

NAWRA annual report 2021-22

It's now 2 years since the original Covid-19 lockdown, and our last 'physical' conference in Swansea back in March 2020 really seems like an age ago. Although we have been unable to get together in person, the virtual world has increased overall attendance at conferences and our membership numbers have also risen from 248 in March 2020 to 266 last March and 286 as of today – a 15% increase over the 2 years which is wonderful and means we are even better placed to act as a voice for the welfare rights sector.

This past year we have held four virtual conferences, each hosted by one of our membership organisations and located in an internet version of their actual location.

March 2021 was hosted by Big Book of Benefits and saw us welcome speakers and workshops from Advice Services Alliance, Ferret software, Inbest, The House of Commons Library, St Christopher's Hospice, Sheffield Hallam University, Durham County Council and Salford Council, plus Tom from Big Book of Benefits himself!

In June 2021 we moved to a virtual Greenwich who hosted sessions from the Local Government Association, Bromley by Bow Centre, CPAG, Nottingham Trent University (who gave the inaugural Terry Patterson Memorial Lecture on the future direction of social security, which links in with the session we have had today), Housing Systems and our friends from Ferret software again. Our hosts also led an excellent session on their Social Prescribing Model.

We had hoped to visit Glasgow in person in September 2021 but restrictions meant that this too need to be an online conference. Hosted by the city's Welfare Rights and Money Advice service we welcomed in house sessions along with guests from The Social Security Tribunal of Canada (go Blue Jays!), Kinship Carers, Durham County Council, Warwick University, CPAG, Epping Forest Citizens Advice. Our vice chair, Daphne, also hosted a session on the Health and Disability Green Paper which was used as a platform for NAWRA members to help frame an excellent response to that consultation exercise.

My own charity, Coventry Independent Advice Service, hosted our winter conference in December 2021 where Prof Tara Mulqueen of Warwick University gave the Phil Hanns Memorial Lecture on the value of Public Legal Education. Interspersed with a selection of tunes from the late 1970's Ska and wider Coventry scene, we also welcomed guests from CPAG, Islington People's Rights, Advice Services Alliance, rightsnet and, who could forget, Lord David Freud offering his reflections on the introduction and progress of Universal Credit.

We do plan to return to some face-to-face conferences – the first one is earmarked for June this year. If any of our wonderful members would like to provide a venue for this, we can offer full support with regard to speakers, etc. And as costs have been reduced due to virtual conferences we do have some money in the bank that we may be able to offer in support of venue hire if this is needed. Please do get in touch if you are interested. It would be fantastic to get together again.

While our conferences are the inevitable focus of our public activity, there is lots of work going on behind the scenes in the wider policy arena. I've already briefly mentioned the response to the Health and Disability Green Paper. Our response to this was informed by member input at the conference, along with 63 additional responses from members. Your input was invaluable. On your behalf, we expressed our concerns about the aim expressed in the Paper to make the system 'more affordable' and instead stated that this consultation should be focused on how to improve the lives of disabled people and those with long-term health conditions, to empower them, and to give them choice. Investing in social security and employment support will not only help achieve these aims but is also likely to lead to higher employment among disabled people, and reduced demands on other services such as health and housing. We made 29 specific recommendations, ranging from ensuring proper funding for independent advice and advocacy, to extending the Motability Scheme, improving the training for work coaches, recording of disability assessments, and increasing the use of passporting within the benefit system. You can read the full response on our website. The government's response to the consultation is pending.

During the past year we have also responded to the Work and Pensions Committee enquiry into Health Assessments for Benefits, again using a membership survey and working with colleagues at Central England Law School and Warwick Law School who had undertaken research into delays with issuing UC50s. NAWRA representatives have since met with DWP and work is ongoing.

Our representative in Scotland Craig Samuel, also complied a response to the Scottish Government's consultation on Adult Disability Payment regulations, making a series of recommendations and good practice points.

Dan Manville, our North-West representative, has also led on a survey and response to the Legal Aid Agency and the possibility of some welfare benefits work being brought back into scope in the Housing Possession Court Duty scheme.

More recently, we have written to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to raise serious concerns about the new Help to Claim Service, particularly highlighting how a digital only service may be wholly inappropriate for those who need the help most.

Again, all our responses can be found on our website.

Another significant area of work that we have been undertaking is around equality and diversity within NAWRA as a membership organisation. I want to thank Atif Kaudri from the NAWRA committee for leading this work and for the engagement of several members who have joined the working group. Atif will give a report on this activity separately.

To conclude the formal business:

Election of NAWRA committee members for the next two years. This time around, all committee positions were uncontested, and so the existing committee members are re-elected for a further two years. These are:

England –

- North West – [Dan Manville](#), Greater Manchester Law Centre
- North East – [Julie Kirkby](#), Durham County Council
- Yorkshire & The Humber – [Zoey Corker](#), Leeds City Council
- West Midlands – [Alan Markey](#), Coventry Independent Advice Service
- East Midlands – [Juan Ramirez](#), Derbyshire County Council
- East – [Michael Shanks](#), Equal Lives
- London – [Maureen Arthur](#), Peabody
- London – [Corin Hammersley](#), Greenwich Welfare Rights
- South East – [Atif Kaudri](#), Mind
- South West – [Daphne Hall](#), Rightsnet

Scotland –

- [Craig Samuel](#), City of Edinburgh Council
- Second representative position is vacant. If you are interested in representing Scotland on the NAWRA committee, [please contact us](#).

Wales –

- North Wales: [Gareth Morgan](#), Ferret Information Systems
- South Wales: [Tom Messere](#), Big Book of Benefits

Northern Ireland –

- Position currently vacant. If you are interested in representing Northern Ireland on the NAWRA committee, [please contact us](#).

I want to thank all the committee members for their hard work and dedication over the past year. None of them are paid for their work with NAWRA – they undertake the role because of their commitment to the sector and to our members. And I also want to thank all of you – the members of NAWRA – for helping to make this organisation the fantastic family that it is. NAWRA has gone from strength to strength and has shown incredible resilience during the last two years. Your input and support have been an enormous part of that success – so thank you to each and every one of you.

Alan Markey
NAWRA Chair
March 2022