

## **Social Work Scotland Annual Conference**

**Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> June 2015**

**Alistair Gaw, President**

A very warm welcome

Our conference title *Whose Right is it Anyway* is inspired by an award winning 1970s play that I saw as a teenager - *Whose Life is it Anyway?*

Written by Brian Clark and starring Tom Conti, the play is set in a hospital room. The action revolves around Ken, a sculptor by profession, who has been paralysed in a car accident and is determined to be allowed to die. Brian Clark presents the arguments on both sides and asks to what extent government should be allowed to interfere in the life of a private citizen. The play leaves us with conflicting feelings about Ken's desire to end his life.

Recently this issue has again been the subject of debate in the Scottish Parliament. It seems it will always be with us.

Questions of the boundaries between the state and the individual run through the history of ideas.

And we in this room will always be managing these boundaries because this is at the heart of Social Work. *Whose Right is it anyway?*

Within families - whose rights prevail?

We speak of children's rights, parental rights, human rights. We want people to exercise autonomy, to be in control.

We promote personalisation and family decision-making and we aspire to 'co-production'.

We also do things to people which they would not choose. We implement compulsory measures of supervision for both children and adults. Sometimes we deprive our fellow human beings of their very liberty.

Social workers have profoundly serious responsibilities.

We want to do things with people - but sometimes we must do things to them.

So, welcome to our Conference - did you think you were coming to enjoy yourselves!

Do enjoy this precious gift of time – time away from the day job to think, discuss and debate.

Get re-acquainted with old friends and make some new ones.

Demand for places this year has been super high and we especially want to welcome those who are here for the first time.

This is the conference of the leadership of the social work profession. It should be a place of curiosity and debate – to take us forward. Here there is no such thing as a daft question.

Like many of you my own journey into social work was not straightforward.

After I graduated, my first job was with a bank. I realised banking wasn't for me when I had to knock on doors in Lothian mining villages during the 1984 strike to try to collect a few pounds from people who had nothing.

After that experience knocking on doors as a 'cruelty man' was easy.

I was lucky – in social work I found my vocation.

I've also had the privilege of working in inspection which has taken me to 31 out of 32 local authorities. The only one I've not visited is the one I still can't confidently pronounce – sorry Iain – I'd love to get up to the Western Isles this year.

Now to return to our theme

Incredibly we have a government in London committed to finding a way to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights. My question is - what madness is this?

Dominic Grieve the recently retired Conservative attorney general described this course of action, to take us back to 1945, as “puerile” – I agree.

If we are to be civilised and protect the rights of the most vulnerable, including sometimes the despised, what are the implications for social work?

I'd like to start with a small bushfire close to home.

In December 2013 two social workers employed by my authority the City of Edinburgh Council were found in contempt of court by a sheriff because they had suspended a parent's contact with two children in the council's care in contravention of a contact order.

The sheriff rejected their defence, that they had been acting in what they genuinely believed was the best interests of the children, on the basis that - and I quote - “social workers are in no different a position from anyone else and require to comply with orders of the court, children's hearings and the general law. They have no authority to act unilaterally however strongly held their views may be”. We all agree with that.

The expenses of the procedure, including a five day proof hearing, were awarded against the social workers. The finding of contempt exposed them to investigation by the Scottish Social Services Council.

Importantly, the action for contempt was against the social workers as individuals, not against their local authority to whom they were accountable. The Sheriff excluded the local authority from the proceedings and targeted the individuals. This caused great alarm amongst all professionals working with vulnerable families.

Thankfully, 10 weeks ago the Scottish Appeal Court issued a unanimous decision exonerating the social workers. The three Scottish law lords concluded that the sheriff erred in making the findings of contempt and determined that the decision should be quashed.

In the end, after significant financial and human cost, sense prevailed.

However, there are lessons for all the parties in this, including big ones for Social Work.

Scottish social workers in child care deal routinely with children's hearings, which operate very differently from the courts. As a consequence they can lack the familiarity with the law and legal procedure acquired as a matter of course by social workers in court-based welfare systems. They may also fail to understand the interface between children's hearings and the courts – labyrinthine at times.

For social workers lack of legal knowledge can have serious consequences.

We must have a sound understanding of the legal framework underpinning our interventions and access to legal advice and representation.

So we have to get training right, invest much more in continuing professional development (and track and evaluate it) and resist temptations to cut legal capacity.

In an increasingly litigious environment we will fail vulnerable people if we allow the strongest to be the loudest.

In the longer term we should work with policy makers to find a way to take forward contentious decisions not in adversity but on the basis of evidence, professional judgement and humanity.

The interests of the most vulnerable must be paramount, not as they are increasingly, an afterthought.

Best of all of course is to prevent bushfires in the first place.

Social Work Scotland's response to the contempt case was to work with colleagues in SCRA and the Scottish Government to agree a national protocol to reduce the risk of further stooshies over contact arrangements. We worked to make it better.

As an organisation Social Work Scotland has achieved its first birthday.

We've taken the conscious decision to walk before we run. On our journey from what was the Association of Directors of Social Work we've changed the focus from local authority social work to leading the profession across all sectors. Our membership has almost doubled.

Local authority members still make up the majority of our members and we want colleagues from other parts of the sector to join to extend and widen our focus.

And you can join here today. Your profession needs you.

Just see Sophie Mills at our stand at reception. If you work in social work there is a place for you. Our door is open - please come through it.

And we've opened the door specifically to partners in higher education – in our social work schools, from IRISS and our Centres for Excellence. The way forward for social work must be to drive knowledge and creativity and have it increasingly intertwined with practice.

We are also changing the organisation in other ways - making it more focused on creating our agenda rather than responding to the agenda set by the governments of the day.

We have achieved significant successes. We've secured grants to support our work on integration, self-directed support, workforce and justice. We also received a grant to add to our capacity.

Much of this we owe to the work over the past two years of Harry Stevenson.

Harry worked with his excellent predecessor Sandy Riddell, to build consensus in ADSW and take us on the journey to create Social Work Scotland.

Harry has achieved a huge amount in this time, leading us through that most challenging first year with great success.

As a result our work with the Scottish Government is increasingly strong and productive. We have excellent conversations with Ministers and are building really effective working relationships with Scottish civil servants.

We hugely value our relationship with Alan Baird, the Chief Social Work Advisor to the Government.

On 17 March, World Social Work Day, Harry led Social Work Scotland's involvement in the launch of the Shared Vision and Strategy for Social Work Services in Scotland. The strategy is built on partnership work, led by a Ministerial Group. A shared action plan to build and enhance social care in Scotland over the next five years.

The Strategy builds on the Changing Lives report from 2005 and is for a very different time.

As a civil servant I worked on the Changing Lives report. We thought it would be a slow burn.....but ten years?

A key lesson remains - social work alone can't solve society's problems.

"We need to harness all our resources and expertise to design services around the needs of people. That means new ways of working alongside partners in the public, voluntary and private sectors."

All of this within a fast changing environment. Let's take a minute to consider the totality of what's going on.

We need to make the most of the opportunities of community capacity building in the Community Empowerment legislation. We will help the Government increase the pace and scale of Public Service Reform by supporting the focus on outcomes.

There is a new energy in integrating health and care. We know that successful integration requires strengthening of professional leadership and we are making progress. For example on Chief Social Work Officer Accreditation, the process is now in place and the programme will be delivered from September this year by Glasgow Caledonian and Dundee Universities.

We will do more to lead improvements in anticipatory care and build on the shared vision for independent living to make sure disabled people have the same freedom, dignity and control as others.

Criminal justice social work is an area where we have a mass of evidence about what works – we know how to reduce re-offending. Right now we have a political climate more receptive than ever and we must

catch this wave. At a recent meeting the justice minister told us about a visit to Finland to get new ideas to find they are waiting to see what we do. We will move this exciting agenda forward.

Integrating Health and Care raises questions for child care services. There is a danger that children are an afterthought. Jackie Brock, who is with us today, set out these concerns in her report at the end of last year. We have contributed to a paper produced with CELSIS and Children in Scotland - Integrating Health and Social Care in Scotland: Potential impact on children's services. Available here today.

Successful implementation of the Children and Young People's Act will to a large extent depend on how well it is funded. We will continue to work to secure the right level of resources for maximum benefit.

The new Carers legislation intent is that carers must be equal partners in the planning and delivery and that partnership with them is key to sustainable social work. It is the intention that Scotland's 750,000 adult carers and 44,000 young carers are better supported so they can continue to care and to have a life alongside caring.

Carers voices will be strong over these two days and rightly so.

We will continue to develop links UK wide and abroad. We're delighted to introduce the European Social Network – an international force for good – to our conference and we hope to encourage much more learning and exchange with this progressive organisation.

200,000 people are now employed in the Scottish social services workforce. Our contribution to the Scottish economy is immense. We will work closely with the Scottish Social Services Council and our colleagues in learning to continue to improve standards and support the professionalism of the workforce.

But we will not provide adequate standards of care if we accept those at the sharp end are the lowest paid employees in the country. We will do all we can to make care a career rather than a job.

We need effective scrutiny. We lost something when we lost SWIA. The sector requires a robust professional scrutiny body that delivers support and challenge, understands performance and provides intelligence and reliable benchmarks to help us learn. We know it works. For example we

have seen effective scrutiny drive improvements and provide the necessary assurance in child protection.

We welcome the intention of the Care Inspectorate to build a rights-based approach. I would like to congratulate Karen on her recent appointment as Chief Executive of the Care Inspectorate. I know she and her colleagues will be keen to engage with the sector as new approaches are taken forward. Social Work Scotland will do all we can to support them.

Most important of all we must continue to build our own learning cultures based on high levels of self-awareness. We can use our partnerships with scrutiny and regulatory bodies to achieve this, to make sure our services are based on effective self-evaluation.

The changes we are experiencing also bring opportunities to refresh relationships between providers and commissioners and the people they support - all of which can deliver improved outcomes.

And we are just embarking on what will be the revolution of personalisation.

So an environment more volatile than ever.

I'd like to finish with some comment on a key priority - communications.

The biggest threat to our profession is the reticence of our profession.

We will get your voice heard.

We need a strong media profile and presence in the press so instead of waiting for it to come to us we're doing it.

If you read the Scotsman for no other reason, then read it for our articles.

We'll push some boundaries to get the issues for the most vulnerable heard – as we did in the Herald on Monday.

Use social media. Currently we have over 1200 followers on Twitter. Please follow us and tweet about the conference today at #sws15.



We are going to change people's perception of social work. And the first step is talking about it.

We will not aim to be a confident profession – we will be a confident profession. Part of being excellent is letting people know what we have achieved. And it is a lot.

We will continue to build trust - with the public, the Parliament and the Scottish Government.

Trust to agree, debate and disagree. We will always seek to bring solutions. Our attitude is - how can we help?

And we will speak out when it is right to do so. We did this on poverty. It is a scandal that food banks are now mainstream welfare.

In the city where I work some people feed their families from what they find in the bins. Where do we go next?

As pressures grow we will draw on all the knowledge and creativity we can muster to sustain services.

We will stay on the front foot to secure resources. We are already preparing for the forthcoming Spending Review.

To conclude

Social Work Scotland is a membership organisation that has achieved a great deal in a short time through the hard work of many of you in this room – so I'm saving all the thanks for tomorrow.

Speaking personally I'm delighted Elaine Torrance from Scottish Borders is now our Vice President. Elaine has great knowledge and skills that I will draw on and we plan to work closely together. She will take over the leadership of Social Work Scotland next May.

After five men in a row it's high time we had another woman at the helm.

Colleagues – much of our conference this year focuses on the human stories - for me this is the essence of social work and what makes it unique. It's what gets us out of bed in the morning.

Whose Right is it Anyway?

Whose Life is it Anyway?

It's our job to make sure we all have a life worth living.

Thank you – enjoy our time together