



IASW

Irish Association of
Social Workers

BECOMING INFLUENTIAL, GETTING RESULTS

IASW ADVOCACY STRATEGY

PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND COMMUNICATIONS
2021-2024



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ADVOCACY AND STRATEGY

For the Irish Association of Social Workers
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Summary of Recommendations

1

The Advocacy Statement is the cornerstone of all IASW Advocacy work including the Advocacy Strategy and work of the Special Interest Groups, guiding how the Association does its advocacy work as well as its focus on equality and social justice.

2

The focus of IASW's Advocacy Strategy in the 3 year-time frame is on progressing and securing:

- Adult Safeguarding legislation
- Right to Home Care
- Adoptees Right to birth information
- Statutory right to aftercare

3

The focus of IASW's Special Interest Groups would shift from being interest-based to being issue-based and that their structure within IASW's overall governance is reviewed.

4

To realise IASW's ambition and its potential to become ever more influential and to get results in advocacy, it invests in both its leadership and communications capacity.

5

IASW Board adopts three-year Advocacy Strategy, including interlinked Public Affairs and Communication Plans.

The Journey So Far

In September 2020, the IASW commissioned Kelleher O'Meara to work with the Association to develop an Advocacy Strategy and related plans, against the background of a strong sense within the IASW that it has struggled to focus on what it has referred to as:



the key issues, agencies and people that will improve the understanding, position and influence of social work in Irish health and social services.

Social work interacts with all service sectors, sees the person in the environment and employs systemic and reflective practices across the full range of service provision. However, our professional influence remains poor within service sectors and aspects of our work are facing continual colonisation by other roles and professions.



This was reflected in one of the motions passed at at AGM recently.

“That the IASW develops an advocacy strategy that defines advocacy for social work and advances the social work role in advocacy work”.

A clear focus on advocacy work was also highlighted as important in the survey of IASW members, published at the end of 2020. Given the scale and importance of the work that social work delivers across health, mental health, social care, child protection, criminal justice, local government sectors and across civil society as a whole, it is critically important that the professional influence of the national representative organisation for the profession, which you are, is strong, influential and effective. The voice and opinion of social work and opinion should be easily and clearly heard, it should be distinctive, authoritative, and influential on the airwaves, in print, online, in academia and most of all in the corridors of power where life changing policies are made or not made for those IASW serves. The Association should be seen as essential, be consulted, and included by those shaping policy and making decisions, and it should be the go-to place for journalists and media on the major policy and news issues which should include your insight and analysis.

Wider Context of IASW Work

This project cannot be and should not be separated from the wider context in which the profession operates, day in and day out. Right now, the work of social workers, both in Ireland and internationally, is very broad and diverse; the extent of the range of the work in which social workers engage presents its own challenges, particularly in succeeding in having the unique voice of social work heard.

A feature of being a social worker now is the level of personal and professional challenge it presents, often leading to burnout and exit from the profession and the front line. This results in a high number of vacancies for front line social work posts and increased pressure on those in position.

At the same time threats such as the privatisation of care are bearing down on social workers.

There is a poor general understanding and appreciation of what social workers do, why it is important and the unique perspective they bring in terms of public policy and societal change. This lack of awareness includes within organisations where social workers operate and among allied bodies and agencies including sponsoring Government Departments and in the media. Their role has been impacted and to some extent diluted with the growth of other disciplines including social care.



Covid Context

This work was carried out during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, an event which has had and will continue to have significant implications for the professional life of social workers. The pandemic not only revealed but also exacerbated existing inequalities in Irish society, as groups already vulnerable or disadvantaged were more exposed, both to infection and to the economic fallout of the event.

The pandemic has put the issue of care at the heart of public discourse and presents an opportunity for IASW to bring its agenda to the table and to focus on progressing key issues including adult safeguarding, home care, the right to information for adoptees and aftercare for care leavers, where the existing gaps for vulnerable groups have been highlighted as never before. The social fabric of society has been degraded by the impact of the pandemic and will require to be repaired; social work as a profession has an important role to play in this future when the battlefield of fighting the virus is clear and the extent of societal impact emerges.

The voice of the profession of social work, expressed through the IASW, should be heard at the relevant fora; this 3-year Advocacy Strategy will provide the focus for that voice to be heard.

A Seat at the Table

Kelleher O'Meara undertook a series of semi-structured interviews with a number of senior stakeholders across the range of state agencies, politics, media, and relevant Government departments, all of whom have a key relationship with social workers as a profession, to gain an insight into how IASW is viewed, with specific reference to the voice of IASW being heard in key policy formulation and implementation forums, and to establish why IASW is missing from a number of these.

What emerged from these interviews was a remarkably consistent view that social workers are not only welcome at the table, but that they are missing from the table. There is a clear demand and appetite for the unique voice and valuable input of the social work profession to be included in the policy formation process and ongoing policy development. This feedback is a positive endorsement of the regard in which social workers are held, as well as the need for IASW to act to ensure that it executes a plan to take the seat at the relevant tables, as soon as possible.

Key Developments

At the beginning of the process, IASW appointed an Advocacy Strategy Group to work with Kelleher O'Meara on the development of an Advocacy Statement in the first instance - see appendix 1. This Group was made up of social workers who have been active in the work of IASW, as well as two Board members, the Chairperson and the CPD Officer. This group met on nine occasions over a four-month period, from mid-October to mid-February. It provided advice, guidance throughout the process. It provided material to Kelleher O'Meara for the formulation of the Advocacy Statement.

The Advocacy Statement was discussed by the Special Interest Groups who fed back to Kelleher O'Meara. The response to the draft Statement was very positive and it was approved by the IASW Council in December 2020.

In the second phase, beginning in January 2021, the Advocacy Strategy Group held three sessions with Kelleher O'Meara on honing the key advocacy asks of the IASW which will be the foundation of the Advocacy Strategy and provide a focus for advocacy work from 2021-2024.

The Group also worked with Kelleher O'Meara on the development of this Advocacy Strategy and its recommendations.

The Advocacy Statement

The Advocacy Statement agreed by the IASW Council is set out here:

As social workers, we take a stand for social justice, and against inequality and injustice.

Taking a stand means speaking up and speaking out. It means speaking from the unique perspective of the social worker. This voice speaks from the emancipatory values of social work and of the IASW, from the core value of the fundamental right of each person to be treated equally.

We do not sit on the side-lines observing the lived experience of the adults, children, and communities we work with. We are active on their behalf, taking a stand for and with those who are marginalised, disadvantaged, at risk, and not heard.

We speak up for social justice, we demand the change needed to tackle the inequality we experience every day, and the resources to make that change happen.

Our stand is not even primarily about the Association or even the profession. It is about the perspective and unique insight of the social worker, based on our professional training and on the ground experience, and our unique stand for the person, families, and communities we seek to empower.

Statement Guides the Work

Kelleher O'Meara recommends that the Advocacy Statement is the cornerstone of, positions and shapes both the content and IASW approach to its advocacy work. It goes beyond a nice thing to say and has been published on the Association's website. It is far more than that. It provides the context for the delivery and the mode of delivery of the Advocacy Strategy. It means, for instance, that IASW works with and for, and makes common cause with individuals and representative groups and advocates in the area which IASW is focusing on. IASW would proactively reach out to, include, and consult with people and groups in formulating specific advocacy campaigns. Such a process gives expression to the values and the commitments in the Advocacy Statement. It means that the concerns of those directly impacted by the policy areas identified in the key asks, informs, shapes, and drives IASW's advocacy work.

1

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The Four Key Asks

The Advocacy Strategy Group has worked with Kelleher O'Meara to identify key areas of focus for advocacy work from 2021-2024. Given the breadth of social work, a wide range of issues were identified that IASW could focus on terms of its advocacy work and focus. So, there was a consultation with the Special Interest Groups which generated a 'long list' of 'asks and some areas of consensus.

The 'long list' of 'asks' were honed by the IASW Special Interest Groups, using a process which assessed issues which most reflect the 'unique voice of social work; the issues on which IASW might lead, partner with others or follow; the issues where there is an opportunity to make progress and an assessment of IASW's capacity to deliver.

The Advocacy Strategy Group advised on the following issues or 'asks' to be progressed in the three-year Advocacy Strategy:

- Safeguarding legislation
- Right to Home Care
- Adoptees Right to birth information
- Statutory right to aftercare



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The Objective of the Advocacy Strategy

The objective of the Advocacy Strategy is to bring a focus to the advocacy and policy work of the IASW, primarily by taking actions to advance the four key asks.

The Advocacy Strategy has the potential to move IASW to another level of influence on key social policy. It can create visibility too of IASW and impact on membership recruitment and growth. Given IASW's 50th anniversary, the Advocacy Strategy is a timely initiative where IASW stands with and for people on key societal questions of social justice and equality, raising awareness as well as proposing positive changes in law, resourcing and otherwise.

Role of Special Interest Groups

Focussing on these areas does not mean that IASW does not continue to make submissions on important policy areas outside of these four areas. Nor does it impact the important work being done by the Special Interest Groups, who provide an invaluable, grounded and member led advisory role to the IASW Board.

However, in the context of the wider impact of IASW advocacy, to be as impactful, as possible the work of the Special Interest Groups would benefit from being more strategic, proactive rather than reactive and co-ordinated and with an annual work plan. Their focus could shift from being 'interest' based to issue based. This repositioning has been effective in recent times on adult safeguarding for example.

It may be useful to review IASW's current organisation, structures, and governance with a view to maximising external impact and influence and for this to happen in the near future.

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How the Strategy will Yield Results

The Advocacy Strategy will yield results through the execution of Public Affairs and Communications Plans, which moves the action forward towards the achievement of the key asks. The asks identified all revolve around legislative change, which can be a slow process, even when adopted by the government. On the other hand, in the case of one of the asks (adoptees right to birth information) the process has already begun and there is momentum behind it as a result of the high profile of the Mother and Baby Homes issue.

Comparator Analysis

Kelleher O'Meara undertook a brief 'comparator' analysis. We looked at the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) and Aotearoa - the New Zealand Association of Social Workers. Like IASW both are membership organisations. Both engage in 'advocacy' work. Both have user friendly websites and use other technologies to engage and communicate. For example, PSI has a podcast series.

A key point of notable difference is in organisational capacity and staffing levels. As compared to IASW's 2.5 staff, Aotearoa has a staff of 6, also with a CEO and a Communications Coordinator. PSI has 7 staff including a CEO, Head of Communications and Communications Coordinator. PSI has 3,000 members as compared to IASW's 1,450 and so has a stronger income base.

Aotearoa and PSI's capacity and dedicated CEO and communications resource supports leadership in and delivery of advocacy work.

Leadership and Capacity

An investment is required and necessary for the successful delivery of the three-year Advocacy Strategy. Kelleher O' Meara recommends that IASW invests in both its leadership and communications capacity if it is to maximise the potential of the work done so far. Recruitment of a CEO with a background in public affairs would be a good first step, additional staffing in communications skills and expertise is also recommended but could be 'bought in', in the short term.



4

To realise IASW's ambition and its potential to become ever more influential and to get results in advocacy, it invests in both its leadership and communications capacity.

Delivery

Kelleher O' Meara has also submitted two interlinked plans for Public Affairs and Communications separately. Taken with implementing recommendations 1-4, these plans provide a roadmap for IASW's implementation of the Advocacy Strategy over the coming years. IASW's ambition to 'Becoming Influential, and Getting Results' taking "a stand for social justice, and against inequality and injustice" and "for and with those who are marginalised, disadvantaged, at risk, and not heard.

5

IASW Board adopts three-year Advocacy Strategy, including the interlinked Public Affairs and Communication Plans.

Appendix 1

IASW Advocacy Strategy Group: membership

Kerry Cuskelly

Vivian Geiran

Áine McGuirk (to December 2020)

Sinéad McGarry

Maria McGloughlin (from January to end February 2021)

Clíona Murphy

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