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Direction

SUMMER 2024

**Covid-19 Inquiry
wants your views on
Scotland's response
to the pandemic**

**New IoD Mentor
service launched**

The wellbeing issue

**Helping young
people bloom
is a winning
strategy for all**



A photograph of Zahra Hedges, CEO of Winning Scotland, standing in front of a modern building with large windows. She is wearing a bright pink, short-sleeved, form-fitting dress and has her arms crossed. She is smiling warmly at the camera.

It's everyone's job to give our young people a boost

Many young people today are facing a crisis in confidence – but Zahra Hedges, chief executive of Winning Scotland, believes that if everyone in society pulls together, we can help them build the lives they want, and deserve.

Words by Rob Beswick; photos by Robert Perry

“When a flower doesn’t bloom you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower...”

That quote was first popularised by Dutch inspirational speaker Alexander Den Heijer. Its meaning is pretty clear: if things don’t develop the way you would have liked, check out the surroundings first to see if that’s where the problem lies.

Swap ‘flower’ for ‘young people’, and you are starting to tiptoe down a path that Winning Scotland is creating across the country, as part of its mission to improve the life chances of our young people.

The charity was launched in 2006 by Sir Bill Gammell with the sole focus of building confidence and resilience in young people.

Gammell – a former Scotland rugby international and successful businessman – acknowledged that his own success was based on a childhood packed full of supportive role models – parents, family, and from sport. Not every young person was as fortunate, and his goal was to create a cultural change in Scotland, to build young people’s confidence no matter what background they came from, so that, in his words, “every young person walks around with their head up, not looking down.”

But despite its goal of helping young people develop with confidence, perhaps unusually for this sector it doesn’t work with the young people themselves; rather, it works with the adults who are already influences on their lives.

Winning Scotland’s chief executive Zahra Hedges explains the strategy. “Young people are in a jigsaw,” she says. “They are a piece that sits in the middle of the picture, and round them are all the other pieces of their lives – parents, friends, teachers, sports clubs, activities. They already have plenty of people working with them; rather than Winning Scotland becoming another ‘piece’ of their jigsaw, our goal is to work with the existing pieces to enable them to create better environments in which young people can flourish and reach their full potential.”

This work can take on a wide variety of forms, but essentially all are focused on building capacity within their community, to better support them. “We work with like-

minded partners to build confidence and resilience in young people. We engage and empower the individuals and groups who have the greatest influence on young people, giving them the tools and knowledge to create sustainable impact.”

“We do this by building partnerships across the sectors – public, Third sector and private, in a diverse range of programmes. We work with adults to improve their own wellbeing and resilience, improving their mindset, as we know that this will help them develop the skills they need to help young people, and to create positive role models for young people to copy.

“For example, we work with schools to create a positive learning culture, where mistakes are seen as part of the learning journey, and effort is valued for its own sakes,

“We asked young people whether they felt safe in their community. A third said they didn’t. They also felt that it wasn’t ‘their’ community; it was other people’s. They didn’t feel that they had a stake in their environment...”

rather than simply trying to memorise stuff for exams, which is then forgotten a few weeks later.”

“We also support social workers and employability advisers, who say our work is helping re-engage young people, particularly those who have developed the feeling that they ‘aren’t clever’ and don’t see the point in education.”

The crisis facing young people – and that’s the word Zahra used to describe the landscape many of them face – demands urgent attention. “When we talk to young people, their goals are pretty simple: they want to succeed, they want a job, they want to live a good life. They need a space in which they can thrive, and opportunities to make the most of their potential. They want to feel safe, and supported. Tragically, for many, none of that happens.”

That takes us back to the non-blooming plant. Let’s check out the soil and whether it’s getting the right amount of water and light...

When you look at some of the

statistics that emerge from conversations with young people, you can see why Winning Scotland’s vision is so badly needed, says Zahra: “We asked young people whether they felt safe in their community. A third said they didn’t. Perhaps crucially, they also felt that it wasn’t ‘their’ community; it was other people’s. They didn’t feel that they had a stake in their environment.

“When you know that, you understand better why, perhaps, some young people behave the way they do.”

The way young people’s brains are wired means they are constantly looking for ‘highs’. For the lucky few, these come from drama, music or on the sports field. For the ones with limited access to such options, however, they can turn to risky behaviour, alcohol and drug use.

“We asked 15-year-olds about their lives and the community they live in,” said Zahra. “What they would like it to look like, and what the reality was. It’s pretty heartbreaking. There are fewer and fewer opportunities available for their self-expression, fewer safe spaces for them to develop and grow.”

“Young people, even moreso than adults, crave connection and belonging. If we don’t provide them with safe avenues to find that, they will go searching for it in dark corners.”

There are lots of charities and organisations who work with those 15-year-olds, and who can help them if they are struggling now. “Our goal is to work ‘upstream’, to change the environment for today’s 10-year-olds so that by the time they reach 15, they are more mentally resilient and better prepared to handle challenges and able to make better informed – and safer – choices with their lives.”

The good news? We can change this picture. Iceland shows us that.

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One of Winning Scotland's biggest current programmes is Planet Youth, which is inspired by a programme launched in Iceland in 1998. Zahra takes up the story.

"When people look at Iceland from the outside they see an ordered, law-abiding and community-focused society. But it wasn't always like that. Iceland's data on their young people in 1998 showed the same high levels of alcohol misuse, drug taking and anti-social behaviour we have today in Scotland."

The difference was that the

anti-social behaviour fell in tandem, and today, Iceland can proudly boast the cleanest-living youths in the world.

"There wasn't one intervention in Iceland that proved crucial; it was the combination of changes that made the difference," says Zahra. "They simply allowed young people to be heard, their frustrations understood and opportunities created for them. Iceland proved that young people will make the right choices if you put them in the right environment."

Winning Scotland is currently

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country's leaders embraced the challenge of finding out why this was the case, and worked to change young people's mindsets and provide more support when it was needed, so they could make better, more informed choices. With the whole community focused on working with the next generation, drink and drug misuse plummeted,

running six pilots of the Planet Youth programme, in 24 microsites. Each group has drawn together a cross-section of concerned agencies from education, social services, the NHS and community representatives like parents, charities and youth work, to gather data, look at what the young need in their communities, and what local capacity there is to help them.

But who's missing from that list of concerned actors? The private sector – and that's an omission Zahra is determined to change. "We were in talks with some of the leading figures from public health and education and the thing we all agreed on was broadening the tent, to get more input from the private sector. I find that when business leaders know what societal projects are going on in their communities, they are keen to get involved, but too often programmes like this exist in a public sector/third sector bubble. Businesses are excluded – not deliberately, but because we don't reach out to them. Yet we know that directors and business leaders have a lot to contribute, and they've got 'skin in the game'. After all, the young people we're talking about are their children, or their future workforce."

Zahra would love business leaders to contact Winning Scotland to find out what's going on in their area, particularly around the Planet Youth programme. "Everyone has a role to play. I was reading a report by The Health Foundation recently, on health inequalities in Scotland, and it put the issue succinctly: 'We do not need another grand strategy [to fix

our inequality problems]. We need practical collaboration, up and downstream, to sweat the considerable assets we already have – public, third and private sectors, all collaborating with communities. Each of us has our part to play.’

“That’s a perfect definition of what Winning Scotland’s goals.”

There are other ways business can help these goals. “Think about parents’ hours. Do you give them time to attend key events in their children’s lives – at school, hobbies? Do you offer flexible working hours so they juggle work and care commitments? We often think it’s only parents and carers with young children who need flexibility, but our data is really clear, when teenagers spend time with their parents, and those parents set healthy boundaries, they make better choices around substances and alcohol, and we also see positive impacts on mental health and pro-social behaviour.”

Zahra has another request for businesses: broaden opportunities: “Do you offer work experience to young people – and not just to the children who come from the ‘right’ schools, but from all schools?”

“Do you get round schools to offer careers advice, highlight opportunities, give young people a chance to dream of their own success?”

The key is to look at building a business in a way that adds value to the community in which it sits, not just bottom line profit. “I find small businesses do this better than larger ones. They tend to be more grounded in their community and have stronger links with it. SMEs lead the way on improving societal values. Too often when big business gets involved in the social value movement it is not altruistic but a fig leaf for their way of doing business.”

One of the things employers say is that too often they find young people “aren’t work ready.”

“Whose fault is that?” counters Zahra. “Who’s helping them become ‘work ready’? Is it the schools’ jobs? Or businesses?”

“Let’s end the blame game that infects this debate. We need to bring voices together as we all want the same thing: a productive young workforce who feel fulfilled in their employment, and their lives, and who feel part of their community.”

Your business can add value to your community, she adds. “It’s

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everyone’s responsibility to ensure young people are happy, healthy and safe. Build that type of society, and they’ll flourish, and we’ll all benefit.”

If our young people are feeling disillusioned, the obvious question is, how have we got to this point? “Austerity has hammered many young people,” says Zahra. “They’ve seen their sports clubs close, effective programmes like Sure Start axed – a huge mistake, in my view – and youth work hollowed out. So what’s left?”

“Add to that, with modern tech, we’re practically experimenting on our young people, to see how they’ll turn out. They are simultaneously more connected and more isolated than any of us were in our youth. We’ve no real idea how exposure to social media at a young age will affect them later in life.”

All-in-all, “we’re heading to crisis point – actually, we’re already there. Wealth can mitigate the situation for some parents, those who can afford to invest in their children, for sports clubs, support, counselling, but with more families struggling just to pay the households bills, these things are a luxury they can’t afford.”

“Young people aren’t stupid. They can see that the social contract we used to have – work hard and you’ll have a decent standard of living – has been lost. They see their parents struggling, foodbank use rising and

mortgages and rents unaffordable, and then ask themselves why they should bother with a system which doesn’t appear to care for its people.”

But this situation is reversible, and Zahra sees hope in the way Planet Youth turned Iceland around. But the clock is ticking on transforming Scotland in the same way. “We need to ask ourselves where we want to be in a decade. Do we want to just continue with the way things are, or step in now and make improvements. It’s not inevitable that things will get worse, but it is inevitable that things won’t improve if we don’t change. Young people want to do the right thing; do adults want to help them?”

Zahra is clear about what she wants from government: “I would like the government – and local government and business, in fact – to look at every decision through the lens of positive prevention, ie, will this decision, in the long term, take us towards the kind of future we want to create for our children, our young people, our families and our communities – or is it something we are going to have to come back and fix later?”

“Let’s change our focus and help young people be happy, healthy and safe – for the good of all.”

To get involved with Winning Scotland, see winningscotland.org, connect with Zahra through LinkedIn, or contact her team via info@winning-scotland.org

What IoD Scotland’s Nations Director Catherine McWilliam says about Winning Scotland:

It’s a well-known adage that ‘prevention is better than cure’, so why are we not taking Winning Scotland’s proactive approach to society? If I had £1 for every person I have come across who has a comment on the ‘youth of today’, I could probably look at retirement.

The issue is not so much about young people being disengaged and uninterested, more that the world is changing so quickly that none of us can quite keep up. I’m really pleased to be able to be part of the conversations that Winning Scotland is having and even more pleased to see how IoD members are responding. Young people want prospects and a future that they can look forward to – so let’s help them. I’d urge you to look up Winning Scotland and get involved with its projects.

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