

# JUST KEEP PERSERVERING

*In this special interview, I sit down with Irene Clark, then-CEO of East Ayrshire Advocacy Service (EAAS), on the eve of her retirement party, after 30 years of working in independent advocacy. Irene reflects on the organisation's history, challenges and highlights over the years, and discusses the importance of relationships, collaboration, and the future of independent advocacy.*



Irene and Neill during the open day

**Marta: Irene, could you tell me why we're sitting down to do this interview today?**

**Irene:** I'm the CEO at East Ayrshire Advocacy Services, and I'm about to retire after 30 years on the job. I've seen lots of changes over the years, and we're having an open day tomorrow to celebrate 30 years of independent advocacy in East Ayrshire, my retirement and the handover to my successor, Neill. It's an exciting time for the service, and I think some of the staff are quite anxious because there's change - I have been

there for so long. But I'm a great believer that change is not always a bad thing.

**Marta: Lots of reasons to celebrate! I imagine that your history and the history of EAAS must be very intertwined. Can you tell me about that history and the beginnings of the organisation?**

**Irene:** The idea for the organisation came from the local community. There was a group of community activists meeting monthly, and they set up projects to improve the local community services. One of the members had a son with severe learning disabilities. He was really worried about what would happen to his son when he was no longer there to speak out for him, and this is where the idea came from. That wee group went out to find out what was going on advocacy-wise in Scotland, and they visited a couple of projects. They went to Barnardo's in Edinburgh, because there was advocacy there for children who were accommodated, and they visited Lynebank Hospital in Dunfermline, which was a hospital for people with learning disabilities. They also visited Drumchapel housing estate. It was a huge undertaking: they were just all volunteers, and they didn't really

know what advocacy was or which model to go for.

They thought that it would be a good idea to have advocacy for tenants in East Ayrshire who were struggling with benefits and evictions, who were not able to speak up for themselves and didn't like dealing with authority, so the model they went for was the Drumchapel model.

The group got help with building a funding bid, and the initial funding came through in the summer of 1994. This is when they advertised for the project leader job, and I got it – and I think it was because of my benefits experience with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The initial funding came with strings attached – it was only for the three specific areas in Kilmarnock, and lasted for three years. If you lived outwith these areas, you couldn't access the service. Our remit was to support people who had learning disabilities, mental health problems, or an acquired brain injury and were aged 16 to 65. The idea was employing sessional staff to carry out advocacy, kind of like zero hours contracts today, and it was very difficult, for the service and for the people themselves.

Then, there was a change, new unitary authorities came in, and East Ayrshire Council was created. We had all these new councillors, and there was a lot of disagreement about the fairest way to distribute funding to voluntary organisations.

### **Marta: What happened to the EAAS then?**

**Irene:** We went through a big evaluation, and we included people who had used our service as a part of the evaluation team.

“**Afterwards, the councillors told us that Advocacy Partners were the reason why we survived: they spoke about the difference independent advocacy made to their lives.**

We also showed that nobody else was providing independent advocacy, and that it was all we provided.

We survived, but many organisations went to the wall in that time, and I have to say we were very lucky to have the backing of the new East Ayrshire Council. They even increased our funding. From then on, we were on 3-year contracts, and our funding got extended to cover the whole East Ayrshire. We also went on to have permanent staff instead of sessional staff, and now we have 18 staff members; most of them are full time.

### **Marta: How did the provision of independent advocacy in EAAS evolve over the years?**

**Irene:** From the beginning, we kept loads of statistics about who we couldn't help, and why we couldn't help them. For example, we were getting referrals from parents who had a mental health problem or a learning disability, and their children were going through child protection issues, and they didn't understand the seriousness of what was happening. We bid for additional funding and employed a specialist worker to support these parents. Now we have a full team who provide that service.

We were then criticised for stopping at age 65 - due to the funding. Again, we kept the statistics and put together a business case to provide a service

for people over the age of 65 at early stages of dementia. The older people service now is funded really well, and it's as busy, if not busier, than the adult service.

When I started, the only legislation that was in force was the old Mental Health Act, where people were treated like criminals, often detained and had to appear at the Sheriff Court. So the best piece of legislation, I would say, was the new Mental Health (Care and Treatment) Act, which gave the legal right to independent advocacy. Because of that, we got increased funding, and today we have two staff members who support people going through tribunals or are detained under the Act – that's a busy service as well.

Over the years, we had intermittent funding to work with people with addictions, and currently employ a full-time advocate. We also we attracted funding from the local authority to support people in care homes. We didn't realise it then, but it became so important during Covid.

**Marta: Did you carry on working in Covid times? How was that?**

**Irene:** Yes, our staff carried on. We were very much seen as partners within the Health and Social Care Partnership, they made sure we had full PPE, everything we needed, and we got access to all the vaccinations like the Social Work staff did. We carried on working particularly for people who were detained and those in care homes.

In fact, we were highlighted in an inspection in East Ayrshire for the continued input that that our staff gave during such a difficult time. We also did an independent report, which took in the views of care home residents and care home staff, and that was presented

at the Strategic Planning Group within our Health and Social Care Partnership. The report was quite damning, actually. The care home residents seemed okay, they missed their families, obviously, but they felt really supported by the staff. But the staff did not feel supported at all. It was a sad report, I remember sitting at my dining room table compiling the report and in tears, because it was really horrific, and it's still quite hard to believe that we went through all that.

I still don't know how we managed, but the staff were fabulous, so innovative. They came up with amazing ideas. The member of staff that works with people with addictions started cooking groups, on Teams or Zoom. It was amazing! Lots of our staff just doing doorstep checks and people making sure people were okay. I think we did as well as we possibly could have in that situation.

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We've seen a huge increase of referrals since Covid, and we're monitoring that very closely.**

Everything is recorded online, even though I was, and I still am, a paper person, but now we've got this great online management system.

**Marta: It sounds like you consistently kept track of people you were supporting over the last 30 years. Do you feel that having that data was helpful?**

**Irene:** I think it's been really important for us, and the reason EAAS is still here. We started very, very small: our initial budget was £44,000 per year, and now we have just over £500,000.

We kept the statistics; we were able to evidence the gaps and understand who we're helping.

**Marta: You really understood the difference that you were making.**

**Irene:** Yes, and we always included our service users, in all different parts of our service. For me, that is really important. We work very closely with other third sector organisations in East Ayrshire. None of us are precious about what we do, and it's all about relationships.

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**In the end, if anyone struggles to speak up for themselves, having someone on your side makes all the difference.**

But it's the independence part of it that is the most important thing, to be able to challenge systems and be as free as possible from conflict of interest.

**Marta: What really shone through your story is, for me, the relationships that you built throughout the years. What is their role in independent advocacy?**

**Irene:** Advocacy is all about relationships, isn't it? We come across different people, staff members, organisations. If you can have a good relationship with them, then it's half the battle. Yes, we have to challenge, but we have to be respectful - everybody's got a job to do. If you go all guns blazing at the beginning, it's not going to help the person you're trying to support. Good relationships make it easier to support people, knowing who to go to and your contacts. It's become more difficult over the years, as the "go-to people" retired or moved on, but then you need to build a new positive relationship. Relationships, for me, are paramount.



EAAS staff team during 2023 conference

**Marta: And what were some of the highlights in your time as the CEO?**

**Irene:** There've been so many highlights, Marta! *[laughs]*. One of them was going from having a sessional staff to permanent staff. I honestly don't know whether we would have survived if we hadn't received the additional funding for that.

Our conference last year celebrating the diversity of our services was really special. All staff members told stories about their jobs, involving this mythical person who have come through every part of our service. They had been through Children's Hearings system, in prison, adult services right through older peoples service.

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**I was so proud of staff, and it was so powerful. We got amazing feedback after the event, I think people didn't realise the breadth of what we do.**

And another highlight is that my sons have both been involved in the organisation over the years, dipping in and out when they were at university. Neill, who applied for the CEO job and got it is now taking over from me. He set up the prison service and first database we ever had. I think it's quite amazing that the family have all obviously listened.

**Marta: Clearly, you set a great example.**

**Irene:** It's really rewarding that they understood the message. Everybody's got a right to be listened to, and if you don't have that, you don't have a lot.

**Marta: Beautifully said. We spoke about changes that happened to the service over the years. Have you noticed changes in the wider independent advocacy sector as well?**

**Irene:** I remember the first experience of feeling supported nationally was through the Scottish Advocacy Workers Forum in the 90s. We used to meet at different venues, and we had away days and overnights. I remember a weekend in a youth hostel in Pitlochry. It was so good to hear other people experiencing the same as we have. Things like difficulties with funding, or how to advocate. Really, how do you go about it? Because it was all very new to us in the beginning, but we felt really supported.

From there on we kind of went from strength to strength. We had Advocacy 2000, the Advocacy Safeguards Agency, and now we have the SIAA, which we were a founder member of, and we still have a place on the board. I've always found it really helpful to be a member of the SIAA. Maybe I haven't contributed as much as I could have, because of the extent of our service, but we always tried to be involved. There are huge issues now for us in Scotland: the lack of funding, local authorities are struggling with money, and I wonder, where do we go from here?

I think as long as we feel we've got SIAA at our back advocating for us, then long may that continue. I would tell people: take the support you can get from SIAA. The roundtables, the peer supports are really good for new people, for staff and managers. I would always encourage people to use SIAA support, because I don't know where we would be without it, everyone in their own wee niche. We have much louder voice if we stick together.

**Marta: In your opinion, what is the one thing that independent advocacy needs most right now?**

**Irene:** I think it's stability and commitment from funders. The short term funding really isn't helpful, as you can't plan anything. We had a spell of annual funding, and it was nerve-wracking, every year we had to fight for the same funding. Now we are back to 3 + 2 years funding, and it has been a huge improvement. I think we need to be more realistic about funding: paying fair wages and all that stuff. For a wee while we were losing people because the councils were paying more than we were. But this year, we managed give staff a pay rise, for the first time in four years. We're very proud and grateful for that. In North and South Ayrshire, there were local advocacy organisations that had been there as long as we have. But their services went out to tender, and a big national organisation won. I'm a great believer that local people know the local area, and they know what the local issues are. And I don't think the national organisations have got a grip of that yet. You can't just replace these relationships.

**Marta: Where would you like to see independent advocacy go in the future? And what is next for you?**

**Irene:** I think I would like to see SIAA to continue to advocate and safeguard advocacy in Scotland, working with commissioners and funders and emphasising the difference that it makes. I know there is a goal of advocacy for all, but I do have concerns about that, because there is no money just now. So, if we tried to provide advocacy for all, we spread ourselves too thin, advocacy is not effective, and disabled people would maybe lose out. That's a worry for me. Independent advocacy is a very worthwhile thing to be involved in. I've just loved every minute of it, I don't know how I'll go on retiring *[laughs]*. But I've got lots to look forward to, spending more time with wee granddaughters, more holidays... I also play golf, and I bowl, so a lot more of that. There's loads of good people in this service that are going to take this forward, hopefully for the next 30 years.

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Just keep persevering.  
Don't forget why you're  
here, because there are  
a lot of people out there,  
particularly now,  
who really do need  
somebody on their side.**

Marta Wittek