

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL WITNESS

Convener: Rev DAVID BRICE

Secretary: Mr LINDSAY CONWAY, OBE

1. *The Convener writes:* I hope I will be forgiven for the use of superlatives in this report, not because I am a new convener but because the work of our staff this past Covid-19 year warrants it. In keeping with all Councils of the General Assembly, the work of Social Witness has been disrupted by the assault of Covid-19 on our society and the restrictions that the various degrees of lockdown imposed on us. Where perhaps we differed was that the work of our homes and units became even more intense and vital. Just as emergency workers find themselves walking toward danger while all others run from it, so our staff became key workers in the fight against Covid-19. While others were furloughed, our staff “doubled up” taking on extra duties and shifts to keep residents safe. It has been humbling as a new convener to watch the professionalism, dedication and Christian compassion that our staff have shown to residents and their families. The heroic interventions by staff are too numerous to mention, their care and dedication has been immense.
2. In the midst of these circumstances our Secretary, Lindsay Conway, has been a tower of strength, a fount of wisdom and a reservoir of grace. These comments may appear to be platitudes but they are far from it, the truth is we could not have managed through this year without Lindsay’s depth of experience and decisiveness. Sadly, having successfully sailed us through to calmer waters and having served for 19 years, Lindsay is retiring. Over the years, Lindsay has guided us as a council through a staff and committee restructure that has made us fit for modern times, able to comply with the ever increasing professional standards required of us. He has created a new concept of Social Witness, the Taking Care Programme and coaxed our denomination to come on board. He has traveled the length and breadth of Ireland to take a personal interest in each of our facilities, the heads of homes are well known by him and the recurrent feedback I have observed is in the confidence they have of help being only a phone call away. In the midst of this, he has graciously given the impression that he has all the time in the world when a minister or congregation has needed his help. Lindsay has championed the ministries of compassion within our church, represented us to other professional bodies, and has never forgotten the centrality of Christ in all that he does. As a church we owe him a debt of gratitude, we are sorry to see him go but delight in the more restful, stressless days that lie ahead for him.

3. On 1 January 2021, I took over as Convener of the Council of Social Witness from Rev Dr Trevor McCormick. I would wish to record our thanks to Trevor for giving so much time and attention to the Council, his wise advice and steering of the Council through its decision making, sprinkled with humour and spiced with pointed questions, has been invaluable. Trevor's close working with our Secretary has offered exactly the support that was needed. His emphasis on Christian witness has kept the Council on track and ensured that our gospel purpose has not diminished.

The Secretary to the Council made his final report to Council before his retirement in October:

4. I recently went on a bit of a hunt to find the roots of Social Witness within PCI and I came across a report of the old Social Service Committee, presented to the General Assembly of 1953 – the year of my birth. The report stated – “The Committee have given attention to the various social problems of this busy and complex age. They have been impressed anew by the fact that the primary need of the world is to find a great faith to serve as a spiritual basis for the tremendous social tasks which confront us all. The Committee wish to assert afresh that this faith is to be found in the great social ideal of Jesus Himself – in the idea of the Kingdom of God. Christian people must learn to judge all their actions and all their social, economic, and political institutions, by the effect which they may have on the advance of the Kingdom of God in the world. If this were done, then the solution of most of our perplexing social difficulties would be in sight.” This report was a clear acknowledgement that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland was giving priority to reaching out to those on the margins and given the language of Social Service and not welfare, gives an illustration of some progressive thinking within the church. Move on 68 years and our church finds itself at the forefront of a worldwide pandemic that has had a catastrophic impact on Health and Social Care throughout the world. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland is a key provider of Social Care Services and has had to confront head-on the human issues that the pandemic has created. I genuinely struggled to find the words that adequately describe what we have been going through over the past 15 months as a Social Care Provider, how we adapted to the new language of Lockdown, PPE, window visits, Covid Testing, fogging and vaccines, to name a few. That visiting, testing and vaccines would dominate our daily routines and cause so much conflict, worry and stress. For long periods of time our homes and units remained Covid free with outbreaks in a few of our homes. Although deaths as a result of the virus remain in single figures, there have been a number of residents and staff who have tested positive. We have worked hard at keeping a busy routine going at all times. Our priority was and is to keep residents, tenants and staff safe, and to prevent the spread of infection. I commend all the CSW staff who have worked

through these unusual times. Our staff have worked tirelessly to enable contact within the restrictions and have shared the challenges that both residents and families have experienced. We have all witnessed at first hand the dedication and commitment of all health and social care workers. The additional work and added pressure is taking its toll, with many of our staff simply exhausted. Please continue to support and encourage them, they have appreciated your support and prayers which I assure you make a difference. In particular, I have to thank the Executive Management Team – Denise Keegan, Jacqui Montgomery-Devlin, Caroline Yeomans, Laura Kelly and David Hooks. Together we have responded to the most challenging of times. Again, there are no words to adequately describe what has been the true sacrifice, nothing has been too little or too much. We have laughed and cried together over the months and have survived. Also to our Administration Team of Jennie Telford, Wilma Steele and Cathy Mullin who have supported us during these challenging months. A special thanks to Denise who has borne the brunt of the additional duties during the outbreaks in our homes. The whole team have had to manage extremely difficult staff situations, prolonged sickness of Home Managers and Care Staff, investigations and challenging RQIA reports. The Department of Health, the Health and Social Care Trusts, Supporting People, Probation Board and other partners and stakeholders have been generous in their support and in the provision of additional funding. Regrettably, Guidelines were sometimes being issued too late and were often confusing as each Trust interpreted them differently.

At my Commissioning Service on 12 September 2002, the then Moderator, Very Rev Dr Russell Birney, challenged me greatly when he referred to me entering a Ministry without walls. Words cogged from the Church of Scotland's report "Church without walls". I barely knew what he meant – nearly 19 years on, I fully understand what he meant. It has been my privilege to lead the work of the old Board of Social Witness and now the Council for Social Witness and serve the wider church. My presentation at my interview was "Mission impossible to Mission possible" – the challenge of bringing Social Witness from a number of standalone homes/units and pieces of work to a cohesive operation, with centralised functions. The Council of Social Witness is now a major player as a social care provider and plays its role in the wider social care sector.

The work has benefitted greatly from Board, Council and Committee members over the years, who have overseen the work and encouraged development. Personally, I have had the support of Social Witness Conveners – Rev Roy Vallely, Rev Bobby Liddle, Rev Dr Trevor McCormick and now Rev David Brice, also the support of three Clerks of the General Assembly, Dr Sam Hutchinson, Dr Donald Watts and the current Clerk Rev Trevor Gribben and have served 18 Moderators. I have enjoyed and gained much from my fellow Council Secretaries as we have journeyed together.

In calling me, God has equipped me, and my Saviour and Lord has walked with me every step of the way. I have been truly blessed over these years and could not have managed without the support of Norma, Fiona and Darren, Charles and my West Church family and the prayers and encouragement of so many. I hope I can continue to serve PCI in some way in the future.

Disability Services

5. It is good to welcome Caroline Yeomans as the new Head of Disability Services, who took up her post on 4 January 2021.
6. These have been very challenging times over the past 16 months for staff. All services had to change the way they work due to very strict infection control procedures. Staff had to deal with the pressure of weekly testing, as well as keeping up with guidance that had been issued by the Department of Health. Tenants who usually visit day centres were in the service 24 hours a day. Care Staff have done a fantastic job since the Coronavirus outbreak, staying over their hours and working extra shifts. Staff are exhausted and Senior Management are trying their best to support them with time off and covering shifts. Major changes are happening very fast with a 16 week – 4 block plan to go back to normal visiting.
7. **Aaron House** – had a Covid outbreak in January and the passing of two residents – both residents had been in Aaron House for over 20 years. This has been a traumatic time for Aaron House, both residents and staff. Recruitment of staff was proving difficult. A lot of work has been put in to resolve the situation e.g. advertising on different media platforms, changing Job Descriptions to encourage more interest. RQIA Inspection went very well. They commended the person-centred approach in Aaron House and the sensitivity, empathy and compassion from staff.
8. **Lawnfield House** – A plan has been drawn up to move Lawnfield from seven permanent beds to ten by June and this target was hit by May. This target has now been increased to 12 beds by June. Lawnfield are trying to increase referrals for respite. Respite numbers were down, as the guidance related to Covid was to isolate for two weeks and, as respite is only funded by the Trust for two weeks, people were not wanting to leave their families to stay in a room isolating. The recent recruitment of new staff will greatly improve the ability to deliver a better service to residents. A recent Pharmacy Inspection commended new procedures that had been introduced.
9. **Willowbrook** – The Manager is off on long-term sick leave. Tim Higgins and David Farrow from Thompson House are helping out while the manager is off and the Head of Disability Services is visiting twice a week to oversee the work. A total review of policies and procedures has been undertaken and forwarded to RQIA.

10. **Peacehaven** – Negotiations continue to formalise the management of Peacehaven within the Council for Social Witness structures. The Head of Disability Services continues to provide oversight of staff and professional services. As a result of Covid a number of residents are displaying behaviours which challenge, which has resulted in Psychological and Psychiatric input being set in place.
11. **Kinghan Church** – The congregation met for the first time on 6 June 2021, having not met during the duration of the pandemic, but joined with Windsor Presbyterian, when regulations permitted. The future for the congregation is to integrate with another congregation. It is essential that any future ministry will include support to the whole denomination in the area of services to deaf people.

Older People Services

12. Older People Services has borne the brunt of the Covid-19 crisis, with outbreaks in three of our homes. These resulted in the homes going into total lockdown and very specialist nursing and care procedures being put in place. Other homes have had both residents and staff testing positive and have had to self-isolate. Weekly testing for staff and monthly testing for residents added further to the pressure and stress in the homes.
13. The visiting restrictions of relatives in the homes has been the most contentious issue and has brought out both the best and worst in how families have dealt with this during the pandemic. Staff at all levels have acknowledged how difficult it is for residents to be separated from their loved ones and to miss out on significant celebrations.
14. Staff have ensured that the care of residents has remained the priority during the pandemic, ensuring that daily routines are kept as normal as possible. Many innovative activities have been devised by staff to keep residents stimulated and physically fit.
15. **CSW Heroes** – Covid has resulted in a dramatic change in the daily routine of all staff. All disciplines have been vital in keeping our residents and homes safe – new cleaning regimes, more administration, regular testing and more reporting to name a few. In recognition of this, staff were awarded an increase in pay, they have been given Easter Eggs, CSW Hero Water Bottles and a gift token at Christmas. In normal times the Convener would have recommended that Home Managers would have been thanked in person at the General Assembly.
16. **Maintenance** – Council have been advised that major maintenance will have to be undertaken in the next few years, as a number of our buildings are starting to show their age.
17. **Sale of Ard Cluan and York House** – Ard Cluan House in Londonderry has been sold. York House in Portrush remains on the market.

18. **New Developments** – Council have agreed that the proposed extension of Harold McCauley House in Omagh should undergo a new feasibility study before existing planning permission runs out. Proposed developments in Lucan and Ballybay remain on hold, but will remain on the Council Agenda.
19. **Training** – Consideration is being given to setting up a trainee programme so that individuals applying for jobs do not require previous experience. This could be linked with an entry scheme for schools to recruit young people and help them gain qualifications and experience. CSW also benefits from the Apprenticeship Scheme, which also attracts funding for employers. The production of a video is also being planned in conjunction with the Creative Production Department.
20. **Planning and managing the transition to the new normal for social care** – The Covid Crisis has brought into focus the true worth of the Social Care Sector. Residential and Nursing homes were very much under-supported in the early days of the pandemic, with 58% of deaths occurring in this sector. On occasions requests were made to admit Covid positive patients to a Covid free home. The Minister of Health in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Robin Swann, has launched a review of the Social Care with plans to create a career structure, and improved terms and conditions as the work moves forward into the future. It is essential that a response is given to any future consultation and the professionalisation of social care is supported.

Taking Care

21. **Safeguarding** within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is well established both within the life and work of congregations and as a service provider within social care. There is a constant challenge for the small staff team in having to interpret and implement legislation and guidelines from two jurisdictions.
22. **Adult Safeguarding** – There has been much discussion regarding Adult Safeguarding in congregations, with clarity being sought on the role of the Designated Person and training opportunities. A PowerPoint presentation has been produced for use within Presbyteries, targeting local congregations and organisations.
23. **Taking Care 3** – this has not been completed as a result of Covid and the general pressure of work over the past year. There is now a clearer intention that Taking Care 3 will be an online information and advice facility, enabling regular updates and encouraging a more interactive service. The development of an APP and E-Training are actively being discussed.
24. **Safeguarding Training for Congregations and Ministers** – Since December 2020, training for Ministers, Designated Persons and leaders has been delivered via Microsoft Teams. This has been a significant challenge for the Head of Safeguarding and the Taking

Care administrator, as well as a major learning curve in delivering the training virtually, and training some of the Taking Care trainers to deliver in this way.

Numbers Trained

Designated Persons:	163
Ministers:	228
Foundation training sessions:	5
Refresher training sessions:	26

25. **Access NI and GARDA Vetting** – Although church and youth organisations were not meeting as a result of Covid, there was significant activity in congregations to recruit new leaders and review their policies and procedures. 281 GARDA vetting and 275 Access NI forms were submitted during this period.
26. **Adult Safeguarding in PCI Homes and Safeguarding Champion** – 13 adult safeguarding training sessions were delivered within the homes. The Head of Safeguarding, as Adult Safeguarding Champion, consistently works with the homes regarding safeguarding referrals to Social Services and has carried out a number of investigations in this role.
27. **Priorities for the coming year**
 - The development of Taking Care guidelines.
 - Review and development of all Taking Care training.
 - Review and development of the Taking Care website.
28. **Additional development work**
 - Adult Safeguarding training for congregations.
 - Provision of Onus (domestic abuse) training for churches, to enable them to become a ‘Safe Place’.
 - The development of trauma informed practice throughout CSW.
29. **Inter-Faith Committee of Safeguarding Board (NI)** – The Council Secretary is currently Chair and Head of Safeguarding and Deputy Chair of the Inter-Faith Committee. This committee discusses common areas of concern within the wider faith community and advises the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.

Specialist Services

30. **Thompson House** – Covid has impacted on services in Thompson House and its ability to offer services, with no opportunity to gather together for group activities as a staff group or with residents. There was an outbreak of Covid-19 in November, five residents had to self-isolate in their bedrooms and five staff had to take time off at various times when they tested positive. During the outbreak there were staff shortages due to staff self-isolating, however this was managed with

staff working extra hours and using bank or relief staff, so the service was not seriously impacted during the outbreak. Occupancy levels remained high, enabling Thompson House to accommodate residents from another unit. All staff and residents are vaccinated and as government restrictions are easing, a Bible study titled ‘The Difference (Difference: The power of faith in a conflicted world (rln.global))’ is in the process of being organised. This will be facilitated by one of the project workers, who delivered the course in prisons while working with London City Mission. Whilst it has not been possible to deliver group courses, one-to-one work with residents has been maintained, with residents receiving assurance that they are being prayed for and Bible notes being sourced for those requesting them. Through Supporting People funding, the unit has secured the services of an artist to deliver art therapy sessions and has also paired with a Christian artist through Prison Arts Foundation.

31. **Carlisle House and Gray’s Court** – Carlisle House closed on 23 March 2020 and reopened on 1 June 2020, following the agreement by both Health Trusts. During Lockdown, the residential accommodation in Carlisle House had been offered as accommodation for medical and nursing staff in the Mater Hospital. A new Protocol was adapted consisting of:

- Working at 50% capacity
- Employing Admission Cohort System
- All admissions Covid Tested within 48 hours of admission
- Reduction of programme to 34 days
- Weekend working for therapeutic team
- Extensive daily sanitising programme.

There have been no cases of Covid-19 within the staff team or clients since Carlisle House reopened and remarkably client satisfaction levels have improved since the programme has been revised. Recruitment has been extremely difficult for some time, resulting in discussions with the Health and Social Care Trust. The Director of Addiction Services has prepared a major discussion paper “Carlisle House Review – Emerging from Covid-19” for discussion with the Trusts. Gray’s Court continued to provide a normal support service during the Covid crisis. The staff team and tenants produced a comic “Recovery”, with funding provided by Supporting People. The comic has been commended and has been well received within the homeless and criminal justice sectors.

32. **Mental Health Task Group** – The Task Group has not been finalised but priority will be given to its formation given the concerns of the growing mental health needs in the post Covid period.
33. **Fresh Start** – The programme is on hold until the lifting of restrictions within the Prison Service. There is a desire to expand the scheme into the female side at Hydebank Wood College and the Woodlands Centre.