described as modest when compared to the experience of other local authority services; for example, the significant alterations made in the provision of community education (Milburn, 1999). Most classroom teachers, therefore, encountered minimal disruption to their day-to-day activities after the new councils took over on April 1, 1996. One notable exception, however, was in the work of secondary school music teachers throughout Scotland.

Music departments differ from other subject areas in the manner in which the curriculum is delivered. In addition to the work of the classroom teacher, music instructors—specialist teachers of specific instruments—are employed to tutor small groups of pupils in performance skills in brass, woodwind, strings, and percussion instruments. Consequently, a ‘two tier’ system exists whereby the combination of the class music teacher and the music instructor supply the music provision within a particular school. Yet only the work of the class music teacher falls into the category of ‘core’ local authority educational provision. Instrumental musical instruction is considered to be a non-statutory service that had (quite successfully) been developed by a number of the former local authorities as a means whereby children could obtain specialist instruction on a preferred instrument. However, the ‘non-core’ nature of the instruction service has meant that it has always been particularly vulnerable to local authority policy changes. Consequently, given the financial pressures placed on the new councils, music tuition was particularly at risk of being placed near the bottom of the ‘hierarchy of priority’. As a result, the service was at the receiving end of a range of policy changes, most of which were determined by financial matters rather than any specific educational issues. Peter Cope and Hugh Smith have reinforced this point while at the same time highlighting the nature of these policy decisions:

The policy changes being considered [with regard to music instruction] are mainly driven by resource (or lack of resource) considerations and are essentially ways in which local authorities are trying to cope with a restricted budget. The effect of budget cuts on instrumental tuition may either take the form of restricting provision on offer or increase in tuition fees to parents. There seems little evidence to support the notion that these changes are based on sound educational judgements or decisions. (Cope & Smith, 1997, p.1)

For those councils that hitherto had passed no cost burden on to parents, the introduction of a policy whereby parents were required to pay for their child’s instruction represented a very significant change in the delivery of the service and in many cases was met with open hostility (Louden, 1997). While some children were exempt from payment (such as those pupils in receipt of free school meals) throughout Scotland local government re-organisation brought significant changes in the delivery of school instrumental music instruction; either in the form of a financial cost to parents or through a reduction in the level of service provision (Louden, 1997).

The effect of these policy changes on the number of pupils participating in school music tuition has already received a certain degree of analysis (Johnston, 1997; Hall, 1999). However, the purpose of this paper is to argue the case of instrumental tuition as an example of how local government can occasionally acutely misjudge its role in serving the public and, in doing so, risk the intervention of central government in the formation of educational policy. It is the intention of this discussion to highlight how this is particularly significant given the increased need for councils to justify their value to the local community due to the recent creation of a Scottish Parliament. It will be argued that, instead of alienating the public, services such as instrumental music instruction possess the potential to strengthen local democracy through the implementation of alternative approaches to delivery.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC TUITION

By choosing to expose the service to a range of policy changes, many of the new local authorities evidently viewed music tuition as a non-essential aspect of their education provision. However, in reality instrumental tuition had developed into a core part of the school curriculum. Instrumental competence is a compulsory part of SQA

music examinations (SEB, 1988); the Scottish Office Education Department 5–14 National Guidelines for Expressive Arts state that pupils should ‘where appropriate, experience individual tuition with a visiting specialist’ (SOED, 1992, p.52); and the 1998 HMI report *Effective Learning and Teaching in Scottish Secondary Schools* found that the skills of instrumental tutors have become ‘deeply embedded in the work of music departments’ (SOEID, 1998, p.7). Consequently, the music tuition service has become an integral element of both primary and secondary school music provision. While it is true to say that music could be taught exclusively by classroom teachers, such a course of instruction would severely restrict the choice of instruments available to pupils as well as doing much to curtail the growth experienced by the subject in recent years.

The importance of instrumental music instruction is not, however, solely confined to aiding those pupils working towards certificate coursework. School youth orchestras, wind bands, jazz groups and an array of other music ensembles have materialised as a direct result of the work of tutors in schools. Such extra-curricular activities perform numerous positive functions, from the enhancement of school ethos to raising pupil confidence and social skills (SOEID, 1998).

Music instruction has, therefore, become a vital component of Scottish education. Through a range of curricular and extra-curricular activities it is a local government service that makes a valuable contribution to both schools and the local community. Yet many of the new councils were clearly of the opinion that, while it was perhaps not dispensable, music tuition was certainly not an essential element of their newly acquired education provision. Consequently, when finances were tight and difficult policy decisions had to be made, the level of funding for this service was particularly at risk. Bloomer (1999) has supplied an interesting illustration of how the new councils went about this process of prioritisation:

Most of the new unitary authorities have attempted to ensure that major front-line services, principally education and social work, have been allocated smaller savings targets than, for example, central support services and chief executive’s functions. Within the education service, the same type of thinking has tended to protect primary and secondary education. Within the school service itself, teacher staffing has been seen as the key priority while ‘extras’ such as outdoor education and music instruction have been adversely affected. (Bloomer, 1999, p.161)

However, instrumental tuition was clearly not an ‘extra’: it had developed into a key support service that was essential to the work of classroom music teachers. Yet evidently local authorities viewed music instruction as a ‘non-statutory’ council service and consequently chose to make cuts in this area in preference to reducing the provision of other so-called ‘core’ elements of school education provision. Yet unlike England and Wales, Scotland has not been subjected to any form of national curricular legislation; the content and management of the curriculum are not dictated by statute. There are, therefore, no genuinely ‘core’ areas of provision. Bloomer (1999) has highlighted a council’s legal educational responsibilities in this area:

The overarching statutory educational responsibility of local authorities is contained in Section 1 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. The 1980 Act consolidated earlier legislation and the Section 1 responsibility has remained largely unchanged over a much longer period. Section 1 states that, ‘It shall be the duty of every education authority to secure for their area the provision of adequate and effective school education. (Bloomer, 1999, p.157)

An exact definition of ‘adequate and effective school education’ is not supplied in the Act. It is, therefore, left to local authorities to determine the precise nature of

this provision and this could conceivably incorporate music tuition as an integral part of their education service. Councils would of course argue that the requirements of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the existence of national curricular guidelines for pupils aged 5 through to 14, and the continued recommendations made by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) provide the framework of a Scottish 'National Curriculum'. This in turn helps educational authorities to establish priorities with regard to the structure and content of subject provision in schools. However, even when these 3 traditional cornerstones of Scottish curricular guidance are cited there is still no basis for categorising the tuition service as a 'non-core' element of education. Furthermore, while the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 does not supply a detailed account of a local authority's educational obligations, it does nevertheless specify that 'school education' (p.2) should mean education of a progressive nature with 'regard being had to the age, ability and aptitude' (p.2) of pupils attending local authority schools. Consequently, it could be argued that by diminishing or indeed charging for the education of children with a particular musical aptitude, councils were in fact in breach of the law. There was, therefore, no justification for cutting the music tuition service on the basis that it was a 'non-statutory' council function. Rationalisation was a policy decision based on council preferences and instrumental music was placed near the bottom of the priority list.

#### THE PURPOSE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

At the beginning of a new millennium local government could be forgiven for feeling somewhat fatigued. In recent years both Conservative and Labour administrations have subjected local authorities to a range of policy decisions that have reduced the role of councils in the delivery of certain key functions. This can be seen in steps such as legislation designed to stimulate tenant ownership of council homes while supplying those in the rented sector with the opportunity of transferring to a non-local authority landlord; legislation concerning community care provision, making it possible for councils to acquire facilities from various provider agencies; the formation of local enterprise companies which reduce the role of local councils in the economic development of their own area; and in the practice of requiring local authorities to look to other service providers through submitting certain functions to competitive tender.

The education sector has witnessed comparable measures. The School Boards (Scotland) Act 1988 increased the influence of parents, teachers, and co-opted members in the running of certain school activities; the Self-Governing Schools etc. (Scotland) Act 1989 provided the opportunity for individual schools to receive funding directly from central government and to take full responsibility for their own administration (a process that eventually become known as 'opting out' of local authority control); the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 completely removed further education colleges from local authority administration; the Scottish Office Circular No. 6/93 *Devolved School Management: Guidelines for Schemes* directed all local authorities to put in place a mechanism whereby expenditure decisions for certain functions would be transferred from authority to school level (SOED, 1993); and the 5–14 Development Programme supplied detailed guidance to councils as to the content of a significant part of the school curriculum as well as the manner in which pupil progress was to be assessed and reported (SOED, 1994). Policies such as these share a common purpose: they aim to lessen the influence of local authorities in the administration of prominent public functions. As Jean McFadden has pointed out: 'local government has been steadily stripped of its powers' (McFadden, 1996, p.35).

Indeed, it could be argued that the process of local government re-organisation itself was a deliberate attempt by the then Conservative UK government to reduce

the overall power of local councils. By creating a large number of smaller units, central government succeeded in reducing both the capacity of local councils to engage in large-scale strategic planning and their ability to significantly influence policy decisions. This in turn transferred power to the centre, as the smaller authorities would by now be compelled to look to the UK government for guidance and direction on a number of crucial matters (McFadden, 1996).

This can be contrasted with the important role played by the former local authorities in influencing key policy developments. Just before re-organisation was about to be implemented, John Fairley highlighted the role played by the then large regional councils, in particular that of Strathclyde Region—a local authority that at that time possessed a population of over 2 million—in influencing certain policy matters. At the same time, Fairley questioned the future capacity of the new smaller councils to engage in similar influential activities:

There is strong evidence to suggest that the large Regions have exercised considerable influence in some areas of policy development and that in so doing they have modified Scottish Office thinking and proposals. It is fairly clear that Strathclyde Region used both its size and its experience of voluntary devolving management of resources (DMR) to schools effectively to influence the Scottish Office Education Department's approach to the reform of school management arrangements. In part this power is based in 'sheer size'. A local authority may simply have more experience in a particular policy area than has a Government department. It is not yet clear whether any of the new councils will be able to play this kind of role in the governance of Scotland. (Fairley, 1995b, p.41)

Although John Fairley has recently questioned the true extent of smaller councils losing their strategic planning capabilities (Fairley, 1998), there is little doubt that by the time the new authorities took over on 1 April 1996, the environment in which they were about to operate had altered quite significantly. With the assistance of its London based political colleagues, The Scottish Office had successfully managed to acquire significant influence and control over a range of local functions. Consequently, councils would have to ensure that they made the general public aware the value of local democracy. It was strange, therefore, that one of the first decisions made by several of the new authorities was to implement a music policy that, in many cases, only succeeded in enraging those it served.

#### THE MIGHT OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

In February 1998 a seminar on instrumental music tuition took place at St Margaret's Academy, Livingston, West Lothian. During the course of the day the then Scottish Office Minister of Education, Brian Wilson MP, announced that he was intending to commission a review of instrumental music provision in Scotland. He, like many others, had heard varied reports concerning how the new local authorities were administering the service. Stories of parents being outraged at having to pay for tuition previously provided free of charge; pupils being unable to continue specialist lessons of their chosen instrument; children being arranged into larger groupings in order to receive instruction; and the disbandment of highly popular youth orchestras had become commonplace in the Scottish media. No one quite knew what was happening, but the minister was going to find out.

At first glance there seemed to be nothing untoward in both the organisation of an instrumental music seminar and the minister's announcement. After all, both seemed highly positive measures aimed at increasing the profile and understanding of the tuition service. However, the impact of that day's proceedings went much further than this. The very nature of a seminar devoted to the tuition service meant

that councils were forced to make a detailed examination of their existing music provision, with council staff frantically producing information leaflets to give to interested parties on the day. The minister's proposal also contained a number of implications. On the one hand it could be interpreted as an understandable attempt to establish detailed data concerning the music tuition service. However, ministerial announcements are rarely that benign. Central government was making a point: it was aware of a potentially politically damaging problem—children being forced to give up music lessons produces negative newspaper headlines—and it wanted something done about it. A 'review of provision' and the notion of 'ring-fencing' funding for music lessons (this was also discussed at the seminar) made sure that councils soon got the underlying message: if local government cannot effectively deliver the tuition service on its own, central government will examine ways of taking control. Indeed, even the venue of the seminar was interesting. West Lothian Council had in fact decided not to implement cuts in its music provision. If council staff wanted an illustration of how the service could still be delivered effectively, the Minister for Education had ensured that they were in the right place.

Of course, most local authorities would argue that the responsibility for the cuts made in music tuition lay firmly at the door of central government. After all, councils had endured huge financial constraints at a time when they were being subjected to a momentous process of re-organisation and this was inevitably going to mean that certain services had to be curtailed. However, the problem for local government was that the general public did not perceive it like this. Instead, individuals observed authorities charging pupils for music lessons while at the same time councillors were spending money on other areas (the notion of segregated budgets for different council activities is one that the general public does not readily accept). Central government has become versed in the act of employing its local counterpart as a vehicle through which it can implement certain unpopular policy decisions. That way it can pass the blame onto local councils while at the same time take all the credit when it has to intervene in order to resolve any difficulties (difficulties that it perhaps helped to create in the first instance). The experience of music tuition illustrates how local government must be extremely careful when implementing potentially troublesome policy initiatives. In many council areas the general public would have no doubt welcomed the intervention of central government since their local educational authority had failed to effectively administer this service. This has ominous implications for local democracy. If central government can convince the public that it can successfully take over the responsibility for one aspect of council provision then the door is well and truly open for it to do the same in other areas.

#### THE CREATION OF A SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

As stated previously, when the new councils finally took over their responsibilities on 1 April 1996, they did so in a much-changed political climate. However, their operational environment was to be altered still further. On 12 May 1999, a Scottish Parliament sat for the first time since 1707, and it went on to obtain full legislative powers on July 1. The UK legislation that established this new democratic institution, the Scotland Act 1998, opened with the following statement:

An Act to provide for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament and Administration and other changes in the government of Scotland; to provide for changes in the constitution and functions of certain public authorities; to provide for the variation of the basic rate of income tax in relation to income of Scottish taxpayers in accordance with a resolution of the Scottish Parliament; to amend the law about parliamentary constituencies in Scotland; and for connected purposes. (Scotland Act, 1998, p.1)

While the new Parliament would differ significantly from its predecessor—its powers would be devolved with overall sovereignty remaining with the UK Westminster government—from observing this Act’s opening declaration it was nevertheless instantly evident that devolution would have the potential to make a huge impact on local government in Scotland. Education will undoubtedly become one of the primary concerns of the new Parliament: this is perhaps the most prestigious of its new responsibilities. The significance of a Scottish Parliament to both the future role of local government and the particular operational implications for the education sector have already been subjected to extensive analysis (see Fairley, 1997 and 1998; Himsforth, 1998; MacKenzie, 1998; McFadden, 1996; Midwinter, 1997; and, Paterson, 1998). This discussion does not intend to add a detailed contribution to these highly valuable deliberations. Instead, the intention here is to highlight once again the need for local democracy to justify its value to the local community. The fact that it now has both Edinburgh—as well as London—based politicians to contend with makes this even more of a necessity. In the case of music tuition, the new Scottish Executive (the legislative body of the Scottish Parliament) spared no time in reminding local authorities that it is monitoring the situation very closely. In August 1999 the executive’s Deputy Minister for Culture and Sport, Rhona Brankin MSP, launched a consultation process on Scotland’s first National Cultural Strategy. The resulting document *Creating our Future: Minding our Past* was issued in August 2000. The publication made the following statement with regard to the instrumental tuition service:

In responding to consultation on the National Cultural Strategy, some young people, parents and teachers said that more should be done in some areas and in particular instruments. The research also indicated some disparity in the provision of instrumental tuition across Scottish local authorities. Some education authorities have introduced charging for specialist tuition. We shall work with education authorities to maximise opportunities for instrumental tuition in schools, free to those unable to pay. (Scottish Executive, 2000, p.43)

The document went on to say that the executive would aim to ‘produce guidance on best practice on provision of instrumental tuition services’ (Scottish Executive, 2000, p.43). The executive had, therefore, made its position on music instruction quite clear: it was not only closely monitoring the situation but it also wished to become actively engaged in the delivery of the service.

#### THE NEED FOR RADICAL THINKING ON POLICY

How, therefore, is local government to map out a new role for itself in this re-designed political environment? Interestingly, the instrumental tuition service may hold some solutions. If authorities are to make a unique contribution to Scottish democracy then evidently they must come up with initiatives that truly make a difference to peoples’ lives. Consequently, radical thinking with regard to policy formation is required. In the delivery of music instruction, several councils have already been involved in fairly innovative policy initiatives by implementing charging mechanisms; the only problem is that these have had a negative impact on their local community. Nevertheless the experience of music tuition has demonstrated that this is an area of local authority provision open to new ideas. Charging fees for an aspect of publicly funded education is, after all, a sweeping departure from the norm in Scotland.

However, if councils were to examine more positive methods of providing this service to the public they might just succeed in delivering some form of purposeful and meaningful local democracy. A way of achieving this is to look to what has become known as the ‘enabling’ capacity of local government. The traditional notion

of the enabling council is one in which a local authority specifies the particular level of provision for one of its functions, and then pays an external agency to actually provide the service (Ridley, 1988). In the period leading up to local government re-organisation, this version of the enabling concept was actually used by some to support the move towards a smaller unitary authority structure (Scottish Office, 1991 and 1992). This is not, however, the notion that is being put forward here. Instead, an alternative interpretation is to view enabling as a mechanism whereby communities are provided with the opportunity to achieve their own objectives through the existence of local authority support mechanisms (Brooke, 1989). In this instance, the enabling authority is one that sets a minimum level of provision for the delivery of certain services, but provides the means whereby individuals possess the power to amplify this arrangement. By adopting this approach, local authorities can continue to maintain overall control over the running of certain key services while at the same time allow members of the public to become actively involved in the policy formation process.

The music tuition service possesses numerous possibilities in this area. Councils could, for example, ensure that a minimum level of provision was in place throughout its district, but that communities possessed the power to enhance this provision if they wished to do so. This could perhaps involve individual schools raising funds to contribute towards the provision of free instrumental music lessons for all, or possibly lead to a group of parents agreeing to pay more than the minimum charge in order that others may pay a reduced rate. The key factor is that local communities would be able to determine policy for themselves with local government taking a leading role in ensuring that this can occur. Lindsay Paterson has recently put forward a similar notion with regard to local authority involvement in citizenship education (Paterson, 1998) and the concept could conceivably be applied to a range of other local government functions.

#### CONCLUSION

In many ways the experience of delivering instrumental music instruction has been an interesting lesson for Scotland's new system of local government. Many authorities clearly failed to realise the full implications of their initial policy decisions. However, one positive repercussion of recent events has been to raise the profile of this aspect of Scottish education. We now possess a more detailed picture concerning the nature of instrumental music provision in Scotland and government at both central and local level has become very much aware of the value that the public places on its music service. A further beneficial consequence could see councils embracing radical policy measures that could lead to a substantial improvement in the functions of local democracy. It remains to be seen whether local government is brave enough to seize this opportunity.

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