

Brief Report on recent European Social Services Conference of the European Social Network

20-22 June 2016, World Forum, The Hague

Following a successful workshop proposal to the European Social Network in January 2016, Social Work Scotland (SWS) was delighted to be chosen to present a workshop for delegates as part of the European Social Services Conference in The Hague in June this year.

The theme of this year's conference was "The Future is Local! – Empowering communities, combating poverty and improving services"

The Conference was attended by Val de Souza, of SWS and myself, Murray Swan, Team Leader, South Lanarkshire Council. In keeping with this theme, the proposed Workshop highlighted and celebrated the work they had undertaken in Stirling and Clackmannanshire in 2014-15. This involved developing community-based groups (in partnership with the "Mellow Parenting" programme) with the explicit aim of engaging in dialogue with those fathers and male carers who considered themselves disengaged within Social Work/Child Protection interventions.

The workshop provided Conference delegates with a brief overview of the data generated, including an analysis of the positive outcomes achieved from the programme... as well as an interactive opportunity to get "hands-on" with some of the more fun activities that are integral to the programme; reflecting the European Social Networks core ethos of getting involved at all levels.

The workshop was designed to be small and interactive - with 18 participants involved from across Europe and beyond including France, Sweden and Ireland. Delegates ranged from front-line practitioners to Policy Directors and Academics/Researchers from statutory and non-statutory organisations. A very broad range, indeed, and it was a particular delight to me as the workshop facilitator to see (and hear) the laughter of delegates as they became so passionate about mixing food colouring, water and corn flour in order to "make Gloop"!

Workshop participants brought their individual expertise to engaging in wide ranging and informative discussions around the topic of how and why fathers/male carers (whether as a positive or negative factor) can be "invisible" in some risk assessments, with dis-proportionate expectations sometimes placed upon the mothers/female care givers. This highlighted the mutual challenges faced across Europe in the encouragement and training of staff in improving accessibility of services; along with the embedding of more comprehensive risk assessments, which take account of all elements of a child's life in daily practice.

With 2016 being the "Year of the Dad" in Scotland, this debate was particularly appropriate and the challenges being faced through the delegates own experiences were shared in conversations around the tables. The Workshop –and the conference more widely - also generated good networking opportunities, with links around these challenges already initiating a conversation via e-mail with my peers in France and England around disseminating research outcomes more widely.

Overall, the Conference proved to be an exciting and stimulating opportunity in which Social Work Scotland proved able to contribute effectively to the debates around the social challenges being faced across Europe, with Val de Souza herself, a panellist in the Closing Plenary Session of the Conference.

The key messages of the conference around how users of services are “true” stakeholders not only in receiving services but in their very development and evolution provided me with much valued food for thought, and an experience that offered new professional (and personal) objectives around community engagement for social services in Scotland, now and in the future.

Feedback from the workshop participants and the ESN conference staff was universally positive. Not only in terms of the Workshop having fully met the original proposal criteria of the European Conference, but in terms of the satisfaction of the workshop participants themselves who comments included:

“Interesting Session. Would be curious to hear more about it”

“Thought-provoking”

“Great programme”

“Easy-going and enjoyable”

“Interested”

“I have been convinced...that social services do not pay enough attention to the role of fathers in parenting...I always found it hard to convince social workers and managers...that this was a priority. I wonder how you did that?”

“Thank you for this input, it is indeed very interesting...makes me wish to know more about it”

“It is rewarding ... that social workers and organisations are now more comfortable talking about the complexities of this topic”



Murray Swan

23rd September 2016