



People First Highland

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 - 25th October 2021

Chairman's Report 2020-21

This year has been a year of significant change and no little difficulty. SPiRiT marches on and with the commitment of our members and staff we will come through. As Nietzsche said, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger". In other words life's difficulties are opportunities to grow. After all that is what we do at SPiRiT, take the bad experiences and put them to use for the good of others.

There has been some goodbyes this year. Ken Porter the SPiRiT Manager retired. We wish him a long and healthy retirement, and thank him for his years of hard work. Also John Lyons, who was our SPEAK worker for several months, left us to pursue a teaching qualification. We wish him well in his studies. He does not escape SPiRiT that easily; as partner of Sue Lyons he gives her support and gets roped in to drive his van for us on occasion. Thank you John.

There have been changes on the board of directors as well. We thank every one of them for their service. Recruiting replacement directors has been difficult. We have welcomed several new members to the board. The membership is currently very under represented on the board. We are keen to recruit new board members from within the ranks of the membership.

"Goodbyes" make way for "Hellos". Jamie Bird replaced John as the SPEAK project worker. He has proved to be a great addition to the team. Also, Sue Lyons has stepped up to take the Manager's role permanently.

Another goodbye that has happened this year is not a person but to Cromwell Villa. This decision was arrived at after some lengthy discussion. No one could see an end to Covid 19 restrictions, such that we would again be able to use it as a venue for meetings, within the duration of the current NHS contract. With funding as it is we cannot continue to pay for Cromwell Villa and hire venues for meetings. Another fact we had to consider is the requirement in the current contract to spread out more across the Highlands; holding more meetings away from Inverness.

The support group Serenity for women with borderline personality disorder, who SPiRiT have had a close relationship with, closed at the end of 2020. To replace Serenity the group Togetherness has been formed by SPiRiT. The intention is to help with the establishment of the group and then withdraw slowly as the members take over the running of the group.

The same approach has been taken with a Peer Support Group for Nairn, for which funding was obtained from Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Also a Men's peer support group has been formed with the intention

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of it becoming an independent entity when firmly established. SPIRIT's role in all of these is to enable people to facilitate their own support groups, not to provide any of the services given within the groups.

Covid 19 has had an enormous effect on SPIRIT and the way we work, as I touched on with Cromwell Villa. Much of the work has moved online but this has not been possible in all cases. People First Highland have struggled to engage with members by digital means. Steps have been taken to support members who were digitally excluded through Connecting Communities funding and AbilityNet, but this has still left many members struggling to access online meetings. This has meant that much of the advocacy work has been on a one to one basis rather than a collective basis. However, there is light at the end of this dark tunnel. There are plans afoot to hold a face to face meeting in late summer. Hopefully this will become a regular event.

Over the Christmas holiday period SPIRIT staff manned a friendly phone line for members to call for a chat. We felt Christmas can be a lonely time and Covid only made this much worse. In addition HUG hosted Coffee Mornings on Zoom on Thursday mornings. These proved popular and have been continued alternating with Think Ins.

The skills of using digital technology for meetings, that we have all learned over the lockdown, are hugely valuable. Meetings will never be quite the same again. Most will contain a digital aspect, enabling those who would previously have had to travel, to participate from their own homes. Computers and iPads have been provided for isolated people by the Scottish Government. SPIRIT received an allocation to distribute and staff trained to set these up for people.

Our relationship and interactions with NHS Highland, which give us opportunities to ensure the voices of our members are heard, are growing.

SPIRIT is represented on a variety of NHS forums including Adult Support and Protection Committee where we chair the Participation sub group, the Clinical Governance group, the Service User and Carers Experience group.

We have also been involved in research projects this year with Public Health Scotland and Strathclyde university, The Poverty Alliance, Health and Social Care Alliance and UHI.

In addition SPIRIT is represented on a variety of Third Sector networks. The reputation of SPIRIT is healthy and growing.

Recently meetings with HUG members have been held to reconstitute the advisory group. Our aim is to ensure SPIRIT is truly user led as we move forward.

Alan Bithell
Chair
October 2021

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