2026 – My Annus Horribilis

Cancer, bereavement and the human reality of educational system leadership

Colin Cattanach

On 2 January 2026, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. On 2 November, exactly ten months later, my mother died following a devastating stroke. Between those two dates, my life changed considerably.

I am sharing my story not to seek sympathy, but in the hope that it might help others who are navigating illness, loss and personal adversity whilst continuing to lead others.

In loving memory of my mother, Nancy Cattanach (1942–2026).

Living with uncertainty

There is very little in the professional development of a system leader that prepares you for the moment a consultant tells you that you have cancer. Having spent much of my career making difficult decisions and taking responsibility for others, I suddenly found myself confronting something over which I had very little control.

In March, I underwent major surgery. Further investigations revealed that my cancer was more advanced than I had initially hoped. Radiotherapy followed during June and July, alongside hormone treatment that has continued throughout the year.

The physical consequences have been considerable, but the psychological impact is perhaps more difficult to explain. You learn to live between appointments, blood tests and conversations with consultants. You become acutely aware of unfamiliar pains and find yourself contemplating possibilities you would rather not consider.

Yet everyday life continues. Emails arrive, meetings take place and professional expectations remain. You can be discussing organisational strategy in the morning whilst privately wondering what the future holds for you and your family.

Returning to work does not mean that someone has stopped being a cancer patient.

Losing my mother

On 29 October, my mother suffered a devastating stroke. She never regained consciousness and died on 2 November, aged 84. There is something particularly cruel about losing your mother during a year in which you have already spent so much time confronting your own mortality.

Despite being 57, I was still somebody’s son. There was still someone in the world who had known me from the very beginning, who remembered my childhood and who represented a connection to a life that existed long before professional responsibilities and the complexities of adulthood.

On 18 November, we said goodbye to her at her funeral in Glasgow. I was immensely proud of my three children for being there, and grateful to Kate for standing alongside me throughout this extraordinarily difficult year.

Returning home, I felt an overwhelming sense of emptiness. The funeral was over and the world around me appeared to be returning to normal. For me, nothing felt normal. I miss my mother terribly. There are conversations I would like to have and things I would like to tell her.

> Grief does not operate according to a timetable, and it certainly does not conclude at the end of an agreed period of compassionate leave.

When the leader becomes vulnerable

As an executive headteacher, interim chief executive and system leader, I have become accustomed to dealing with uncertainty and taking responsibility for others. Over time, many of us become quite skilled at concealing our own difficulties. There is, however, a significant difference between being resilient and being unaffected.

Throughout 2026, I have continued to develop ideas and contribute professionally. My work on school attendance, the National Attendance Portal, Attendance Magazine and educational belonging has provided me with a sense of purpose during a year in which so much has felt beyond my control.

But I am exhausted. The cumulative effect of serious illness, treatment, uncertainty and bereavement is difficult to articulate.

One of the most important lessons I have learnt is the distinction between professional capacity and professional capability. Cancer treatment may affect my energy. Bereavement may affect my concentration on a particular day. Neither diminishes the knowledge, expertise or ambition I have accumulated throughout my career.

People may need flexibility and understanding, not exclusion from meaningful work or strategic conversations. We should listen to what colleagues need rather than make assumptions on their behalf.

You can be a strong leader and still need support.

Compassionate leadership, beyond the rhetoric

I have spent decades working in a sector that routinely talks about compassion, inclusion, belonging and wellbeing. We rightly encourage schools to recognise that children’s experiences beyond the classroom affect their ability to engage. I wonder whether we consistently extend that same understanding to the adults working within our organisations.

The effectiveness of an organisation’s values cannot be judged solely by its strategic documents, policies or presentations. Those values are demonstrated in the decisions people make and the way they treat others when circumstances become difficult.

How do we respond when a colleague receives a cancer diagnosis? How do we support someone undergoing treatment? What happens when a member of staff loses a parent? Do we recognise the continuing impact of these experiences, or simply expect people to return and resume their responsibilities?

Compassionate leadership does not require abandoning professional expectations. It requires recognising that people may need something different from those who lead them. Sometimes a conversation, a telephone call or a genuine enquiry about someone’s wellbeing can mean more than a formal process.

People remember how they were treated during the most difficult periods of their lives.

For those quietly struggling

I am still receiving cancer treatment, still grieving for my mother and still trying to make sense of an incredibly painful year. I do not feel obliged to turn these experiences into an inspirational story. I hope that 2027 will bring healing, better health and renewed purpose.

If there is one message I would want other educational leaders to take from my experience, it is this: never underestimate what someone may be carrying with them when they walk into work each morning. Be interested in the people you lead. Listen to them, value their contribution and treat them with kindness.

If sharing my experience helps just one person feel less alone, it will have been worthwhile.

Sources of confidential support

Macmillan Cancer Support – Support for people living with cancer and their families.

Prostate Cancer UK – Specialist information and support.

Cruse Bereavement Support – Support following the death of someone close.

Education Support – Confidential support for education professionals.

Colin Cattanach / November 2026