**Upstart Scotland - Annual General Meeting/Conference**

**11.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. - Saturday 21st September 2024**

**Albert Halls, Stirling**

**Upstart Scotland - Chair’s Report**

It is a privilege to be afforded the opportunity to present this report on behalf of Upstart Scotland in preparation for the 2024 Upstart Scotland Annual General Meeting/Conference on Saturday 21st September 2024 at The Albert Halls in Stirling.

The 2023 Annual General Meeting/Conference convened on Saturday 7th October in Edinburgh. During the formal part of this meeting there was a significant change with regard to the Board of Trustees. I consider it very important that I make some reference to this change.

I knew Sue Palmer prior to the establishment of Upstart Scotland. In my role as a primary headteacher, I had enlisted Sue to deliver a presentation on her book ‘Toxic Childhood’ to the parent/carer community within the school. Additionally, many staff were in attendance. The response to Sue’s presentation was overwhelming. Parents, carers and staff claimed that this was the most informative, effective and interesting presentation they had attended with regard to changes in behaviour, child development and education. Our staff in attendance claimed it was the most helpful ‘professional development’ they had attended. This initiated my contact with Sue. In August 2015 I contacted Sue to deliver a similar presentation at a different school, and during our conversation, Sue asked if I would be keen to meet to discuss a book she was about to publish and a likely associated campaign. We met, for me it was compelling, a small group was created, and thus, Upstart Scotland was established.

Sue’s years as a literacy adviser and expert, her years of researching child development, and her high profile role as a consultant ensured that Sue’s campaign was based on real evidence and fact. Additionally, her experience as a teacher and head teacher provided more gravitas.

**Following nine years of relentless campaigning, Sue made the decision to step down from her role as Chair, citing that it had been an exhausting experience. The Board of Trustees nominated me to succeed Sue in the role of Chair. It has been a real privilege to undertake this role. I can assure you that succeeding someone of Sue’s expertise has been a daunting experience. I will work tirelessly, but replicating Sue’s influence may be a step too far.**

**When, not if (I am confident of success), Upstart’s aspirations are realised; children, families, educators, early years and society in general will be indebted to Sue for not only ensuring this candle was lit, but the flame was maintained until change was achieved.**

**I am delighted that Sue now represents Upstart as Honorary President. Sue continues to contribute, advise and is the editor of the Upstart Newsletter. Sue has just completed and published her 100th newsletter. I am sure you will agree that Sue’s newsletter informs and inspires more than any other educational journal.**

Simultaneously, Kate Johnston relinquished her role as Vice Chair. If Sue’s contribution cannot be quantified, the same can be said about Kate. Her efforts have been outstanding; publicity, advocacy, social media, training opportunities, organising events and supporting Sue throughout. Kate remains on the board of trustees and her continuing work on **training and engagement** remains crucial to our organisation. I am very pleased to confirm that **Dawn Ewan** was nominated from the existing board members to succeed Kate in the role of vice-chair. Dawn’s experience as a primary school teacher who now operates her own outdoor early years provision ensures we have more early years expertise and advice. Dawn’s contribution is so valuable to the cause.

I take this opportunity to assure the audience reading this report of the broad and varied expertise that is provided by those members of the board. In addition to the aforementioned personnel, it is my pleasure to update you as follows with regard to board members. Tam Baillie, speaker, trainer and consultant. Tam is the former Children and Young People Commissioner for Scotland, presently active in public and child protection, and a member/ambassador for many associated organisations. Professor John Frank, epidemiologist. John has held many esteemed academic roles in his native Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. In July 2008, John was appointed Chair, Public Health Research and Policy at the University of Edinburgh. David Ashford is our Treasurer, in addition to managing our finances so effectively (presently our balance is

£24 036.08), David has committed much of his working life to supporting young people. Since 2004 David has made great use of his legal background to volunteer for a wide range of Scottish organisations, this undertaken from his home on the Isle of Skye. Our most recent addition to the board is Lesley Young. Lesley has a degree in Social Sciences. Lesley then trained as a primary school teacher and she has amassed over twenty years experience as a primary school practitioner. Much of this experience focused on specialised nursery and early years. Lesley now lectures in Early Years at Glasgow Kelvin College.

**I am aware that I have afforded a significant amount of the Chair’s report to updating on board members. I am also aware that this information can be sourced from our website. I make no apology for this section of my Chair’s report. I have taken this opportunity to inform the Annual General Meeting of the varied expertise and knowledge provided by our board members. Our campaign is challenging and I am very pleased to share that we can rely on those with academic, educational, early years, research and policy experience. Members of the Board of Trustees devote an inordinate amount of time and effort to the Upstart campaign and our sincere gratitude and appreciation should be recorded for our Annual General Meeting.**

As mentioned previously, whilst there is no doubting that our campaign aspirations will benefit Scotland’s children, Scotland’s society in general, and future generations, we are very aware that a significant change in educational culture is a major challenge. The change process is slow, to say the least, and convincing the population in general is no mean feat.

The period since our previous Annual General Meeting, October 2023, has predominantly focused on **raising our profile** and **engaging/influencing politicians and other key personnel**.

It is apparent that to make significant progress in achieving our goals, we require to convince our politicians that changing our educational structure and ethos will not only benefit Scotland’s children, but will be of significant benefit to wider society. This change of structure will also be vital in addressing the recent priorities of closing the attainment gap, raising attainment, addressing poverty and mental health issues. Additionally, we have been advised that sustaining our campaign will require some additional finance and some personnel with campaign expertise.

During my twenty-seven years as a primary head teacher I was not too keen on Education Scotland’s evaluation scoring or terms. However, if I were to use them to evaluate Upstart’s performance, I would be uncertain whether to use **very good = major strengths** or **good = important strengths with some areas for improvement**. In the event I would use the latter, those areas for improvement are not for the want of trying or effort. I would state those areas for improvement are for those outwith our organisation who hold responsibility for change.

With regard to progress, I cannot report using any reliable **quantitative data**. However I can confirm that presently:

* **We have 13 600 followers on X (formerly Twitter)**
* **We have 12 200 followers on Facebook**
* **We have 430 subscribed members of our organisation.**
* **Anything between 200 - 400 people have signed up for training events organised by Kate Johnston - the Kym Scott Play Pedagogy series of nine online sessions attracted 453 participants.**

Lesley Young has set up an Instagram account and we hope that this will provide an additional platform for publicity.

Sue, Kate and Lesley will continue to use these social media platforms and training events to maintain our high profile.

**However, with regard to publicity and raising our profile, we need to convince politicians and the wider public, specifically parents/carers of young children and prospective parents/carers that raising the formal starting age of schooling, focusing on a developmental approach that prioritises play and outdoor learning is the way forward.**

**I would urge all Upstart members, supporters and advocates to present our campaign on social media, press, media (where possible) and to lobby your MP’s and MSP’s.**

However, I can update you with regard to progress using some loosely described **qualitative data** by way of ***‘what have we done?’*** since our previous Annual General Meeting.

The following update is not chronological order or any order of importance.

**Over a three day period, 24th to 26th October 2023, various board members organised and managed an Upstart stall at the Scottish Parliament. The stall was set up close to the Members’ Lobby and Debating Chamber. The stall attracted a significant number of MSP’s and their interest was noted. The stall was visited by politicians representing the five major parties; Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats, Conservative, Labour and the Green Party. We considered that this event raised our profile significantly.**

*The following week, Thursday 2nd November 2023, a Scottish Government Debate entitled ‘Early Childhood Developmental Transfer National Change Programme’ took place. Upstart board members and members observed the debate online, however, it would be accurate to state that we were disappointed by the quality of this debate and any associated actions that might have been proposed.*

**During the course of the previous year, significant political progress has been achieved. This progress was initiated by Kaukab Stewart (SNP MSP), when she pledged her unequivocal support to the Upstart campaign, supported raising our profile and she assured us that she would present a motion for debate to the Scottish Parliament. Kaukab was very keen to ensure a kindergarten bill was presented before the 2026 Scottish Parliament election. Kaukab’s advocacy was succeeding in raising our profile, supported by interviews on BBC Scotland’s ‘The Nine’ and BBC Radio Scotland’s ‘Good Morning Scotland’. Regrettably for Upstart, commendably for Kaukab, she was promoted to a cabinet position thus making it not possible to continue her advocacy for Upstart.**

Our fears were allayed when Kaukab informed the board that Fulton MacGregor SNP MSP would succeed Kaukab in ensuring that the advocacy for Upstart would be sustained. Fulton was known to the board as he had supported the successful ‘Give Them Time’ campaign ensuring that parents and carers had the right to defer school entry. Several of the board members attended a parliament reception to recognise the success of the ‘Give Them Time’ campaign where we were afforded the opportunity to discuss Fulton’s involvement and learn of his enthusiasm to support Upstart. We met with Fulton on two occasions to share the aspirations of our campaign. Fulton’s support was confirmed when he presented a very comprehensive motion for debate in the Scottish Parliament Monday 4th March 2024. It was with much excitement and anticipation that board members and other interested parties attended the debate on Thursday 13th June 2024. Eight cross party MSP’s contributed to the debate and there was a great feeling that political support was forthcoming.

**Political support continues to emerge, promisingly cross party support. Willie Rennie (Liberal Democrats), Ross Greer (The Green Party) and Roz McCall (Conservative Party) have made public their support for Upstart. We have a forthcoming meeting with Natalie Don SNP MSP and Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise on Tuesday 10th September 2024. The Labour Party has been slow to engage, however, we have a meeting with Pam Duncan-Glancy and Martin Whitfield on Thursday 19th September 2024.**

Continuing with the political theme, Upstart convened a hustings in the days before the UK Parliament elections of July. The hustings took place on the evening of Tuesday 25th June 2024. Once again, it was encouraging that the five main political parties were represented at these hustings, presenting and responding to questions from the audience. This was an online event. The husting was chaired by long-time Upstart supporter and eminent journalist Lesley Riddoch. Lesley chaired the husting superbly, challenging and probing the politicians. In my capacity as Chair, I take this opportunity to thank Lesley most sincerely for her long term support, agreeing to chair the husting, and for advocating Upstart’s cause on BBC Scotland’s ‘Debate Night’.

**During the course of the last year, board members advised that a ‘steering group’ should attend relevant meetings thus ensuring continuity. Myself, Dawn Ewan and Tam Baillie represent the ‘steering group’. This has consisted mainly of attending meetings with politicians and other delegates. I offer my sincere gratitude to Dawn and Tam who contributed significant time and effort to produce three informative papers as follows:**

* **Policy and Influencing Strategy**
* **Financial Modelling**
* **Challenging Questions**

**These papers have been presented and shared with key personnel in preparation for meetings and discussions.**

I offer my sincere thanks to The Herald newspaper for their continued support to ensure the kindergarten campaign remains high profile and relevant. The editor has ensured that this issue is afforded newspaper space. Thanks also to James McEnaney and Gareth Stell for writing and reporting so comprehensively.

**As our campaign of aspiration to realise a kindergarten stage continues, so the campaign becomes more complex with a need for greater funding and expertise. During the course of the last year, much discussion has taken place with regard to sourcing more funding and perhaps a campaign manager or lead who can advise as our campaign progresses. The steering group has approached three organisations. Discussions have taken place to explore additional funding and the potential for fiscal and campaign advice. Please note the present position:**

* **We submitted a request to Barnardos and attended a meeting with their representatives. Despite supporting our campaign in theory, they were not in a position to provide the support requested.**
* **A submission has been made to The Robertson Trust. I have been assured that this will be presented to their board but presently there is no further update.**
* **We have attended two meetings with Cattanach. Cattanach is an independent Scottish charitable organisation (SCIO) with a focus in supporting early relationships and early childhood. Some of our discussions have been promising with regard to funding, providing administrative support and policy facilitation. No firm decision or commitment has been made and the process is ongoing.**

I met with Nicola Killean, The Children’s Commissioner for Scotland. We had a good discussion and Nicola was supportive of our campaign. However, she is not in a position to provide any support presently as her priority is focussing on adolescents, behaviour and providing them with a voice.

***I hope that my ‘Chair’s Report’ has provided an overview of some of the events and progress experienced during the last year. There have been many more, too many to report and comment on.***

***I confirm that I consider this past year as a year of significant progress, specifically with regard to the attention afforded by politicians. However, we cannot be complacent and we must continue to work tirelessly to maintain this progress.***

***Please do all that you can to drive our ambition and aspiration to an even higher level. We require to increase our membership, post and comment on social media, campaign and appeal to our constituent parliamentarians, write and raise the profile in the press and media,***

***Our ultimate ambition is the creation of a kindergarten stage focussing on child development and play. We acknowledge that this is a long, long change management journey. However, we can influence some of the constituent parts presently; keeping the ‘Play Not Tests’ agenda high profile to ensure the ceasing of P.1 SNSA tests, and ensuring that ‘Realising the Ambition’ becomes the business of all early years, perhaps campaigning for legislation.***

***My sincere appreciation to fellow board members, members and supporters.***

***I look forward to seeing many at the forthcoming AGM/Conference and I am excited to hear our keynote speakers; Carol Craig and Jennifer Knussen.***

I sign off by using Sue’s favourite tag.

Onwards and upwards,

Willie

***Willie French***

***Chair - Upstart Scotland***