



Chairman's Annual Report 2014/15

Author: John Austin – ADSO Chair

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Welcome to my Chairman's annual report. It only seems a short while ago that we were having our first conference in Birmingham City Council House. Now we are six years old and a very different organisation to back then.
- 1.2 We have grown year on year and, as other parts of my report will show, we have reached the point where we are having to commission services externally to ensure that we continue to provide quality services to you as members.
- 1.3 ADSO Board members all give their time and energy voluntarily, most in addition to having very demanding full time jobs. They work extremely hard on your behalf and I would like to thank them for their continued commitment and dedication. I am very proud of all of them and their achievements. Thanks also to you for being members and supporting our events. Your continued support will be crucial to ADSO's future development. More about that later.
- 1.4 This report looks back over some of our achievements during 2014/15 and provides an insight into some of our current and future plans. It is also linked, in part, to my report to the AGM on Board Director roles.

2. The ADSO Board and Business Plan

- 2.1 I mentioned in paragraph one of this report that we were now externally commissioning certain services to members. ADSO has grown to the extent that we can no longer rely on volunteers to carry out certain roles, as willing and committed as they are. Too many roles are in the hands of too few people and Board members are spending a disproportionate amount of their time on day to day operational matters rather than fulfilling the strategic and corporate roles required to run any business effectively. In July, the Board agreed my report which addressed such matters and

- proposed a restructure of Directors' roles, allied with an agreement to out-source services such as book keeping and training administration. The fact that we are now paying for essential services means that we will have to review our charges to members and others so that the Association can run on a more commercial basis. This is flagged up in the Finance Director's report and the Board will consider this at the earliest opportunity.
- 2.2 My report to the July meeting was followed by a Board Development and Business Planning day to discuss the Board restructure in more detail and review our working practices. The outcome was fewer but better focused strategic aims with more emphasis on delivering outcomes.
- 2.3 The notes from that day are available on the website. We agreed three key services that (by way of a 'core offer' to members) we will always provide. These are:
- training and qualifications
 - a professional network
 - a campaigning voice for the sector
- 2.4 The above sets out the core 'reasons for being' as far as ADSO is concerned, but you will continue to receive services over and above these essentials in the years to come.
- 2.5 We also agreed three objectives to focus on over the next few years.
- re-positioning and upskilling the governance professional of the future
 - supporting and developing improved governance in different sectors
 - dealing with Devolution
- 2.6 The Board will now be working hard to ensure that we develop the ideas coming out of the development day to ensure that ADSO remains a highly effective and sustainable organisation.
- 2.7 This process has also resulted in a restructuring of Director roles which had previously remained unchanged since 2009. These are set out in my report to the AGM which seeks approval to these new roles.

3. Learning and development opportunities

- 3.1 We have continued to provide a comprehensive training programme, almost wholly designed and delivered by democratic services professionals. We keep this programme under review and have recently introduced a First Steps to Management course. There will be a follow up Second Steps in next year's programme.

- 3.2 The programme is quality assured with courses being observed against a set of good practice criteria. Feedback is monitored with changes to content and delivery made as appropriate.
- 3.3 The ADSO qualifications continue to go from strength to strength under the leadership of Sue Keogh and Mark Towers. My thanks to them both. We have a waiting list for both the Certificate and the Diploma. We currently have 78 active learners working towards the Certificate and 42 working towards the Diploma. The Centre is still trying to improve the completion rates by monitoring progress and agreeing and then enforcing timescales with learners and advisers. A number of advisers have been allocated to learners who are not making the required progress. This means that there are not always enough advisers available to support any new learners. As part of an agreed development plan for the ADSO Centre, we will be carrying out a review of the qualifications next year to ensure that they still meet the needs of the sector.
- 3.4 I am delighted that we will, once again, be presenting certificates to successful learners at the Conference.
- 3.5 Our Annual Conference is a key part of our development opportunities for members and others in the sector. Following positive feedback in 2014, we have kept the one and a half day format, with the dinner and awards ceremony on the first evening. We have also continued with the Panel Q&A session and the facilitated discussion round tables, plus have preserved the time available for you to engage with our sponsors. Please visit their stands whenever you can. I hope you enjoy the conference and, as in previous years, we will listen carefully to comments received.
- 3.6 The ADSO awards proved very popular last year and I am pleased that we were able to continue them in 2015. I have said many times in the bulletin that their continued existence relies on authorities making the effort to put their teams and individual members of staff forward. There was a time this year when I thought the awards wouldn't go ahead because we had too few entries. Thankfully, a number of councils rallied to the cause and made submissions. Thank you to all of them. There is no better way of showcasing the sector and the fantastic work that you all do. So please let's make the awards even better next year and do everything you can to encourage your authority to submit an entry. Unfortunately, there are winners and losers in any awards ceremony. I hope that even those authorities who were unsuccessful found the process beneficial.
- 3.7 Another key element of our learning and development policy is the weekly *Democracy Direct* update. This is an excellent way of keeping up to date with legislative and other changes but I am sorry to say that only a small proportion of the membership actually read it.

4. The Future of ADSO

- 4.1 I referred in paragraph one to the fact that your support is crucial to ADSO's development. I also said in section two that ADSO has grown to the point where we cannot rely on the current band of volunteers to ensure its future. The Board is taking decisive action in outsourcing some of the services but that will not be enough. Putting it bluntly, we need more people to get involved. Any effective organisation does not stand still. Nor can the relatively few people running it carry on forever. Let's be in no doubt that succession planning (or rather the lack of it) is a major threat to the existence and future of ADSO. We need to see people coming through, ready to take on regional and national positions in the future. This will be an important part of our work in 2015/16 and I urge you all to think hard about how you could get more involved. Please don't sit back and leave it to others.
- 4.2 As part of the wider considerations about succession planning, the Board will also be looking at possible remuneration for those who fulfill key roles.
- 4.3 We all know that local government and the numbers of staff within it are shrinking. The Democratic Services Sector is affected as much as anywhere else. ADSO needs to think about diversifying into new markets to ensure future growth. We will therefore be looking at other sectors such as health and charities to see how we can adapt to offer our services to governance staff in those areas.
- 4.4 We will continue also to look at other parts of the UK to extend our membership. This has not proved successful to date. See also paragraph 8 below.

5. Communications

- 5.1 We have had problems with the website in recent years, particularly with external hacking and I apologise for the impact this has had in terms of access. The website is our flagship and a valuable source of information and networking for you as members. We will therefore be working hard to ensure that the site is as robust and secure as possible, whilst at the same time improving the facilities it offers. Rest assured that we do not keep any personal information on the site so that has not been at risk.
- 5.2 We are also conscious that the website needs to be kept more up to date. This is a constant challenge as information requires updating regularly. I am pleased to say that we are increasing support to the site administration and will be looking at the option of outsourcing this at some point in the future.

6. Raising the profile of the Association and working with others

- 6.1 One of the biggest challenges we face is increasing our influence with Central Government and other key partners. We have made progress and have developed a good relationship with for example DCLG when commenting on draft regulations. We must keep working hard to raise our profile and get our voice heard.
- 6.2 We exhibited at the LGA Conference this year in Harrogate and did our best to make members, Chief Executives and others aware of who we are and what we do. Thanks to Xpress/Modern Mindset for allowing us to join them at their exhibition stand. I think it was worthwhile and we hope to attend the event next year in Brighton.
- 6.3 We have also had positive discussions with the Centre for Public Scrutiny about how we could work more effectively together for the benefit of scrutiny and the wider governance sector generally. I am pleased that CfPS are able to be with us at Conference, be represented on the Q&A Panel and run a workshop. I look forward to this relationship developing in the future.
- 6.4 Thank you to Xpress, as our main conference sponsor, for their continued support. The increased sponsorship we are receiving is testimony to the progress made by ADSO in establishing ourselves on the national stage. My thanks to all our sponsors for their support both at conference and throughout the year at regional events.
- 6.5 We continue to develop our links with the International Institute of Municipal Clerks (IIMC) and will once again be offering a sponsorship package to members to attend their conference in the USA next May. We are also working with the IIMC to plan the second European Symposium in Brussels in June 2016. Those who attended the very first event in 2014 will testify just how good it was and the Board will shortly be asked to agree offering subsidised places for a number of members as we did previously.

7. Financial and commercial income for the Association

- 7.1 This has been covered in John Lynch's report and I thank him for his efficient stewardship of ADSO's funds. We have worked hard at ensuring that we are financially stable whilst keeping to the principle of reinvesting funds back into the association and our members.

8. Development of the Regions

- 8.1 The level of activity across the regions is generally on the increase but there are still one or two areas that need support. During the coming year, the Board will be undertaking a review of our regional structure to ensure that it is fit for purpose. This will include looking at current boundaries, the

role of the regional representatives and how can we provide more support for those areas that need it. We will be consulting all members as part of this review to ask for your views and ideas.

- 8.2 I am pleased to say that we have a member in Wales, Gary Jones from Bridgend. Gary has come onto the Board to work with us to try and develop membership interest in Wales.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 In my annual report in 2014, I said that we had much to be proud of - both for how ADSO has developed and for the work you are doing within your authorities. This applies just as much today as it did then – if not more so. Democratic Services teams across the country are playing an important part in tackling the problems within local government. You are demonstrating great commitment and professionalism and I see evidence of this being recognised in many Councils. I also saw it in abundance as part of the Awards process. Raising the profile of the democratic services officer and upskilling the role to give it the professional status it so richly deserves is a major priority.
- 9.2 We have come a long way together and we can go a lot further. We should celebrate this success at Conference and elsewhere but not rest on our laurels. We must keep developing as an organisation.
- 9.3 You will by now have received your membership renewal notices. Please ensure that you renew as quickly as possible. Membership numbers are so important to our future development. Also, please encourage colleagues to join and highlight the benefits of membership to your managers.
- 9.4 I look forward to seeing as many of you at the conference as possible. Thank you once again for your support. I assure you that all the Board will continue to work very hard on your behalf in 2015/16 to make ADSO a bigger and better professional association.

John Austin
Chair ADSO Board

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