A NEW BLUEPRINT FOR THE CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE
INTRODUCTION

The Curriculum for Excellence is the most fundamental reform of Scottish education for a generation yet it is not working well enough to deliver high standards in all our schools.

At the time of its introduction, there was near unanimous agreement that its principles were the right ones; that to educate young people for the 21st century there had to be greater focus on skills and on personal and social responsibility as well as on core knowledge. Young people should understand why they were learning just as much as what they were learning. As such, it was built on the four capacities:

• Successful Learners
• Confident Individuals
• Responsible Citizens
• Effective Contributors

But whilst there continues to be widespread support for these four capacities – who could argue otherwise - the educational rationale for the Curriculum for Excellence remains unclear. Ask teachers and parents to come up with the definition of Curriculum for Excellence and they will struggle to provide the answer.

As a result, the Curriculum for Excellence has come to mean different things to different people. Its structure is not coherent therefore it has confused teachers. The learning “outcomes and experiences” that are intended to shape the curriculum are too vague and there are far too many of them. Mastering core knowledge has, too often, had to give way to learning processes.

At the same time, there has been an absence of the necessary quantitative and qualitative data to measure the progress of the Curriculum for Excellence making it impossible to pinpoint exactly where the problems really lie.

The Scottish Government has been quick to remind us that, in its recent review of Scottish schools, the OECD applauded Scotland for having the foresight to put in place such an ambitious reform as the Curriculum for Excellence. That’s true, but the OECD also made clear that there was a long way to go before Scotland could live up to its full potential and realise excellence and equity right across the country.

The Scottish Conservatives believe we owe it to every parent, teacher and young person to deliver that excellence and equity. Simply hoping things will improve is not an option.

After extensive consultation, I am delighted to present our five recommendations to improve the delivery of the Curriculum for Excellence.

Liz Smith MSP
1. CLARITY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND MEASUREMENT

The educational rationale for the Curriculum for Excellence needs to be clear and easily understood – so too do its aims and what progress is expected of young people at each stage of their school career.

Parents, teachers and young people need to know exactly what the Curriculum for Excellence is expected to deliver at the key stages, both in terms of core knowledge and key skills. There must be no scope for ambiguity or misinterpretation. If it was possible to provide this clarity with 5-14 and also with SQA assessments, then it should surely be possible with the Curriculum for Excellence.

The Scottish Government accepted the recommendation of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that Scotland needed to do much more to realise our potential when it comes to the Curriculum for Excellence. It should start by simplifying the Curriculum for Excellence guidelines and weeding out all the unnecessary paperwork which, in many cases, has been seen by teachers as unintelligible and a burden that has diverted their energies away from teaching. The Scottish Government has made some progress with this with the introduction of benchmarks in order to provide clarity about the national standards which are required within each curriculum area. These benchmarks have generally been well received by teachers but there remain significant concerns about how to measure progress across the board, most especially when it comes to the production of reliable data.

The absence of high quality quantitative and qualitative evidence by which the Curriculum for Excellence can be measured is a serious problem since it limits the identification of where the main problems lie. The fact that no baseline data was collected at the time of implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence makes it very difficult to draw valid conclusions about how schools are progressing. This has not been helped by the Scottish Government’s decision to remove Scotland from the TIMSS and PIRLS measurements and the ending of SSLN.

The Scottish Conservatives whole-heartedly agree with the Royal Society of Edinburgh and Professor Lindsay Paterson that good data is a prerequisite for the success of the Curriculum for Excellence. For example, teacher judgment should not be the sole measure of attainment in the broad general education phase.

Three things should happen;

Firstly, the Scottish Government should reverse its decision to take Scotland out of the TIMSS and PIRLS measurements. SSLN should not have been abandoned but, instead, reformed to provide analysis of a wider cohort of pupils in both literacy and numeracy on an annual basis. There is surely an argument that SSLN should be reinstated and reformed to include a wider sample of the curriculum, especially science. This is exactly what used to happen with the Scottish Survey of Achievement which, on a four - year basis, measured progress in literacy, numeracy, science and social subjects.

Secondly, to take up a further point raised by Professor Lindsay Paterson, the focus needs to shift to helping the individual pupil rather than targeting whole neighbourhoods via the SIMD index which, although it has some use, does not pinpoint where individual poverty lies. Professor Paterson correctly makes the point that there are many children in what is defined as a deprived community who are not themselves deprived just as there are deprived children in a non-deprived area.

Thirdly, the new standardised tests should be exactly that – standardised across the country in the test content and in the conditions under which they are taken and not open to the wide variation across different local authorities. The results of these tests should be published so that proper statistical work can be undertaken to measure progress year on year. If we are to raise standards across the board we need that transparency to ensure that teacher judgment, which is so crucial, is wholly backed up by the necessary data which proves that progress is being made.

To achieve all of this, we believe that there is need for an independent research body that can provide objective and regular assessment of the Curriculum for Excellence.

2. TEACHER NUMBERS, WORKFORCE PLANNING AND TEACHER TRAINING

Having sufficient, well qualified and highly skilled teachers is obviously key to educational success. It is also the key to getting the Curriculum for Excellence back on track.

Notwithstanding the fact that teacher numbers are bound to fluctuate as a result of changing
pupil demographics, the very significant drop of 3,500 teachers since 2007 has had a profound effect on the ability of schools to deliver top class education given the resulting pressure on resources. In particular, groups such as the Scottish Children’s Services Coalition have regularly produced worrying statistics which show the cumulative effects on additional support for learning resources. Given that the most recent data indicates that around one quarter of Scottish school pupils are identified with additional support needs this is a very worrying trend which means that many of our most vulnerable children are not receiving adequate support.

The inability of some local authorities to find teachers to employ – often after extensive advertisement - lays bare the fact that workforce planning is, in some crucial areas, inadequate. There are clearly barriers within the system which are preventing a more flexible and free movement of the qualified teaching workforce but there is also a problem with the restricted routes into teaching that have been in place for several years. This needs to change.

Whilst the Scottish Government is in the process of improving this situation (for example, with its recent offer to fund bursaries for those well qualified STEM graduates who might be willing to move into teaching from their present occupation but, who at present, find it financially unrewarding), much more needs to be done to make teaching a more attractive profession.

When the Scottish Parliament’s education committee looked into the issues in teacher training it cited the following problems which need to be addressed:

- The huge range of experiences for trainees. Whilst it was very clear that some experiences were very positive, some were seen as very disappointing. For example, in some cases the experience appeared to be little more than covering classes or undertaking some photocopying. In a few cases, the organisation of school placements was seen as chaotic. This is surely something that can be easily solved and should be solved as a matter of urgency.

- Likewise, there were issues raised about whether there was sufficient focus on the importance of mentoring new teachers. It is clear that a growing number of departments in secondary schools have been refusing to accept trainees because existing staff have been too busy to cope with mentoring probationers. This is not an acceptable situation and more needs to be done to ensure that all schools understand their responsibility in this respect.

- Serious question marks were raised about the quality of some aspects of teacher training. For example, some trainee teachers who gave evidence to the Education and Skills Committee were astonished that so little attention was given to learning to teach literacy and numeracy. It was pointed out by one trainee that we cannot expect children to be wholly competent in literacy and numeracy if those who are teaching them have not been given the opportunity in teacher training to develop their own understanding of these key skills and of how to teach them. The Scottish Conservatives believe this is a key issue and that these skills should be tested before trainee teachers complete their probationary period.

- In a similar vein, concern was expressed about how little time was devoted within teacher training to understanding and looking after the needs of pupils with ASN and those who were facing particular challenges within PSE.

It is surely important that the structure of teacher training is reviewed so that these problems are properly addressed. The Scottish Conservatives would like to see more work undertaken to make it possible to have more flexible routes into teaching. We believe there remains a strong case for a Scottish version of Teach First which can meet the rigorous academic standards required by our universities and teacher training institutions, accreditation with the General Teaching Council of Scotland, and also the high expectations of parents.

Those within business and industry whose employees would like to make a commitment to teaching should be encouraged to do so via bursary support and philanthropic support to undertake the necessary training.

Likewise, we hope much faster progress can be made to ensure that those teachers who have qualified and demonstrated professional expertise from jurisdictions outwith Scotland can be quickly accredited with the GTCS. It is not acceptable that there is a long wait for paperwork to be completed and that potential teachers can be turned away on account of red tape. The Scottish Government has intimated that the ongoing work within the GTCS to improve the situation will not be complete until January 2019. This seems a
worrying length of time given the urgency of finding a wider, well qualified pool of teachers. The Scottish Conservatives have expressed their disappointment with the slow pace of changes to visa restrictions which are overseen by the Westminster Government. We are, however, encouraged by some recent developments and will continue to make the case for a balanced policy towards international students who want to train as teachers – one that is based on the positive contribution they can make to Scotland providing they too meet the highest standards we expect of our own students.

Through the work of the Education and Skills Committee at Holyrood, calls have been made to improve both the data that underpins workforce planning and the transparency of the methodology used in planning teacher recruitment. The Scottish Conservatives strongly support these calls and want to see these changes implemented as soon as possible. To ensure workforce planning is as accurate as possible, there is an important need to take account of demand factors as well as supply factors. For example, the health of the economy and the strength of competition for graduate labour can both be important drivers.

It has been said many times that part of the unattractiveness of teaching is often the growing burden of paperwork and assessment which is distracting teachers from the vocation they have chosen. The Scottish Conservatives believe this is a valid concern and that is just another reason for changes to be made to the delivery of the Curriculum for Excellence.

3. A CLEAR FOCUS ON CORE SKILLS

Strong competence in literacy and numeracy are obviously the core skills required for every learner. Competence in these skills opens doors to all sorts of other educational opportunities and it provides confidence to the learner.

Not surprisingly, on the back of the recent poor showing in both the PISA and SSLN results, there is widespread concern that far too many young people in Scotland are leaving school without good quality grounding in the 3Rs. Many teachers told us that they struggled to put sufficient emphasis on literacy and numeracy because of the huge burden of paperwork which has accompanied the Curriculum for Excellence.

Like all parents, the Scottish Conservatives believe this is a completely unacceptable state of affairs. The urgent priority within the Curriculum for Excellence must be to address this.

Most importantly, the capacities to teach literacy and numeracy need to have much more focus in teacher training. That, of course, depends on ensuring trainee teachers having the requisite skills themselves but it also depends on adequate time on training courses being set aside for learning how to teach these skills effectively. In this respect, we agree with the Royal Society of Edinburgh when it makes the call for teachers to have Higher Maths as well as Higher English.

Recent evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s Education Committee from trainee teachers made it abundantly clear that teacher training courses are failing to provide sufficient support to new teachers as they learn how to teach literacy and numeracy. In some extreme cases, trainees said they had virtually no training in numeracy. In recommendation 2, we outline the improvements that need to take place in teacher training.

We believe there is strong evidence from some local authorities in Scotland and from abroad that those systems of teaching literacy and numeracy which combine traditional methods with good quality diagnostic assessment yield the best results, including amongst more disadvantaged young people.

The Scottish Conservatives agree with the Scottish Government that there must be national standardised testing of literacy in order to raise attainment across the board. However, as yet, this has not happened. As a result, the absence of national standardised testing currently makes it difficult to pinpoint where the main problems lie. It should be noted that within SSLN, a great deal of helpful data was provided by a regular sample of pupil attainment.

But there are other issues too. Many teachers and parents told us that they felt the broad general education (BGE) part of the Curriculum for Excellence was failing to deliver the foundation of rigorous learning of core knowledge which is so important as young people prepare for qualifications and for the world beyond school. Time and again we were told that core knowledge had lost out to the obsession with learning processes and meeting the vast numbers of “outcomes and experiences”.

The Scottish Conservatives believe that broad general education should be reset so that its main focus is on traditional subjects and on
the necessary core knowledge which defines them. Knowledge matters for the following two reasons:

- It is only through acquiring knowledge that skills develop. Knowledge matters for work and for being a good citizen. Many employers refer to this when discussing some of the gaps within young people’s education.

Knowledge also matters for progression in key subjects eg mathematics – in other words, the student cannot go on to develop more sophisticated abilities if they have not first mastered the previous stages.

We appreciate that it is never easy to establish agreement on what constitutes key knowledge but it would surely be a main task of Education Scotland and SQA to use their specialist subject working groups to make these decisions for BGE.

Likewise, the qualification system should reflect these decisions about core knowledge so that they are examined. The National 4 qualification needs to include an external examination and be much more focused around the testing of core knowledge. There is no reason why this cannot be complementary to skills training and a better link-up with vocational training.

**Addressing concerns about lack of knowledge content is not only crucial for improved educational attainment but also for resolving the subject choice issue.**

4. **REFORMING THE EDUCATION AGENCIES**

It is essential that there is full public trust in our education agencies including Education Scotland, HMie, SQA and the GTCS, but it is very clear that from recent evidence submitted to the Scottish Parliament’s Education Committee in 2016 that many teachers do not feel that the education agencies are currently working well enough to deliver higher standards in our schools.

Teachers have raised concerns about weak lines of communication and about the vast volume of paperwork – some of it unintelligible – which has emanated from the agencies and which has created confusion for many teachers. The Scottish Conservatives believe this has had a significant and detrimental impact on the delivery of the Curriculum for Excellence. That is why we have made the suggested changes as set out in sections 1 and 3 of this document.

We believe there has to be full clarity about responsibility for decision-making and accountability for the decisions taken. That is why the headteachers’ charter is so important in terms of ensuring good leadership and better strategic planning.

We welcome the idea that headteachers should have the final say in relation to school curriculum, pedagogy and staffing. However, they have to be accountable for the decisions they take. In the more decentralised system that seems to be emerging, that accountability has to be local. At school, or at cluster level, there is a need for empowered school boards, involving parents, the community and elected councillors. There should be places too for co-opted members, most especially public-spirited individuals who could bring additional expertise.

We want to see a radically reformed Education Scotland which is completely separate from HMie and which links more effectively to SQA, local authorities and schools. Education Scotland should not be responsible for both curriculum development and for inspecting it. The current system is one of “judge and jury” and that cannot be right. As well as that, our current inspectors have often found themselves assisting local authorities with the development of the Curriculum for Excellence rather than inspecting schools.

Education Scotland has also been responsible for producing ‘guidance’, much of it relating to Curriculum for Excellence. This guidance has been excessive in quantity and of variable quality. What is needed instead is a minimal framework of genuinely strategic policy, which should be developed in conjunction with SQA and government ministers.

We recognise the value that teachers place on collaboration, providing it is “home-grown” rather than imposed from above. Any collaboration must be responsive to what teachers are asking for when it comes to support in the classroom. In this context of providing classroom support, we do not see the need for both Education Scotland and the regional collaborative structures which are set out in the new Education Bill to be doing the same job. To have both, blurs the lines of accountability.

It is also important that schools should be free to obtain support from whoever they consider best suited to provide it. Universities, third sector and private sector organisations have much to offer.

To properly evaluate the progress within
the Curriculum for Excellence, the Scottish Government needs to commission independent research which will provide regular, detailed and rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The Scottish Conservatives believe that the recent downturn in the number of inspectors and the downturn in the number of inspections have been matters of grave concern, particularly at a time when there are falling standards in literacy and numeracy. We recognise the Scottish Government is now trying to address this situation but we believe there needs to be greater transparency over the administration of the inspection process (as distinct from the inspections themselves). Inspection is a crucial part of maintaining high standards. The Scottish Conservatives want to see HMIe properly resourced and not facing conflicts of interest as it is asked to devote more time to curriculum development.

We believe SQA is also a crucial agency when it comes to delivering higher standards. We do not see a need to reform its overall structure but we believe that there must be better resourcing, more transparent decision-making which draws on teachers’ classroom experiences, clearer lines of responsibility, much greater clarity of purpose and better communication with schools. We were disturbed to read the recent evidence which tells us that many teachers felt SQA was underperforming in these areas and that some exam question papers were below standard.

The government is currently proposing to replace the General Teaching Council for Scotland by an Education Workforce Council that would have responsibility for the registration, professional standards and professional learning, not just of teachers but of all employed in early years, school and college education. There is a good case for improving entry qualifications and learning opportunities for many of these groups. However, we believe the task of achieving this is an enormously complex one, which requires to be the subject of separate and extensive consultation.

5. EXTENDING SCHOOL AUTONOMY

We agree, in principle with the Scottish Government that there should be certain governance reforms which bring greater devolution of power towards schools and which automatically bring with it the opportunities to enhance parental and community involvement. We do not believe that the current system which rests solely on the accountability of local authorities works well enough when it comes to meeting the individual needs of young people. We believe Scotland has some of the most professional, creative and dynamic teachers anywhere in the world but there is something preventing them from making the fullest use of these attributes. This is due to a “systems issue” which presents several key barriers. This is largely to do with the fact that there has been a conflation of meaning between equality and uniformity.

Too often, the latter has been seen as the prerequisite for ensuring that all pupils have the same experience. The introduction of comprehensive education exemplified this dilemma. In theory, it might have been a laudable aim but, in practice, it has constrained diversity and choice, both of which, if international experience is anything to go by, can have very favourable outcomes in terms of raising standards.

In this respect, we note the interesting point made by the Royal Society of Edinburgh made in a recent advice paper (December 2016) when it said “there exists a culture of compliance and conformity. This can inhibit headteachers and teachers from publicly expressing their professional views when they run counter to those of their employers (local authorities) or to national policy on education”. This is a very important point because many heads have come to accept that there is a safeguard in compliance and therefore there is less incentive for them to be ambitious.

We don’t think anyone could disagree with excellence and equity as key principles, but we would like to add one more. We would like to see greater diversity within the school system. We believe equity relates principally to opportunity rather than to outcome. Each child is different and a successful school system must reflect that. We were very persuaded of the principles which underpinned the Wood Commission (principles which, we believe, have been successfully implemented in Newlands Junior College and in several apprenticeship schemes) and the principles which underpin the approaches of other European nations which seek to tailor their education systems to the diversity of aspiration and the practical needs of a fast-changing and flexible economy. We are aware of several business plans in Scotland which would expand the diversity of provision and we very much hope the Scottish Government will respond positively to them.

The extension of powers to allow greater devolution includes greater power over
staffing decisions which is so often under the control of local authorities. We are strongly of the view that there is far too small a percentage of any school budget over which headteachers have direct control. This, in turn raises issues about accountability. Several heads have made the point that they feel accountable only to local authorities, not to parents – something which we believe is a serious concern which prevents a more dynamic school sector.

Fundamentally, we believe that there should be much greater autonomy for headteachers so that they are free to make the decisions which they know can raise standards in their school. Indeed, the success of Curriculum for Excellence, much of which is based on the principle of being more responsive to the needs of the individual child, surely demands that headteachers have that greater autonomy.

CONCLUSION

Throughout all the interviews and consultations we undertook, there was general agreement that the principles which underpin the Curriculum for Excellence – and which were agreed unanimously by Scotland’s political parties – are sound. This is because there is widespread agreement that pupils should understand why they are learning something just as much as what they are learning. There was also general agreement however, that the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence has been fraught with problems which, in turn, has undermined its effective delivery in the classroom.

There is no time to lose to get Curriculum for Excellence back on track and ensure that Scotland is, once again, leading the field in education.