

# PROFESSIONAL Social Work

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## The Human Issue

Why people not processes matter most

## SCOTLAND NEWS



The First Minister pledged to put the voice of young people at the “very heart” of the care review

### New advocacy service ‘will help protect children’s rights’

**T**he Scottish Government will fund a new nationwide service offering independent advocacy for young people involved in children’s hearings.

Delivering the 15th Kilbrandon lecture on social work and social policy, Nicola Sturgeon said the service would be up and running from 2019 to strengthen children’s awareness of their rights.

“[Advocates] will be available for children who have expressed an interest in advocacy, and for those who might not otherwise be able to participate fully in their own hearing,” she said.

“Independent advocates can help us to ensure that children’s hearings become even better at hearing from children. By doing so, they can give an effective voice to some children whose views might not otherwise be properly heard.”

Sturgeon said the Scottish Government was examining ways to better embed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

into its policymaking. This included the option of “full incorporation of UNCRC into our law”.

She said young people’s views and stories would be at the “very heart” of the “root and branch” review of the care system launched earlier this year.

“I’m not sure that the state has a more important, a more sacred, duty than the one that we owe to children in care. And for all the superb work that is being done by people across the country, we know we still need to be better,” she added.

SASW manager Trisha Hall attended the lecture. She said she was impressed by Sturgeon’s “passion” and the questions fielded from the floor.

“We heard from a young person, a student, a director of an organisation focused on young people, a social worker, an academic, a father of African origin. It felt a very level playing field.

“It feels like we have begun to break down some barriers and are trying to unite to find solutions which will hopefully lead to lasting culture change.”

### Bureaucracy holding back self-directed support

The way services are implementing self-directed support needs to be “rebooted”, Scotland’s chief social work adviser has said.

Iona Colvin said the legislation underpinning self-directed support was good but practice was “really patchy”, with a

recent Audit Scotland report highlighting a number of issues.

Speaking at a human rights and self-directed support conference organised by charity C-Change, she said: “I think we’ve made it overly bureaucratic and I think we’ve done that because we’re afraid of some of this.

“I think we don’t understand some of the issues around the budgets, so we’ve made it really bureaucratic. It’s time to take stock of it, look at what we’re going to do and pick out the areas of Scotland doing really well in this so we can learn the lessons from them.”

### Scale of abuse ‘much higher than thought’

A leading social worker told the Scottish inquiry into historical child abuse that the scale of the problem was “vastly underestimated”.

Professor Angus Skinner, former chief social work adviser to the Scottish Executive during the early 1990s, said he had tried to tackle inadequate standards of accommodation and care.

“In that context I was also aware of abuse but I vastly underestimated how much there was. I absolutely hold my hands up to that,” he said.

“I don’t know how much I underestimated it, but not a day goes by when it doesn’t appear and some other revelation comes forward and that concerns me. I don’t think that I was alone in underestimating the extent of abuse and, in particular, the evil intent and the duplicitous cover up.”

### Demand rises but spending is cut by 2%

Scottish councils cut their spending on social work services last year despite rising demand, the Accounts Commission warned.

Social work budgets fell two per cent in 2016-17, from £3.2bn to £3.08bn.

Other services, including planning and cultural activities, were hit harder and suffered cuts of more than ten per cent. Some councils risk running out of reserves within two years, the commission found.

## IN FOCUS

# Making the RIGHT MOVE

Moving from children's to adults' services can be terrifying for disabled people and their families. **Andy McNicoll** hears one mother's story of how a rights-based planning approach helped her son

## The diagnosis

Gill Parker says the first ten months of her son's life were "uneventful and uncomplicated". Then a trip to hospital changed everything.

Ross had been feeling poorly. Gill suspected he had a tummy bug and wanted to get it checked out. The medics spotted something else. Over the next eight months Ross had a series of hospital stays that culminated in him being diagnosed with autism.

Within months Ross was getting specialist support. At the time, says Gill, this help was a "genuine postcode lottery" – her family was just lucky. But it was still a testing time for everyone, she says, especially Ross, who was "extremely anxious and frightened by the world around him".

## The school years

When it came to school, Ross was turned down for a place at a specialist unit at a local primary. Gill fought to get him into mainstream education. The move started well – by Christmas Ross had been named as the pupil making most progress in his class.

But things soon got difficult and halfway through his second year Ross was moved to the same specialist unit that had refused him entry 18 months earlier. It became a "short-lived and highly eventful" stay, says Gill.

"Ross had learned the power of aggression and in terms of differences of opinion between Ross and the teaching staff it wasn't good. The staff were issued with body armour. At that point, something had to give."

Ross was transferred to a residential specialist school in East Ayrshire, 60 miles from home. His mum says he thrived there. He learned to use spoken language more constructively, he developed a fascination with the written word and "an absolute passion for the internet".

But as Ross turned 16 his family knew daunting decisions were coming. He was approaching the transition between children's and adults' services and would need to decide where to live after school, and with what support.

"We realised that the time had come to really start putting in steps to try and plan and safeguard for Ross's future."



**'We realised the time had come to really start trying to plan and safeguard for Ross's future'**

## The transition plan

Ross's parents applied for financial and welfare guardianship, knowing that at some point they were likely to apply for some kind of tenancy for Ross. Gill says the thought of him living in his own home "was really scary" but she felt it was the right way forward. Ross's "beloved" Grandad, who he nicknamed 'Grumpy', agreed and was one of his grandson's "biggest advocates" throughout.

"My dad always said that all he wanted was to be able to pop round to see Ross at his house, make himself a cup of coffee, let Ross ignore him for half an hour, and then go back home!" says Gill.

The transition process was "slow to move" initially but last Spring Gill got in touch with C-Change, a self-directed support organisation. They offered to do some pro bono planning work for Ross.

## IN FOCUS



Ross and his gran outside his house (left), and (above) Ross at his computer. He developed “an absolute passion for the Internet” at school

### The dreams and nightmares

C-Change brought Ross and his family together with his social worker, teachers and some close friends for a planning day at Ross’s school. It centred on a few simple but vital questions: What does Ross like? What are his gifts, strengths and talents? What are his hopes and dreams? What are his fears? What does he feel he needs to get the dream and avoid the nightmares?

Everyone heard how Ross loves having his photo taken. He loves to people watch. He enjoys playing and watching football but he isn’t a morning person. His nightmares include not having any stimulation in his life, not being understood, not being heard.

Ross told them he prefers to communicate through social stories – a medium developed specifically for people with autism. He wants quiet environments so he can concentrate. He likes visual cues for praise, like tick charts. Being part of a close family unit is important to him. He dreams of having someone special in his life, of going to college and of flying to America to catch a Broadway show.

### The housing list

Ross’s answers were used to draw up a MAP, a plan setting it all out, along with action points. The whole process used ‘PANEL’ principles – Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination, Empowerment and Legality.

One of the first actions for Ross and Gill was to find a support provider to put the plan into action. Gill, Ross, his social worker Colin, and a family friend interviewed three organisations. After 24 hours of deliberation, they went with C-Change – Gill says they were impressed with the organisation’s ethos.

Work started on making Ross’s plan happen. Gill applied for him to be placed on the local council housing list. “It was all becoming scarily real,” she recalls.

“By late August, we were all hard at work making this dream become a reality. We applied for one house locally for Ross but we were unsuccessful.” At the beginning of September, an ideal house became vacant and Gill was told Ross was at the top of the list.

### The home

The 14th September 2016 was “a momentous day”, says Gill. Ross was offered the house. But just hours later he was hit by devastating news. His granddad had died. Gill is sad that her dad passed away “without knowing that his greatest hope for his boy had just taken a further step to reality.”

Life quickly became a “massive learning curve”. Ahead of the move, Ross had to find support staff. Gill had to explore benefits entitlements. “Every spare minute” was spent scraping, painting and papering to get the house ready. She says: “Who knew I would learn to tile a kitchen!”

### The change

On 11th March Ross left the school, ten years and one month after he arrived. Gill recalls a day of “so much excitement and so many tears”. Ross has lived in the house for eight months. It’s a big step, but it’s not all gone to plan.

“I thought Ross would just love to have a house to himself and no one interfering with his belongings, with us able to visit more often,” says Gill. “In reality, it has been really quite stressful, though there’s no one to blame.”

Initially, Ross longed to move back in with his mum, dad and sister. He’s faced issues finding support staff and there have been arguments about aspects of his care, Gill says.

“The whole process has been much harder than we’d ever anticipated. My husband would be the first to admit that while he knows this is the right thing for Ross, he would bring him back home to live with us in a heartbeat. There are times I have just wanted to hide from the world.”

### The future

While Ross now has a home, college hasn’t been possible yet (“I haven’t quite given up hope on that,” says his mum)

His family were recently told it could take three years for things to settle down to a pace and style well suited to Ross. “While that’s a lot longer than we’d like, I think it’ll make his dad and I slow down a bit, stress less about perceived failures and learn to celebrate the small successes.”

Gill Parker told her story at the Being Human: Human Rights and Self-directed Support conference in November

**‘It all became scarily real. Soon we were all hard at work making this dream a reality’**