

**Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of members
held on Thursday, 9 November 2023 between 4:00pm and 4:55pm
by Zoom webinar**

Directors in attendance: Vittorio Cintio (National President, Chair of the Board and of the meeting), Linda Ford (National Vice President), Elisha Ebdon, Susan Green, Christine Hannan, Fotina Hardy, Brooke Kooymans, Jessica Russ-Smith, Julianne Whyte

Management in attendance: Cindy Smith (CEO), Geoff Bennett (Company Secretary), Alene McGowan (Executive Assistant to the CEO)

Members in attendance: As per the 2023 AGM Zoom attendance register.

The Chair opened the meeting with an *Acknowledgement of Country*.

Attendance, apologies, and introductions

The Chair advised that 71 members were on-line and that a quorum was present. An apology had been received from Cathie Hutchinson. One proxy had been received, though the Chair did not anticipate the proxy needing to be exercised, as there were no matters on the Agenda that required a vote from Members.

The Agenda was taken as read and proceedings were outlined.

The Chair introduced the Board of Directors and congratulated Linda Ford on becoming the Association's first Aboriginal National President. The Chair introduced newly elected Director Ashton Hayes and advised Members that Ms Hayes would take her place on the Board at the conclusion of the AGM.

The Chair acknowledged the contribution of outgoing Director Christine Hannan and thanked Ms. Hannan for her service as a Director, including as a member of the Professional Regulation Committee, People and Culture Committee and National Ethics Committee.

The Chair then turned to matters listed on the Agenda.

Ordinary Business – Agenda item 1 – National President's Report

The National President outlined the significant and ongoing achievements of the Association over the last year.

The National President acknowledged the skill and foresight of CEO Cindy Smith. Under her leadership, he stated, the Board has presided over a period of momentous positive change.

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Date:

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Page 1 of 7

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The National President expressed the view that the social work profession was closer than ever to achieving registration. Whilst AASW's efforts to regulate the conduct of its own members was commendable, it was no substitute for the regulatory powers that will eventually cover the entire profession.

The National President noted that Registration will not be a magic road to respectability - but it will provide an overarching blanket of safety to the communities that we serve. Being relieved of this burden will enable the Association to concentrate on providing continuous professional development, an overarching career framework and the means for AASW members to easily connect with each other.

The National President noted that AASW has implemented a social platform which will enable it to connect with like-minded social workers within its communities, and across the nation. This platform was a better alternative to privately owned social media, which is driven by profit motive which renders it addictive and divisive.

Restructuring has put the Association well on the way to becoming a truly national organisation. State branches have clarity of purpose and AASW has reinvested in more local initiatives.

The National President reported that the Association was in the middle of redesigning the governance of university accreditation of social work programs. This will give all stakeholders a greater say in the further development of program standards. More importantly, the revised standards will place a far greater emphasis on the qualities and capacities of our new graduates.

The National President reflected on the outcome on the recent referendum on *The Voice*. He noted that it was a disappointing result for many social workers and more importantly, a traumatic experience for First Nations Australians.

The National President reflected on the rapid increases in inequality, which were accelerated by COVID. He expressed the view that governments are not done enough to stop impending climate change, and now, because of government inaction across the world, we are in the sorry state of planning for future climate disasters.

Trust in government and faith in democracy is on the decline. Right wing populist movements are exploiting our sense of fear and uncertainty. Instead of welcoming diversity and striving to close the gap between rich and poor, nations are closing their borders and fuelling conspiracy theories that demonise the other- whether they be the poor, refugees, First Nations peoples or minority religions.

The National President concluded his address by acknowledging the work of his Board colleagues, AASW CEO Cindy Smith and her outstanding team, Geoff Bennett (Company Secretary) and Alene McGowan (Executive Assistant to the CEO).

The National President provided a special thanks to Paul Porteous for his guidance and to former National Presidents Bob Lonnie and Imelda Dodds for their support.

Ordinary Business – Agenda item 2 – CEO's report on operations

The CEO acknowledged the contribution of the outgoing National President over the last three years.

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Page 2 of 7

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The CEO reported that AASW had a strong membership base, and a dedicated, skilled and experienced staff to support AASW members with their career - and across areas of practice, and to help build a thriving social work community. She noted that the financial year had been a focus on strengthening connections and supporting professional growth.

The CEO noted that creating a vibrant community is at the core of the AASW's mission. Last year: AASW saw professional connections flourishing at networking events, via AASW's Online Community Hub, across two AASW Symposiums and we saw a large increase in the Mentoring Program. The CEO noted that wherever its members gathered in person, or online, the Association facilitated information exchange and fostered a sense of unity, with the aim that we are enhancing the quality of support we offer one another.

The CEO reported that the Association is dedicated to offering exceptional Continuing Professional Development programs. She noted that Members have access to live-online programs, on demand content, workshops, webinars, training, and other events. In the last financial year 3,800 members attended live-online CPD events, and 5,350 members completed on-demand CPD offerings. 250 Graduates completed the 4 new Graduate Modules on a simulated learning platform.

The CEO reported that AASW's Advanced Supervision Program, co-designed with Family Safety Victoria, was recognised for its excellence. It received commendation and awards in various categories, including Best Capability Building Program and Best Blended Learning Solution. In addition – in the last financial year – AASW introduced for members five new Practice and Career Suites with 223 Resources. Our Podcast - Social Work People - has been downloaded 13,693 times. The CEO expressed the view that it was a great endorsement and represents the quality of the interviews, which showcase social work so well.

The CEO highlighted how AASW supported and nurtured members' careers, at every stage. AASW's Mentoring Program has significantly increased in pairs of mentors and mentees. The Association had facilitated 369 pairs of mentors and mentees - a 102% increase on the previous year. In the coming two years, AASW has plans to implement additional strategies to further enhance the program's impact.

The CEO noted that AASW's digital transformation was important and long overdue. It supports the team to improve our services to members and enhance our members experience when engaging with the AASW. In 2023, AASW completely transformed its digital landscape, introducing MyAASW. MyAASW is a new platform that enables members to access essential resources and manage their CPD and membership more easily.

The CEO reported that the Association launched a greatly improved website in March this year. Management had some initial difficulties during the transition but had worked hard to resolve these, guided by member feedback.

The CEO reiterated that AASW celebrates excellence. The second National Excellence Awards ceremony was held at the AASW Symposium in November 2022, recognising and celebrating outstanding individuals in the field. The CEO once again congratulated Mary-Jo McVeigh, Brenda McDermott, and Claire Perkins for being awarded Social Worker of the Year, /Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Worker of the Year, and Social Work Student of the Year - respectively.

The CEO spoke about valuable insights gained from the 2022 Member Needs and Satisfaction Survey. She thanked the 2,132 participants for their contributions, noting that the survey results help AASW understand members' expectations and guide its efforts to meet them.

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Page 3 of 7

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The CEO advised that in the coming year, the Association will build on the successes in 2023 and explore new avenues for growth and development. AASW will continue to advocate for the social work profession, delivering exceptional resources and events, and nurturing an inclusive and supportive community.

The CEO thanked the AASW members, AASW staff, and the AASW Board for their continuous support. Together: the Association was able to achieve significant outcomes and was confident that the Association will continue to shape the future of social work in ways that bring lasting positive changes.

Agenda Item 3 – Directors’ report, financial statements, and auditor’s report

The National President relayed the apology of Mr. Eric Hummer, the Association’s external auditor. To the extent that there was a question from Members related to the audit of the accounts, the National President offered to take the question on notice, relay the question to the external auditor and provide a written response to the Member.

The National President noted that the Association’s financial statements, directors’ reports and external audit report were provided to Members last month and were available on the Association’s website.

He reported that the Association remains in a good financial position. Although the Association recorded a slight deficit for the year (which was planned), Members’ equity stood at approximately \$2.0 million. The Association has no debt and current assets exceed current liabilities. During this time, the Association has continued to invest in the infrastructure necessary to make the Association efficient, effective, and more accessible to Members. This includes significant upgrades to our IT systems, particularly our website “front end” and Customer Relationship Management platforms.

Agenda item 4 – Appointment of Life Members

The National President announced Ms Kandie Allen-Kelly as a Life Member of the Association. The National President acknowledged the significant contribution Ms. Allen-Kelly made to both the Association and the profession.

Questions from Members

At this point, the National President responded to questions from Members.

In response to questions submitted on-line and in advance of the meeting:

- 7.9% or \$569,000 of the Association’s membership fees comes from AMHSWs.
- 1.8% or \$179,000 of the Association’s total income is derived from AMHSW applications or credentials
- 68% of AMHSW applications are approved on their first or initial application.
- 16% (or \$1.1 million) of AASWs membership fees is spent on the credentialling program.
- Assessors for AMHSW and/or credentialling are specialist social workers with extensive qualifications and background relating to the AMHSW credential.
- There are 8 employees in the National Office that hold a social work degree. This excludes persons who are appointed to the National Research Committee, or who work on Australian Social Work or who run or host various CPD programmes, etc.
- AASW’s membership fee includes the cost of insurance.

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- Credentials are a demonstration of the competence that a social worker has acquired to provide both a safe and high quality of service. While a qualifying degree gives social workers the skills, knowledge, and attributes they need to practise, the complexity of social work means continuous development is required throughout their careers. Credentials assure clients and their families, the Australian community, employers, and funding bodies that accredited social workers have acquired a distinguished level of expertise and are committed to their ongoing professional development.
- Digital badges have been well received by Members; AASW has issued over 29,000 of them. The badges allow Members to showcase their verified social work qualifications, specialisations, education, training, experience, and contribution to the profession. Over 8,800 digital badges were shared by people on social media.
- Voting is not compulsory in AASW Director elections. Whilst the Board would like to see more members voting for their Board representatives, there is little more the Association can do to encourage members to vote. AASW provides easy access to candidate statements (both on our website and that of the Returning Officer), we make it easy to vote (electronic voting) and we provide a platform for candidates to articulate their vision for Directorship of the Association. Director elections are about as comprehensive and as fair and as engaging as we can make them, but we can't force members to vote.
- AASW's English language requirements are (in part) informed by the requirements of the Department of Home Affairs. The Department sets the English language requirements for migration and visa purposes in Australia. Given that social work is a communication-based profession, it is essential that social workers have a high level of English language proficiency, which is why the AASW's English language requirements are higher than the Department of Home Affairs' requirements in some instances and may be higher than some higher education entry requirements. All applicants who are applying for an AASW assessment for migration and/or employment purposes must prove their English language proficiency. The AASW English Language policy relates to the Practice Standards and to ensure the safety and protection of the public so that clients receive high quality services and are protected from unethical practice. AASW mandates IELTS because:
 - the PTE test is only an online computer test, and only covers 3(three) areas of communication- speaking and writing; reading and listening. This is on contrast to the IELTS Academic Test which covers 4(four) specific areas- listening, reading, writing and speaking.
 - There is no face-to-face interaction required in any of the PTE Test components and thus a greater chance of misconduct to occur particularly regarding the speaking/writing test. This may involve a third party acting on behalf of the applicant. The applicant talks to a computer. This is in complete contrast to the IELTS Academic Test whereby for the speaking test component, applicants are required to communicate directly with the Examiner. The IELTS Testing system is recognized worldwide.
- The National President urged Members to read AASW's 2023 Annual Report, in particular pages 10-17. Those pages showcase the collaborative efforts of Members and the Association. Guided by the four pathways outlined in the Strategic Plan, the Annual Report lays out in specific detail the activities we pursued to realise our shared vision and purpose.
- MMR Creative was the company was employed to design and implement the new website. It cost \$123,000 to develop the website, with on-going maintenance covered in the ordinary course of business.

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Page 5 of 7

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- There is no grandparenting clause at AASW for clinical social work qualifications. For over a year, AASW offered fee-free conversion with support from staff to applications from former members of the clinical division of the Australian College of Social Work. As part of the transition, AASW asked (to maintain standards) that each applicant completes a case study.
- That AASW is sensitive to and recognises the stresses that field education placements can place on students, particularly for mature for aged students who may have carer and financial responsibilities, and for younger students dependent on casualised employment, with few safety net supports. Field education is a core and distinctive pedagogy for social work education to ensure that students develop the graduate learning outcomes that are essential for our practice-based profession. Universities have a role to play and thus we encourage students to engage with their University regarding hardship circumstances, scholarships or bursaries which may be available to them.

There have been several coronial inquests reports where the coroner has named social workers as a profession explicitly in their findings. (also increasing). This Association would be derelict in its duty if it did not ensure that graduating students are confident, safe and have had quality learning experiences which provide them with the ability to enter the profession job ready and able to meet these demands but more importantly to communicate and handle situations whereas a social worker they may be placed. In summary: that is why AASW is stating that the hours of practical training is 1,000 hours.

- AASW is advocating to the private health funds that by excluding AMHSWs from being classified as 'Ancillary Providers', the private health funds' customers are placed at a disadvantage - both financially and in terms of receiving assistance for mental health issues. Thanks to AASW's advocacy efforts: AMHSWs are now included under Teachers Health Fund and Bupa schedules. AASW is continuing in its efforts to end this unfair and arbitrary exclusion. The CEO advised that as of the date of this AGM, AASW is in discussions with a further five private health funds.
- AASW actively use member surveys to capture feedback. The Management team analyse the responses to address concerns or trends being raised by our members through the survey. An example of how we used this feedback was in the development of our Digital transformation strategy. AASW engaged an external agency to collect and analyse member requirements as part of our Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Content Management Systems (CMS). The agency surveyed a sample of members and found that just 45% of respondents felt their experience of the website was 'good to excellent', and 42% felt their experience with the portal was 'good to excellent'. This was clearly not good enough and this feedback from members led to an overhaul of our digital platforms.
- AASW's structure is designed around geography, which in years gone by did not give us the visibility of members in their careers or practice. This meant that the Association didn't see students, middle management or upcoming leaders. However, our investment in our Customer Relationship Management system now gives us better insights into our membership. Over the last few years, we have taken deliberate steps to recognise/celebrate our members, including our leaders. We've done this through Fellowship, National Excellence Awards, Mentors and the most recent addition: the PhD series.
- With respect to the Fellow membership category: the CEO responded that AASW requires a five-year minimum demonstration of a significant contribution to the profession: not a five-year

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Page 6 of 7

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maximum. The Fellowship criteria has been extensively benchmarked across other allied professions and broadly aligns with those professions.

In response to queries submitted on-line during the meeting:

- AASW would not be releasing its submission to the Federal Government's *University Accord*, as it was a commercial-in-confidence submission.
- AASW is quite clear as to what roles and/or experience qualifies for mental health accreditation. The CEO noted that approximately 68% of applicants achieve mental health social worker accreditation on the first or initial attempt.
- The AASW attempts to balance resources across the various components of its membership. The CEO reported that of the 17,000 members of AASW, approximately 3,300 are Accredited Mental Health Social Workers in private practice.
- Whilst acknowledging the advancement of the Registration campaign via initiatives taken in the State of South Australia, the Association remains focussed on a national registration framework for social workers, administered through AHPRA.
- The CEO reiterated that branches have a role to play in the success of AASW by hosting professional networking events and other promotional opportunities. Specific funding is available to branches for these activities.
- The vacancy on the AASW Board that will arise at the conclusion of the Annual General Meeting is entirely a matter for the new Board to address. The Company Secretary noted that the Constitution provides the Board with wide powers as to how the vacancy might be filled, including not filling the vacancy at all.
- The CEO reiterated previous explanations as to why AASW mandates ILETS over PTE.

Closing remarks

The National President reiterated that it had been an honour and privilege to lead the AASW for the last three years. He wished the new National President, Linda Ford, every success.

There being no further business, the National President closed the meeting at 4:55pm.