



# SPIRIT Advocacy

## Strengthening People In Raising Issues Together

Incorporating HUG Action for Mental Health (HUG), People First Highland (PFH) and SPEAK (Stigma Prevention through Education, Advocacy and Knowledge)

## SPIRIT Advocacy AGM - 27th October 2020

### Chairman's Report 2019-20

At the 2018 AGM Jon King asked for someone to step up as chair. I was relatively new as a director and did not feel I could step up at that time so instead, after the AGM I spoke with Jon and asked if it would be possible to shadow him through 2018/19. This would give opportunity to see if I felt up to the role. In reality there was not a lot of shadowing to do but I had a better idea what is involved. As a result, I stood forward as chair as Jon stepped down at last years' 2019 AGM.

Though Jon has stepped back, he has not totally stepped out of the picture. I am still in touch with him in New Zealand, and he offered me valuable advice and encouragement. I should say at this point that I have lived experience of poor Mental Health, with a diagnosis of Depression and PTSD. I also identify as physically disabled.

I feel incredibly privileged to in this position, and to be able to share the things I have learned to maintain a life in recovery. I cannot promise that I will be the first leader or do wonderful things, but I will give the job 110% effort.

The past 6 years of extended contracts has reduced SPIRIT to a shadow of its former self. The lack of an ongoing contract crippled us in more ways than just fixing the payment from the NHS at 2013 levels. The NHS was never the entirety of our income. The lack of an ongoing contract also stopped Spirit applying to other major sources of funding, which would have matched the funding from the NHS.

A year ago a new contract was offered by the NHS. Unfortunately, they did not publish it when they said they would but sometime later. There was some confusion over the deadline. Preparation time for the bid had already been shortened by the late publication. This lead to SPIRIT's bid not being accepted. However, as no one else put in a bid. The NHS asked us to submit another bid. This we did. There was a lot of back and forth which resulted in Bill, Ken, Sue and myself attending a meeting at the end of February for clarification, which I am pleased to report has resulted in SPIRIT Advocacy securing a 3 to 5-year contract for Collective Advocacy services in the NHS Highland region.

Another challenge for us is Data Protection. Due to legislative changes we are unable to contact members electronically without their express consent. Although it has been challenging working under this legislation, we are actively working towards a solution and will be contacting our membership over the coming months asking them to complete our data protection consent form.

These have been hard years and have lead to a loss of mojo across the entire organisation. Staff levels have been cut and the remaining staff have had their hours reduced. Directors meetings have been mostly firefighting.

**SPIRIT Advocacy, PO Box 5809, Inverness, IV1 9GB**

I can understand that directors have become disheartened with this. It has been very difficult to form a quorum at meetings, some good people have stepped down from the board, I thank them for the years of service they have given. On the other hand, though, we have also welcomed some new board members.

The board is now starting on the process of comprehensively review of staff terms, conditions, pay and hours. We have set ourself the target of completing this within the next six months.

We have also started a goal setting exercise with the board. We will over the next few weeks plot a course for SPIRIT Advocacy's medium and long term future. One of the major targets is to secure match funding to work alongside our NHS contract. Many applications have been worked up by staff working really hard in a specialist field that is not their speciality. They have had some success and some failures and have received some very good feedback. Employing a specialist in fund raising is something for the board to consider in the short to medium term.

As I write this we are in the earliest days of the lifting of the Covid 19 lock down. The office has been closed since mid-March and we do not have a date for reopening the office as yet; although our committed staff continue to work tirelessly from home. We were also at that time still negotiating the NHS contract; which has taken a truly astounding amount of work. The change to fully working from home and the new tools that are required for it; although it was challenging at first, we are holding Zoom meetings like real pro's. Unfortunately, this technology is not appropriate for all our members and so we are finding ways to stay in touch with members for whom digital technologies are inappropriate and this is also informing strategies to find those people struggling along in silence at home. We have some exciting plans for the future.

SPIRIT's current Manager, Ken Porter retires at the end of August. He leaves us after guiding SPIRIT through its most difficult period. He has put in an enormous amount of work into the contract with the NHS and he leaves with our very best wishes for his retirement.

The Covid 19 situation is preventing us from running a full recruitment program at this time. However, the board were delighted to appoint Susan Lyons as interim Manager and recognise with her experience she will bring a wealth of knowledge to the post. The board will be reviewing the manager role in the light of the new NHS contract and the developing plans to expand SPIRIT's work to attract more funding.

Being awarded the NHS contract was treated with more sighs of relief than cheers. It is a major landmark for SPIRIT, and opens up opportunities for us to regain lost ground and make a real difference for all with lived experience of mental health and learning disabilities. Covid 19 has propelled mental health to whole new level. I hope we can use this in the continuing fight against stigma.

Alan Bithell  
Chair  
October 2020

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