



Association of
Democratic Services
Officers

Chairman's Annual Report 2012/13

Author: John Austin

1. Introduction

ADSO was launched four years ago and I am delighted to report that during 2012/13 we reached 941 members. This is a fantastic achievement. The Directors and Regional representatives continue to work hard to develop a wide range of services for the benefit of you as members and to increase income sources and keep costs as low as possible. We are also taking every opportunity to raise ADSO's profile regionally and nationally to increase our influence over relevant issues. It's important for central government and regional bodies to understand the important role you play within your authorities and the information and expertise you have to offer.

The Board members all give their time and energy voluntarily to develop the Association and I would like to thank them for their continued commitment and dedication. I am very proud of the Board and their achievements. Thanks also to you for being members and supporting our events.

I am also very proud to be the first ADSO chairman to be appointed at last year's AGM through the new electoral process. Thank you for your support. Thanks also to John Quinton and Tom van der Hoven for their support as vice-chairman and secretary.

2. Business Plan

The Association has a Business Plan to drive our development and over 80% of the objectives have now been achieved. This report aims to provide more detail on the progress we have made against these objectives.

We now need to review and update this plan to take us through the next five years. A working group of Board members is meeting on 8th November to

consider the future direction of ADSO and draw up a new set of objectives to be agreed by the Board. We will keep you informed of these developments.

3. Knowledge and learning opportunities

As you are aware, ADSO runs a successful training programme with a wide range of courses directly related to the role of the modern day Democratic Services Officer. These have been very well attended and, at times, we have had to set up additional dates to cope with the demand. Work is currently underway on the next programme, so please let us know if there are any topics you would like covered. The real strength of this training programme is that it is wholly ADSO driven. We set the standards, members write and deliver the content and a robust quality control process ensures that you receive the best possible training at a very reasonable cost.

The ADSO qualifications continue to go from strength to strength – an induction session was run for 12 new Certificate learners and 4 new Regional Advisers in September and we will be starting our third cohort of Diploma learners in December. We are still receiving a number of expressions of interest for each qualification. Many thanks to all the Regional and Specialist Advisers who work hard to support the learners. However, work pressures in Local Authorities have made it hard for some learners to devote time to their qualification so the Centre team are putting in a number of interventions to help them progress. I am delighted that we will be able to once again present the certificates to successful learners at the conference including to the first learner in the country to complete the Diploma. My thanks to Sue Keogh and Mark Towers for their leadership in developing the qualifications.

We are not however resting on our laurels with regard to learning and development and are looking at ways in which they can be improved further. This includes discussions with the Institute of Chartered Secretaries & Administrators (ICSA), the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and International Institute of Municipal Clerks (IIMC) over possible joint working to increase the opportunities available to learners and members more generally.

Following feedback from last year's conference, we have changed the format for this year with the aim of making it a 'working conference'. As well as the interactive workshops, we have introduced a facilitated discussion session to allow more time for delegates to network and share good practice. Networking can also take place in a social setting so, again responding to feedback, we have arranged a post conference reception this year. I hope delegates enjoy the conference and, as in previous years, we will listen carefully to comments received.

In partnership with Lawyers in Local Government (formerly ACSes), we distribute a weekly legislative update to all ADSO members as part of your membership package. *Democracy Direct* is now a well established and welcome source of information for us all.

The London Region is piloting a mentoring scheme for members. We have a pool of experienced practitioners/mentors ready and raring to go, so if you feel you would benefit from this support, visit the website for details or get in touch with me.

4. Website

ADSO now has a new look website, following the decision to rebuild and redesign it after it was hacked earlier in the year. As well as increased security, we have introduced a range of new features such as an events calendar and on-line polling. Many thanks to Laura Latham for all her hard work in developing and managing the new site. We are currently developing a social media strategy which will link with the website to keep members and others up to date with the Association's activities. The members' forum continues to be one of the most visited pages on the website with members sharing views on a wide range of topics. The number of views far exceeds the number of replies for each post, so I would encourage you all to share your views and ideas.

It's good also to see the jobs page so well supported, providing a service to members whilst also bringing in much needed income.

5. Raising the profile of the Association and develop effective working relationships throughout the sector and with influencing partners

We continue to work hard to raise our profile nationally and develop our ability to influence central government, with the arrangements relating to Health & Wellbeing Boards being a prime example.

We have sponsored the Municipal Journal national award in Democratic Services Excellence, the fourth of which was presented to Chester and Cheshire West Council at the Award evening in June. My congratulations to them. Our co-sponsors, Weightmans, have decided to sponsor the MJ Legal Team award next year so our partnership with them will cease. We have looked around for an alternative co-sponsor but this has not proved successful. We have therefore decided not to sponsor the award this year and to consider other ways in which that budget could promote the sector and reward excellence. I will keep you informed of developments.

I am delighted that we are once again working with Xpress as our main conference sponsor - my thanks to them for their support. The increased sponsorship we are receiving is testimony to the progress made by ADSO in establishing itself on the national stage.

We have also further developed our links with the IIMC and we sponsored an ADSO member and a learner to attend their annual conference in America earlier this year. The Board has agreed to sponsor a further two members for next year's event and I am hoping for a big increase in the number of applicants. I and other Board Directors recently met with the President of IIMC and discussed ways in which we can work more effectively for the benefit of our members. This will include opportunities for stronger links with our European partners through for

example exchange visits, improved access to information/knowledge for learners and a European Conference in Brussels in 2014.

The ADSO/CIPFA benchmarking club continues to make progress, although it is disappointing to see that numbers have fallen. Clubs of this nature take time to develop and I am confident that the quality of information and the added value it brings will improve as we get more used to analysing what we do on a day to day basis and what it costs. Please visit the CIPFA stand in the Jasper Carrott suite to find out more about the club.

6. Financial and commercial income for the Association

John Lynch, our Finance Director, has covered this in detail within his report. We are in a relatively healthy position financially but we cannot be complacent and the proposals within his report will help improve the sustainability of the association. We took the difficult decision to increase annual membership fees to £55 from 2013/14 to ensure that we are able to continue to invest and take ADSO forward. We are always prepared to discuss the impact this may have on individuals and be as flexible as possible in relation to payment terms. The usual discount for bulk memberships also still applies. I hope you agree that this still presents excellent value for money compared to other professional bodies.

John does a great job in managing our financial affairs. My thanks to him for all his work. Thanks also to Matthew Kane for his sterling work in attracting increased sponsorship and to the sponsors themselves for their support.

7. To establish regional and national governance structures

The Association's Board has seven Directors and representatives from most of the English regions. The regional representatives work extremely hard on our behalf to ensure that ADSO is relevant locally. I am very grateful to them for their commitment. Helen Abraham (West Midlands) and Gareth Davies (North East) have recently stepped down from the Board and I would like to thank them for their contributions. I am pleased to say that we have already had other members from their regions expressing an interest in taking on the role. The amount of regional activity continues to grow and we are very encouraged by the enthusiasm and commitment of democratic services staff in the regions to make ADSO successful.

8. Our plans for the future

Together, we have achieved a great deal in the last four years and we aim to continue to develop the Association for the benefit of you as members. As mentioned earlier, we are working on our priorities and objectives for the next five years to ensure our longer-term sustainability. We are also planning to carry out a review of our regions to ensure we have the most appropriate structure that is particularly relevant to members.

9. Conclusion

We have come a long way as an association and sometimes it is easy to become complacent and not acknowledge our achievements. Without doubt, ADSO is now a vital part of the democratic services sector and is recognised as such externally. This is down to every member; those who attend a training course; our learners; the ADSO Board; our sponsors and partners; and those who support the annual conference. It is a team effort. With the difficulties local government faces in the years to come, ADSO will grow in importance. We will be a strong voice for the sector. But we will undoubtedly face challenges as council budgets are reduced even further. With your support, we will succeed.

You will by now have received your membership renewal notices. Please ensure that you renew as quickly as possible. Also, please encourage colleagues to join and highlight the benefits of membership to your managers.

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 of us on the Board will continue to work very hard on your behalf in 2013/14 to make ADSO a bigger and better professional association.

Best wishes

John Austin
Chairman ADSO Board

October 2013