

Report from Sarah O' Grady, Chair of the Board, to the 2016 Annual General Meeting of Amnesty International UK Section

9 April 2016

East Midlands Conference Centre, Nottingham, UK

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Good afternoon.

On behalf of the Board I would like to welcome you to the 2016 Annual General Meeting and National Conference.

It has been a tremendous privilege to serve on AIUK Section's Board for six years and a great honour to have served as Chair for nearly three of them. However, it's now close to the end of my term and so this will be my last AGM as Chair.

It has been a fulfilling, challenging and also a humbling experience and one that I'll never forget.

It is true, there are many, many meetings involved with being a Board member... but there has also been some time for campaigning.

London Pride 2015 was one of the most inspiring, happy, celebratory events I have been lucky enough to participate in. I felt hugely proud to walk and dance! beside the Amnesty float, especially when cheers arose from the crowds as we were recognised.

Thank you to all those who worked so hard to make it happen - and for the pink boa and hair glitter!

Amongst the many amazing human rights achievements of the past twelve months, we all celebrated when Moses Akatugba was released from prison. I would like to thank you Justine for your amazing, brave work and for joining us this weekend.

Introduction to Board

It is usual to reserve one's thanks for the end of a speech but I would like introduce and to record up front my sincere thanks to my colleagues on your Board: Jerry Allen, Ruth Breddal, Cris Burson-Thomas, Meredith Coombs, Ade Couper, Eilidh Douglas, Harrison Littler, Tracy Newton-Blows and Hannah Perry. Unfortunately, Tom Hedley and Tom Sparks can't be here due to personal circumstances. We will miss both Toms and send our best wishes.

Please think of questions to ask us at the Q & A tomorrow or at any time over the weekend.

Most of us have been or are members of local or student groups. We're all Amnesty International volunteers and activists, who donate our time, skills and experience to support AIUK. All of us care deeply about Amnesty – its members, its staff, its donors, its democracy, and, most of all, its human rights mission. Together we have over 200 years of membership.

Annual Report

It is my great privilege to present the 2015 Annual Report on their behalf, a copy of which is on the website.

I'm proud of the year we've had in 2015 and the successful campaigning and activism. You'll hear about these from others this weekend.

Governance Development

The Board didn't expect to spend so much time looking at governance processes and the constitution, culminating in the Board discussing and approving the proposals before you this weekend - for you to discuss and, we hope, approve too.

This has been necessary because over many years AIUK has not invested enough time and attention to governance, so we have fallen behind what is expected and what is needed.

Governance in AIUK is not bad – but it could be better and it has to be if we are not only to withstand the pressures that not-for-profit organisations face today, but to thrive and continue to be respected as a democratic movement.

We shine a light on others and must be confident of upholding high standards ourselves when others shine a light on us.

Opinion poll after opinion poll tells us of declining public confidence in the sector. No doubt, a number of factors are at play.

The media has shed any deference and is getting its teeth stuck into large charities, who they think of as institutions. Rightly or wrongly we have become “*fair game*”.

MPs have also had the bit between their teeth. The legitimacy of the campaigning and political activity that charities and NGOs can lawfully undertake has been questioned and Select Committees have looked at fundraising practices. There is the Lobbying Act and a new Fundraising Regulator and the Charity Commission has increased powers.

I doubt that this will be the end of it.

Although the Section is not a charity (but the Charitable Trust is), we try to meet charitable high standards, but without compromising our ability to campaign and lobby, or our democratic principles.

Some within the sector have contributed to this negativity – the disaster at Kids Company and the consequential *awful* impact on the beneficiaries – the families who relied on it -

being one very high profile example of governance failure.

Thankfully, the vast majority of not-for-profit organisations are not like Kids Company but many make mistakes. Amnesty has made mistakes. This is why we need to make sure that our governance arrangements are robust and why I have been determined in my time as Chair to strengthen our governance and widen our democracy. In this climate we can no longer assume that we will be given the benefit of the doubt by a benign environment.

I don't believe that it's all doom and gloom. I believe that the public, even the regulators and certainly our members and activists, remain supportive of what charities and NGOs are trying to do. But they are also more demanding, more willing to scrutinise, more willing to criticise and more willing to donate elsewhere when they think an NGO is getting things wrong.

I think that's appropriate and not something for Amnesty to be afraid of, provided we remain focussed on our Mission and supportive of Members and Staff, whilst ensuring that Board members are appropriately skilled, appropriately resourced, appropriately accountable and appropriately empowered to meet the responsibilities that have been entrusted to them and which they have voluntarily accepted.

Special Resolutions

Following the two membership consultations and drawing on the advice of the Governance Task Force, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and Bates Wells and Braithwaite, our expert lawyers, the Board has tabled a range of Special Resolutions, so fulfilling our commitment made at last year's AGM. The Board has sought to maximise the options that are available, rather than presenting you with a "take it or leave it" constitution. It may be cumbersome and time consuming but we believe it's the right way to proceed and the best way of working together to achieve a better Constitution for the Section.

The proposals are not intended and should not be taken as any personal criticism of those who carry out the affected roles – these are governance matters.

I'm delighted with the level of engagement so far and am looking forward to continuing the conversation this weekend.

The decisions rest where they should...with the Members of this democratic movement.

We've also been working hard on governance improvements in the past few years. Over the last year this has included:

- clearer role descriptions for Board members and Board officers together with a revised Code of Conduct
- an "away weekend" (in the Human Rights Action Centre) where we started to formulate the new Strategic Plan.
- We used a facilitator to conduct a Board skills assessment to identify gaps. Meredith, our new Treasurer, gave us training in financial oversight, a key part of our responsibilities.
- We have a new strategic framework for risk and assurance.
- the key governance documents are in one place with improved version control, and we have new standard ways of setting out Terms of Reference for our Sub-Committees.

- The Board is looking at ways to improve its diversity and that of the membership
- And we are seeing the benefits of a refocussed Activism Sub-Committee, which, having representatives of all Amnesty's different activist constituencies, is assisting us with two-way communication and helping us to plan together. More from Eilidh tomorrow.

I hope that the Board will continue to reform and develop governance at AIUK with your support. There is more that can be done to make our processes more transparent. For example, we can codify our approach to elections and, if you approve, include these in Rules.

Members Rights

Respecting the important role of members in our democracy, we've made it easier for members to exercise your rights and in particular participate in the democratic decision-making.

These key rights include

- Free attendance at the AGM. So this year, we have promoted the joint 2016 AGM and National Conference weekend as free to attend, bar the costs of accommodation and travel.

I'm delighted to see so many of you here, half for the first time.

- All Members have a right to vote on the issues presented to the AGM for decision, including those not able to attend. So, for those members who can't attend, it is now easier to have their voice heard and exercise their right to vote, by voting by proxy on-line. This is in addition to the long-standing right to and practice of voting by proxy by post.

We've also introduced electronic voting which we hope will enable more time for human rights discussions, as well as enabling votes to be cast privately.

- We took a fresh approach to Board elections, including reaching out to more members by the article in the Amnesty Magazine and advertising on social media.

Yet, again, there is no election this year. The only two members who stood for election were existing Board members. It's really important that members stand for election and if you would like to know more, please speak to a Board member - you know who they are....

Change can be challenging, but it is not change for change's sake.

The changes are aimed at helping members exercise your democratic rights, help AIUK be more transparent and accessible as well as more compliant with our legal obligations. The point of having effective and efficient governance is that Amnesty contributes as much as possible to human rights progress around the world – now and in the future.

We are unique. We are a democratic membership movement whose sole purpose is to benefit others and we're proud to be a part of it.

Strategic Plan

With that in mind, I am delighted that we have a five year Strategic Plan for both the Section and the Charitable Trust, to present for this AGM's endorsement. Kate will set out some of its key elements and Hannah will provide more detail when proposing the Resolution.

As a Board, we have spent a lot of time thinking about this plan. We believe that it is a step forward for AIUK. Our priorities and objectives are more clearly expressed than previously. It is our hope and expectation that this will ensure that *together* we focus on the things that will drive us forward as a movement to achieve greater human rights impact. It will help us to be more accountable to you, as we report on the progress being made against the objectives.

The strategic priorities are set against the context of Amnesty International's global Strategic Goals for 2016 - 2019, which were agreed in August by the movement's highest decision-making body, the International Council Meeting (or ICM), held in Dublin. The goals are to ensure:

- Everyone knows and can claim their rights
- Human rights and justice are enjoyed without discrimination
- People are protected during conflict and crisis
- Human rights abusers are held accountable
- Amnesty International is a larger, stronger and more diverse movement.

AIUK will contribute to these goals through our own ambitious growth plans and by

- prioritising the two forthcoming global campaigns
- through our work on crises
- on human rights education and, of course, our work for individuals at risk.
- As many of you know, we are also prioritising work that aims to "Save the Human Rights Act".

Thank you for your amazing and effective activism in support.

The Strategic Plan also aims to develop the organisation for the future and strengthen our work today, not least by finding new ways to enable activists, members and supporters to contribute to the work and deliver even more human rights impact.

Financial Position

We've worked hard to ensure that this strategy is built on a stable financial platform and that the movement's financial model was revised.

This was not inevitable.

As many of you know, Amnesty International's global work is funded by an agreed formula. This determines how much of the money that is raised by larger Sections (like AIUK) should be distributed to the international movement, to sustain the work of our International Secretariat and enable our presence and growth in countries where Amnesty is not yet able to maintain a self-sufficient national body.

Some of you will recall that 2013's AGM authorised the Board to proceed with a restructuring and reduction in the number of staff.

We did this because our income was static and a change in the movement's financial formula meant that more and more income was to be directed to international work. Those reductions were a medium-term measure to stabilise our finances until 2016, whilst we sought changes to the movement's financial arrangements.

These were difficult and painful decisions, involving an EGM.

The Board understands that members feel you should have been consulted in advance of the staff restructure and we welcomed the 2013 AGM Decision that we should consult members in advance of any future material reorganisation.

So, unless there is an urgent financial emergency, the Board will consult members on proposals for any reorganisation of staff resulting in 20 or more redundancies. This threshold is reflective of employment legislation concerning the number of redundancies which would trigger certain consultation rights with employees.

We have no plans for this in the foreseeable future and hope it will never be necessary, but I wanted to share the Board's definition of "material reorganisation" at this AGM for the record.

Since 2013 the Board and members have made great efforts to communicate more openly together, such that I hope that we would all now be more aware of concerns and worries before embarking on significant change.

A lot of hard work went into seeking changes to the movement's financial formula in the years since the 2013 AGM. I am very grateful to AIUK's finance staff and our Treasurers for their detailed and influential work driving the changes. Thank you also to Peter Murray who chaired the key International Finance Meeting in 2014.

It is great to be able to report that the changes were accepted by the ICM. Now, as our income rises, our contributions to the international movement will also rise. That is how it should be and it is what we will aim for. Importantly, however, if our income remains static, then so will our financial contribution and that provides us with stability. More from Meredith tomorrow.

This means that the Board is able to present the AGM with an ambitious Strategic Plan that seeks to grow, rather than a plan for reductions.

International Council Meeting

AIUK Section sent six delegates to the ICM. We worked hard to deliver against AGM Decisions, securing a positive mention of work with Trade Unions in the outcome document and working with AI Spain to secure improved reporting by the International Board, as sought by AIUK's Resolution.

We worked with different Sections to emphasise the importance of children's human rights and underline the enthusiasm for this work globally.

The debate on Amnesty's policy on how best to protect the human rights of sex workers was long and difficult and ultimately the matter went to a vote.

AIUK's delegates were in a difficult situation. The 2014 AGM made two conflicting Decisions from the three options the Board submitted. So, the Board felt it had no option but to abstain from the final vote.

The detailed policy is being developed but the direction is clear – Amnesty International will support the decriminalisation of sex work. AIUK has no current plans to work on the issue.

The ICM also gave us a taste of some of the big issues that will be discussed in 2017. Chief amongst these is international governance reform, which is likely to feature proposals to move away from the ICM with 400-odd delegates towards an annual, smaller global assembly. Also, whether to move from weighted votes to one Section, one vote. Currently AIUK has six votes.

The Board and our International Issues Sub-Committee have scrutinised the early proposals and will continue to do so. More at next year's AGM. In the meantime, please follow developments including information in the "Documents" area of the website.

The ICM gave an opportunity to experience the movement's diversity and understand the challenges and successes of so many different national entities around the world. 47% of the international budget is now spent in the global south, compared with 13% just four years ago.

And, of course, we recounted our collective human rights achievements and I was moved to tears several times.

One particularly poignant moment was when we were joined via Skype by a Syrian activist, who described the situation facing human rights defenders in Syria, many of who were imprisoned including her husband.

That evening, we heard that her husband had been released and we all shared the huge joy at the news, symbolising what all of us around the world are trying to achieve.

Concluding remarks

To close, I would like to thank the very many people who have made me feel so well supported on the Board throughout my six years, including your current Board.

I have benefitted enormously from the wisdom of former Chairs, Board members and Sub-Committees I have served on. They have contributed hugely through good and difficult times with integrity, dedication and good humour. I thank them all.

I would like to thank all of the staff, especially Kate Allen and the Senior Management Team, and the office and bookshop volunteers – all serve AIUK so ably and with such commitment to human rights.

It is a privilege to work with you all

Thank you Alex for chairing this weekend.

And, of course, I would like to thank you, the members and supporters of AIUK who make our work possible and impactful, for inspiring me and sharing your views with such clarity and passion.

But, most of all, I would like to thank the people like Justine Ijeomah, Raif Bedawi, Claudia Medina and so many others who have endured violations, and through their courage, inspire us to stand with them in the defence of human rights.

Thank you.

Enjoy the weekend.