

But Who Looked after the Staff?

Judith Bray

It had become clear soon after the Wales Region of PPA was set up in 1976 that the Region needed its own Personnel Committee. Its funding came from a separate source, the Welsh Office, and it also had a different pattern of employment from that in the ten English Regions.

One of my early jobs as Committee Chairman was, with others from Wales, to meet the Chairman of the National Executive Committee of PPA and other key National members, in London. We discussed the anomalies that had developed because of our unique circumstances and left with the task of amending and updating the employment documents to fit the situation in Wales.

At that time Wales Region employed nine Field staff, four Regional Office staff and three Resource Centre staff, all of whose posts had job specifications and descriptions and detailed terms and conditions of employment, so any changes in these posts added considerably to the routine business of the Personnel Committee so we were kept very busy.

At our routine quarterly meetings the Committee dealt with any matters referred by the Regional Council, Field Staff sessions, Office Management Committees or the National Personnel Committee, as well as arranging annual job appraisals for all staff. At times of staff change the Committee was responsible for advertising, shortlisting (which was often done very satisfactorily on the telephone, by means of a 'Conference' call), interviewing and appointing.

We had to get to grips with employment legislation too and invested in a copy of Croner's Comprehensive Guide. After payment of an annual subscription the Guide was updated throughout the year and barely a month passed without the arrival of closely printed sheets of new

information to replace existing pages in the manual. The information sometimes took time to understand and assimilate but was invaluable in keeping the Committee abreast of changes and on the right side of Employment Law. Not that we had difficult employees but questions arose which needed answers and at one time we had the unenviable task of making a member of staff redundant when the funding which supported her post was unexpectedly not renewed.

By the time that Wales PPA became an independent organisation in 1987 the Personnel Committee was well prepared as it had already taken over an increasing amount of responsibility from the National Personnel Committee and had built up a wealth of knowledge and experience.

For me, one of the most enjoyable parts of Personnel Committee work were the occasions when I travelled the length and breadth of Wales representing the Committee at annual staff appraisals. We met in village halls, leisure centres, local authority offices, college buildings and in PPA offices, some venues bleak, with minimal furniture and facilities, some very comfortable. The appraisals were occasions for both employee and employer to discuss the requirements of the job as well as the highs and lows of the past year in terms of performance: was there a difference between the perceptions of the job, were the expectations unrealistic, did the line management work, were there any clashes of personality and, in the case of Field Staff, were they coping with the need to plan their workload and to work flexible hours?

The employment of paid staff by an organisation run by volunteers, a peculiarity of PPA, sometimes brought unforeseen problems. It came as a surprise to me when one Development Officer explained how much pressure she felt when she saw dedicated volunteers working long hours for the Association while she herself was paid for her input. Flexible working hours could be very demanding on family life when evening meetings and overnight stays were necessary, particularly so if the totally unexpected happened. No one who was involved will forget the Regional Council Meeting of January 1982 in Preston Montford when heavy snowfall disrupted road and rail traffic and many members had at least one additional night away from home.

Job Appraisals for Development Officers followed their County Forward Planning Meeting which gave us, the visiting members of the panel, an invaluable insight into the setting in which the DOs worked. We gained a better understanding of the geography of the County and the amount of the travelling required, we heard of the role of Fieldworkers and of the extent of parental involvement in the groups – the grass roots from which the Association should spring. We saw for ourselves the strengths (and weaknesses) of the County Committee and its relationship with the statutory organisations and we became very aware that having the same job descriptions did not mean that all DOs had identical jobs.

We aimed to make the appraisal a positive experience for all involved and hearing what is done about Job Appraisals in some other organisations, I think that PPA got it right on most occasions.