

## Annual Conference 2009 Presidential Address - Harriet Dempster

Elected Members, colleagues, friends old and new, thank you for your vote of confidence and thank you for the opportunity to be President of the Association this year. I am excited and enthusiastic to be picking up the baton from Alan. He has demonstrated strong, clear, and very positive leadership of ADSW and of social work in his term of office. He has worked energetically and very effectively with the Scottish Government on the 'Changing Lives' agenda and, in so doing, has given it fresh impetus.

It will be important to build on this next year and in the coming years; to maintain the momentum and deliver the vision for social work and of sustainable change.

I am really pleased that Michelle Miller has agreed to be Vice President. I very much value her strong commitment to the Association, her clarity of thought, her attention to important detail and her incisive 'no nonsense' approach. We will, I believe, be an effective team and we will work to support our able group of hard working Standing Committee Chairs taking the agenda forward.

I am also looking forward to working more closely our excellent staff team. The two professional development officers, Wendy Harrington and Yvonne Robson, our new communications and parliamentary officer, Jane Kennedy, and last but certainly not least Sophie Mills and Karen Denoon, who take charge of administration. It is very reassuring to know I can count on their full support and help in the coming year.

I feel very proud and very honoured to be standing here this afternoon addressing conference. I also feel really privileged - privileged because being in social work I've met some inspiring and inspired people. All the speakers on the programme have inspired me one way or another over the years and that's why I have invited them to address you.

I feel very privileged to have worked with teams: with colleagues and to have managed staff, who have regularly gone beyond the distance to make the difference.

I feel very lucky because I am working in a profession with lots of dedicated and very able people. I also feel very lucky because I am working doing something I feel passionate about and so much enjoy.

Gardening and social work are two of my great passions in life. The results you get from both can be surprising and unexpected. I may not get the instant feeling of satisfaction that I get when I have finished cutting my grass or when I have completed weeding the curved border; but, like gardening, give social work time and you can see the difference; you can enjoy the richness and variety.

To return to the business of the conference, I chose the title 'Getting it Right' because its celebratory theme chimed with the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. I chose it because its is hugely important for ADSW and social work to be positively assertive; to get off the back foot; to get onto the front foot and celebrate what social work and social care can and does deliver.

Ian Brodie and his colleagues from the Caledonian University charted the fortunes of social work and ADSW over the past 4 decades in an article published recently in the British Journal.

It is informed by and illustrated with quotes from past and present members and from the Archives of the ADSW. It offers a perspective that enables us to take stock of the social work journey; to take stock of how social work has changed and been changed and take stock of our experiences and learn from them

The Authors trace a path from the hey days of the early 70s through the challenges of the 80s and 90s into the millennium and beyond. The inherent impression conveyed by the article is one of resilience; the ability of social work and ADSW to come through difficult times; the ability to strike a balance between meeting challenge with challenge and the ability to be open to change.

The messages I have taken from the article are;

- How important it is for social work that ADSW builds alliances and relationships and understanding across the political spectrum. Jane Kennedy, our Communications and Parliamentary Officer, has begun to make inroads on this agenda.
- How important it is for social work to recognise there is an opportunity cost of relying on organisational authority alone.
- How important it is that social workers exercise professional accountability; and that this is legitimised, recognised and acknowledged. The guidance on the role of the chief social worker; the eagerly awaited guidance on the reserve functions of the registered social worker and the work of the Practice Governance group under Andrew Lowe's skilful stewardship are relevant here.
- How important it is to obtain explicit recognition of the significant contribution social work makes to national outcomes and to making Scotland successful.

Social Work can and does make a difference. We know from the findings of Inspections and surveys that people who receive social work services value them highly. This stands as powerful testament to the huge effort; the commitment and the good work done by social work staff across the country and across the sectors day-in/day-out.

Our front line staff are without doubt social work's most valuable asset. They are also the unsung heroes and heroines; getting it right for children and families ; getting it right for older and more vulnerable adults and their carers; getting it right for communities through the effective management of offenders.

The government has nailed its colours to the mast. In setting out its vision for Community Justice, it has placed community service centre stage. ADSW very much welcomes this. In the coming year the Association ; through Yvonne Robson's work, aims to give higher profile to the positive difference community service makes to our communities by coordinating a national beach cleaning day coast to coast round Scotland.

**But**, in choosing the theme 'Getting it Right' I am not suggesting everything is hunky dory ; we can never be complacent in social work ; there are few absolute certainties because our work is with and about people; individual people; and our work is about risk and managing risk and both can be unpredictable .

Tricky territory is and will always be part of the social work landscape. Most of us in this room will at some point or other have had or will have to deal with the implications and fallout from of a high profile case. The moral panic that follows these cases often prompts knee jerk reactions; prompts headlines pointing fingers of blame and prompts statements that this must never be allowed happen again. Such responses serve to do a number of things

- They undermine the hard work and the morale of front line staff.
- They allow the public to retreat back into their comfort zones and conveniently forget the important message "It's everybody's job to make sure I'm alright".
- And they get in the way of developing a better understanding of the issues.

It has been interesting to contrast reactions north and south of the border in recent months. Indeed this may be something that Mary Macleod comments on when addresses us later this afternoon.

Following the death of Brandon Muir, the First Minister and Adam Ingram acknowledged the complexity and the hard work and dedication of the workforce. This was welcome and unprecedented. And it was viewed as very supportive by many front line staff. The case has provoked reflections from other political commentators.

- on the fabric of society
- on the impact of drug misuse and the drug culture
- On the danger and risks posed by some predatory men who join households with young children.

These were important because they just might signal willingness to engage in what Muriel Gray; referred to on Sunday in her column as much needed weighty thinking.

Recent events in Dundee provided the context and the backdrop for the launch of our PR Strategy; Social Work Changes Lives. Developed by Pagoda, it has adopted a two pronged approach.

One of the strands focuses on promoting positive and personal stories from the front line; from service users and carers. The other is concerned with developing social work champions to engage the media in courageous conversations about some of the complex and difficult issues.

Complex and difficult issues are and will always be with us. The Association has a key role and responsibility in seeking to influence the public discourse. Engaging with the media in order to enhance the understanding and improve the image of social work has to remain one of our key priorities in the coming year.

The recent straw poll, undertaken as part of “Social Work Changes Lives“ underlines this. It highlighted that, out of the 1000 people canvassed, over 400 respondents had so little knowledge of social work services and what social work and social workers do that they were unable to comment.

So we have a situation where, despite the fact that those who have contact with our services are largely positive and appreciative of our services, it would appear we have swathes of the general public who have little knowledge and or understanding of them.

This presents a real opportunity for social work and ADSW; it is a chance to sow the seeds of understanding, it's a chance to influence. Working with Pagoda on the national front and our own PR people on the local front, we must seize that chance.

We also need to look at ways to encourage and equip staff to speak about their about their practice. The LPFS and care accolade process are potentially fertile hot beds for this. We also need to support and enable service users take courage and tell their own stories. At times we can as social workers be very risk averse and protective of the people we work with and this can work against promoting wider understanding of what we do

Researchers frequently report they have difficulty getting direct access to interview our service users. Reasons given are, more often than not, because the social worker doesn't think it's the right time to ask; there is too much going on in the family; it's too sensitive or they just don't get round to asking because they don't see its value . It would be inappropriate to dismiss these reservations outright but perhaps it's worth reflecting on them.

Some years ago I worked as a researcher for Jacquie Roberts on a project seeking to understand the impact of sexual abuse on women and their children. The research involved interviewing the women and their children following disclosure of abuse, and a year later. Jacquie and I had to work really hard to overcome what I would call the protective resistance of the case holders. Interestingly, as the study progressed, it became clear that the children and the women were highly motivated and wanted to take part; they wanted to share what had been an awful experience for them in the hope that it would help others. Many of the women felt their experience had been vindicated on learning that the research had spawned a new support service for women.

Protective resistance is still around; it was fortunate that the Director of the excellent BBC series Adoption Stories was exceptionally patient and had a long lead in time to make the programme. For months he wasn't able to gain access or film the real meetings and the real people. I was so pleased that staff and families found the courage in the end because the result was very, very powerful. It was an intelligent and profoundly moving programme displaying the talents and integrity of staff and providing insight into an important aspect of social work.

My sense is that social work needs further opportunities like this. We need to have greater trust and confidence in the media if we want them to have confidence in us. Notwithstanding, I am looking forward to hear what advice Alistair Campbell has for us on Friday when he speaks about how social work can get it right in the media.

Addressing conference in this the 40th anniversary year has special resonance for me not least because it is 40 years this year since I began my social work journey as a student of Psychology and Economics at Edinburgh University.

I have many people to thank for being here this afternoon, some who are here some who are not. I have to thank friends and colleagues without whose nurturing, nagging and support I would not be here.

I have to thank in particular some absent colleagues

- Ann Macandrew who gave me the opportunity to articulate and reflect on my practice
- Julia Robertson who established 'Who Cares?' in Tayside 30 years ago and invited me to be part of it
- Peter Bates who put his trust in me and gave me enough rope ; who showed me and gave me clarity and who taught me never to say and never to think never.
- And John Chant and Barbara Kahan for their good counsel when I needed it

I mention these absent friends not just to pay tribute to them; they were indeed leaders; giants and champions for social work but to illustrate the point that all of us in leadership positions have an important responsibility and an important role to play in growing the next generation.

It's interesting that the focus 'Changing Lives' has given to leadership has prompted questions about whether we have sufficient Directors of the future in our midst. Personally I don't doubt we have. Neither do I think it is the right question.

Perhaps the question we ought to be asking of ourselves and others in leadership roles is "What are we doing individually and collectively to support and equip our best people ; to realise their potential so they are not just ready but prepared to take on the mantle of being a Director?"

I am certain I am not the only one here today who feels very fortunate to work and to have worked alongside and some exceptionally bright, creative and able people. In the last 10 years in Highland I have derived immense pleasure and pride seeing people rise to challenges; seize opportunities find latent talents and strengths and just blossom.

Providing ongoing support to the local practitioner forums is an important part of growing our own. I have been bowled over by the energy and enthusiasm that the forums have generated and I see them as being a key vehicle in building the confidence of the work force. They have the potential of offering insightful contribution to policy development .

But these forums will need our tangible support at local and national level if they are to thrive and mature; support with venues. support with time and, just as importantly, engagement and support to ensure what emerges from the them is heard and responded to. At the national level ADSW will continue to engage and hold meetings with the National Network of LPF chairs and the National Chairman Justin McNichol. I look forward to addressing the LPF national conference in September. In addition, I am keen to seek to extend and develop the conversation with the front line events.

We are going tomorrow to hear from Norman Drummond from Columba 1400 whose credo is all about seeing the spark and bringing out the best in people. His message is very relevant for us at this time.

One of his favourite quotes is from John Buchan "the task of leadership is not to put greatness into humanity, but to elicit it, for the greatness is already there.'

I have been pondering on this in relation to the outcomes of looked after children. We are all familiar with the statistics; I don't need to remind anyone in this hall that previously looked after children are more likely to have few if any qualifications; are more likely to be unemployed; are more likely to end up homeless and are more likely to end up in prison. Successive governments have exhorted us to do better as corporate parents: after all these children and young people they are our bairns.

The overriding sense is one that we have failed and the young people are failing. The overriding focus is on the negative rather than seeing and finding the positive.

I often wonder how the young people feel themselves about how they are portrayed; what impact is this image having on them and how they feel about themselves?

I have been privileged in my time as a social worker to meet and work with some fantastic young people. I have admired their resilience and their determination to rise above adversity and pursue their ambitions.

- Michael who loved to dance and pursued his ambition to dance ballet on stage
- Paul who got a first class honours degree in art and design;
- Jackie who cared for her younger siblings and mother and then went on to a career in social work.
- Steven who at 16 got a trial and was signed by the local football team.
- Amelia who sent me an email last Xmas with the question were you my social worker; an email to tell me of her marriage her children and her successful career.

It is a travesty that these individual achievements are invisible amongst the statistics.

If we are going to get it right for our looked after children as corporate parents we must unlock their potential, I believe we need to find more creative and visible ways of giving these young people greater positive recognition . We need as corporate parents to be both pushy and proud parents.

These young people need to feel inspired; they need to realise its possible; they need positive role models close to home and more famous role models like Kris Akabusi and Samantha Morton.

A member of my staff retired recently and at his presentation he took time to share with us his journey as a former child in care; gaining a degree, having a successful career in social work; enjoying a stable marriage and having two children now at university. It was important to him that people linked his success in life with the experience of and identity with previously being in

care. Reflecting on the situation he spoke passionately and powerfully about the importance of the relationship he had with his social worker; the fact he didn't give up on him; he stayed with him encouraging him, cajoling him, and just being there.

Research done by Elaine Farmer following up on the child protection cases and Peter Beresford's work in the palliative care field underline the role played by relationships in getting it right.

Viv Cree and Ann Davis in their research study 'Voices from the Inside' highlighted that the benefits are not one way.

*"Good social work is founded on building relationships with people; only then, are people able to share their difficulties.*

*But relationships are not just one-way. Many of the social workers we met talked about the reciprocal relationships they have with service users and carers. They described how much they had learnt from service users who are themselves 'experts by experience', with much to teach them about their lives, and about the support they need and want."*

Putting people first and letting users and carers be in the driving seat is at the heart of personalisation and active citizenship. ADSW has been and remains energetic in its determination to pursue this agenda:

- Holding a very successful seminar last Autumn that involved the users and carer forum
- Producing a discussion and policy paper drafted by Wendy Harrington.
- Working with our sponsors OLM to organise 3 events for front line staff
- Keeping the issues of enhancing choice and control high profile at this conference because personalisation and active citizenship are central to getting it right for social work.

For many of us these were the very things that brought us into the profession.

Nevertheless, personalisation challenges the status quo and consequently, for some sectors and for some staff, the concept represents not just a challenge but a threat. It is therefore absolutely essential we keep channels of communication open across the sectors and we create more opportunities for exploring the issues and for exchange and dialogue.

The LPFS have started on that journey and have had some opportunity for discussion at the conversations with the front line mentioned earlier. This will need to be further developed and sustained. Furthermore we need to continue the dialogue with other key stakeholders including the unions independent sector; to that end, I plan for ADSW to hold a series of conversations; conversations with Community Care Providers ; I want these to be at a national and at more local levels using our geographical groupings.

Another key theme of the 'Changing Lives' report around is performance improvement. . Scrutiny can be key driver for performance improvement but current inspection arrangements duplicate, replicate and are profligate. ADSW welcomes the government's response to Crerar but I believe we need to be wary of a Trojan horse. There are millions of pounds being spent on scrutiny. The Bill going before parliament will rationalise and reduce the number of bodies responsible for inspecting social work services. The aim is to streamline and simplify. Self evaluation has been heralded as the new approach. There is talk of inspection being

proportionate and of things being done with a light touch. But colleagues; a word of warning; if the paradigm shifts without a shift in resources we could find ourselves just as burdened in the future.

Moreover we need to ensure we are measuring the right things if we are going to demonstrate improvement. If we are committed to an outcome based approach then counting the number of intensive care at home packages may not be the right focus. Indeed this might serve to undermine the aim of promoting the independence of older people. There may be unintended consequences associated addressing the problem of delayed hospital discharge if zero targets are pursued at all costs. Referring to people as codes, whether it be 51x or code 9 or whatever, is unlikely to be the most effective way of protecting the dignity or respecting the individuality of frail older people. I am sure Jacquie will have more to say on this subject tomorrow.

Our core business is about making a difference. Of course it is. But measuring positive outcomes is not straightforward. There are many elements to consider. Social work is also about relationships and to a degree process and context. It not just what we do, it's where we do it and how we do it working with others is a key element.

Tomorrow you will hear from Bill Alexander about 'Getting it Right for Every Child' which has involved a fundamental redesign of how services are delivered to children; the integration has focussed on processes not structures and has resulted in a streamlining of bureaucracy, freeing up valuable practitioner time for direct work with children with the aim delivering better outcomes.

Social work services like other public services have efficiency and effectiveness as key priorities and that places a high premium on research informed practice. This has been a difficult area for social work and it demands and deserves more attention.

Towards a research and development strategy for social work can be found on the IRISS website. It's a product of 'Changing Lives' but to date hasn't had the currency and the profile to make an impact. We need to build research capacity in social work if we are going to take changing lives to the next stage and deliver sustainable change. There is a strong link between developing research capacity in social work and ensuring a confident competent and valued workforce. One feeds into the other. I hope this is an area Garry Coutts might touch upon tomorrow in his address.

I was pleased to read in the recent 'Changing Lives' newsletter about the government's commitment to the development of a knowledge management strategy and its support of IRIS. Enhancing access to and promoting a better understanding of the implications of research and how it applies to practice is key to the development of what Joan Orme terms a research literate workforce.

However, knowledge management isn't the whole story; we need knowledge creation; we need social workers who are not just research literate but research competent if we are going to build and sustain capacity.

The new degree should bring with it a growing number in the workforce with an ability to understand and apply research findings and with the potential to undertake research. But this will need to be fostered and nurtured. There is an urgent need to develop capacity at all levels ;we need to make space to create opportunities for and support small scale practitioner research, we also need to develop and sustain pathways to enable practitioners enter into academic teaching and research whilst retaining a foothold in practice.

Few of our number have Doctorates or have had the opportunity to work on large scale research. That needs to change. I look forward to the publication of what is described in the 'Changing Lives' newsletter as the route map for the research and development strategy. I look forward in anticipation and hope that it will contain some key milestones towards building the research infrastructure that social work and people who use our services need and deserve.

Meantime, I was delighted that at the recent 'Changing Lives' event sponsored by OLM, Fraser Mcluskey confirmed that all ADSW members would be able to access Care Knowledge as part of their membership and also that OLM would seek to support a PHd studentship. This is an extremely welcome development; and I look forward to progressing this with OLM over the coming year.

This afternoon I've done a fair bit of reflecting but in doing that I hope I have been able to throw some light on how we take 'Changing Lives' to the next stage and I want to conclude with that focus now .

In the coming year, I believe the Association has to focus on advancing the development of social work. It has to do this by:

- Continuing to build the ownership of personalisation across the sectors across the levels; moving from rhetoric to reality
- Continuing to build the constituency of support for social work across the political spectrum with the media and the public
- Continuing to build the capacity of Local Practitioners Forums
- Continuing to build on our partnership working
- Contributing to the development and delivery of what we hope will be new streamlined approach to scrutiny

We will, I am sure, face many challenges over the next and coming years; not least the, economic climate and the impact of the recession. But I remain optimistic; we have an opportunity just now to make our contribution in social work count; make our contribution visible and valued in Scotland. We are a small country one of the great benefits we have is that we have a relatively close network in social work and we need to make that work for us by using it to give social work a strong united and powerful voice.

I look forward to working for you and with you to deliver that. getting it right for social work

Thank you

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