

OSCR Podcast

Transcript of Episode 1: OSCR's new Corporate Strategy

John Fellows 0:14

So thanks very much for joining us today. Welcome to OSCR's new podcast. In this series, we're going to try to shine a light on the work of Scotland's charity regulator and talk about the issues that matter to Scotland's 25,000 charities. My name is John Fellows, and I'm the Senior Manager for Digital and Communications for the Scottish Charity Regulator.

Laura Anderson 0:36

And I'm Laura Anderson, and I'm OSCR's Senior Manager for Higher Risk Cases and Quality Assurance. Today, we're joined by OSCR's Chief Executive Maureen Mallon and our Chair Marieke Dwarshuis to talk about OSCR's new corporate strategy, which will underpin all of the work of the organisation over the next three years right up to 2026.

John Fellows 0:57

So I want to kick off today's discussion with a question for Maureen, so Maureen you've been the Chief Executive of OSCR since 2019. Which I think in historical terms is quite a long time ago now. So a lot has happened in the world, since 2019. But what do you think are the main changes you've seen at OSCR in the period you've been in charge?

Maureen Mallon 1:19

Well it does feel like a long time and a short time in equal measure, John, it's been an absolute pleasure, it's a humbling job to do. In terms of the things that have happened over the last four years, one of the big things I think we've done is have a really good big focus on risk assessment in its truest sense and using that for prioritisation. So that's really, if I break that down into what that really means there's been substantial moves in terms of thinking about is that high, low, medium risk of the issues that come in to us very fast flowing. And what we then do is, if we take the low risk, for instance, it means we look at those a lot faster. So we're looking at things and trying to get out people's way, if you like. There's an

easy thing for us to either say that's not for us, or that you don't need to worry about that, we get those things moving through the system really fast. When we look at high risk, and we identify them, we're getting smarter and smarter actually looking at what are the true issues in that? What are the big things that we need and resourcing those effectively. We shifted our resourcing because we wanted to be much more agile, so we had a big organisational redesign. Would I like to have done that in the pandemic? No. Did we need to do that? Yes. So we did it during that time, and it's giving us real dividends of having an agile workforce that we can move around where we can see that we need to shift priorities. And that feels really good. We've done an awful lot of smart things around our corporate-ness generally, we brought lovely people like John in for instance...

John Fellows

Very kind of you, thank you.

Maureen Mallon

I would say that to the host, wouldn't I? We identified new roles that we really needed to have to future proof the organisation. We did all that and we moved to hybrid working and that's here for the long term. So lots of change.

John Fellows 3:04

So it's not, so things haven't set in stone at OSCR I suppose since the 2005 Act, and OSCR later on. And we're still moving in a particular way.

Maureen Mallon 3:20

Very much.

Laura Anderson 3:22

Marieke, you've been Chair for less than a year, what were your first impressions of OSCR? And what have you learned during your time here so far?

Marieke Dwarshuis 3:31

Yes, well, I've been here since October, last year. So that's what, just over six months, really. And my first impressions of OSCR, of course weren't, in a sense, first impressions. And I should clarify for some of those listening, that I had a spell over 12 years ago of actually working for OSCR and I was a member of the senior team. So I was acquainted with OSCR before. I worked for the organisation for five years. So my first impressions were really impressions of the things that had changed in the intervening 12 years. And there was a lot as you would expect, a lot has changed in the 12 years, since 2011, to 2022, some of those changes have come about as a result of the very recent things that have happened in society. Now that everywhere, we've seen a lot of changes as a result of the pandemic, in our ways of working, and then the way in which many ways of working now have become part of how we do our daily jobs that we could never have envisaged even two or three years ago. So that has brought a lot of change about in OSCR, and that was accelerated in a way by the recent restructure that Maureen talked about. So those two things have really set ourselves up with a with a really good platform to take on the new responsibilities that come about when the legislation that's currently going through Parliament, I'm sure we'll talk about that in a minute, that's currently going through Parliament will be implemented. The organisation is in a really good place because we're digitally enabled where we've got, as Maureen says, a workforce that is, well, it's a civil service type word really, it's agile, which basically means that people are able to talk to, to work across different parts of the organisation, and it is possible for the organisation to move people around to areas of work where there is more pressure, and that is a very significant change from where I know the organisation to have been before. And what's also really struck me since I've started as Chair is just how enthusiastic and forward looking really the staff are that are currently in OSCR, there is a lot of new thinking around, a lot of new thinking around how we can really do our role and make our role as a regulator most meaningful and that is something I think the staff and the Board that I'm working with, really share and thinking, how can we be meaningful as a regulator to charities in Scotland? And how can we really through our regulation ensure that the charity sector contributes as well as possible to Scottish society as a whole really. And I feel really enthused about that.

John Fellows 6:33

Thanks very much. I mean, we've kind of started to touch on this stuff already. But what the focus of discussion we wanted to have today was around OSCR's new Corporate Strategy, which we've just published. You know, it sets out our overall plans and the direction of travel for the next couple of years. So if we fast forward to 2026, what will be different? You've talked both I suppose about the changes

that have happened in the last couple of years. You know, building a platform and getting ready for things. But what do you actually expect to be different or better for charities? Marieke you talked a little bit about the legislation that's going through Parliament, what are the main things in there that charities will see a change around?

Marieke Dwarshuis 7:21

What will be better for charities and also for the public in general in Scotland, of course, because some of the measures in the Bill that will be different, are they require charities to do different things, but they have a significant impact on what will be in, for example, the information that will be available for the public in general about charities. So we will all see a significant change there that there will be more information about charities available in the public domain. For example, the public generally or anybody involved in charities or wanting to know about charities will be able to see charities accounts, published online, if the legislation is going through as intended. But also it will be possible to see who is involved in the running of the charities, which is also going to be a significant change. And what will be different also from, and Maureen will no doubt want to come in here, but what we all want to do as a regulator is to be – Maureen talked earlier about prioritisation and being clear about where we actually devote our resources. And I think we will carry on on that journey and be even clearer about where our priorities lie on how we match that to the risk that we see. And that's going to be a very, very important thing to do in the context. And again, I'm sure we'll come on to this, in the context of very tight public sector finances. But you might want to come in here Maureen.

Maureen Mallon 8:51

Yeah, I think, to me, we live in fascinating times, we're building on a mature organisation, you know, we've been around for a while now. And I think the confidence in the organisation to embrace change is something that I've seen really come together over the last few years. And I'd say if I fast forward into '26, what I can see we're going to be doing is building on that confidence to say, actually we've always done this this way but we can do this smarter, we can do this better. There's a huge willingness to short circuit traditional ways of doing things, to pick up phones to say to people come on that we can get better than this. And to engage differently. To me, the ultimate thing that this new Corporate Strategy is about is about improvements and efficiencies. In terms of looking at the public service...

John Fellows 9:45

When you talk about change, sorry, when you talk about change there, if I was a charity, I'd be worried about that, wouldn't I? Because I've been doing this, I've been doing all this interaction with OSCR for so long, and I'm quite happy with that. And you're coming to go and change it – what reassurance can you give charities that we're not ripping everything up and it's change for change's sake?

Maureen Mallon 10:08

Absolutely John. I think that we've had some really good examples of that recently. So when we brought in the new OSCR Online, and that was a big change for charities, I think, I really hope a lot of people can take the reassurance of how we handled that. We put out guidance, webinars, podcasts, loads of us came in over Christmas and New Year to take calls to make sure that anybody that was trying it thinking, what's the change in this could see. But also, I think, what the feedback we had from that was good, because people are saying, 'Oh, you're not changing, you're throwing everything out, you're making things better and simplifying'. We're actually thinking as a really strong user focus, there's a customer focus basis to this, I think there's quite a borderline obsession here about how do we make this better for our people. One of the lovely things about being the Chief Exec here is you walk the room here, and you hear people really desperately care about the people who are on the other end of the call. So people are not just trying to think, how do I do this fast and get out of my way to charities they are actually thinking, I want this to be better for charities. So charities are better at what they do, and they need to contact us less. If we get our job, right – nothing personal – but charities should be talking to us less because they don't need to. Because they can find stuff online, they can follow things through simply, they don't have to come to us because they're feeling that they've failed try and do things themselves. So I think all of that in terms of efficiency is actually not about the nasty side of efficiency. It's about the really positive way of, why would you fill in five forms when you can do a download of things. And it's a nice, easy thing. So what we're trying to do is make it better.

John Fellows 11:39

Absolutely. I've got the impression in my time here, if we can let good charities who are run well get on with our work, then that's to everybody's benefit. And then we can focus a time more on where things aren't going so well. And your

know so that means that the vast 99% of Scotland's charities will hopefully spend less time with OSCR over the period if we get if we get this right, I suppose.

Maureen Mallon 12:09

Yeah, I think that's strangely, that's weirdly right, John, I think. That's one of the other things that I would like to see over this period is also a lot of those charities who are getting things right, I would really like to see positive lessons learned stuff going out. I'd really like that positive kind of, here's a great a bit of practice. Now that's something we've been always really cautious about thinking when somebody says, what's a great charity for me to go into talk to. who's a great Board? We all look each other going oh, oh, that's quite a scary question. Because how do you say, well you can say, you know, on the ninth of August, that was a really great Board, I can't tell you how it was on the 25th of December, it may have been rubbish by then. So we've always been a little bit cautious about pointing to practice. And I think something around that is something that this organisation is getting to the space where it could be looking at that too, and having that different engagement with those who are doing really well.

John Fellows 12:59

Thank you very much.

Laura Anderson 13:01

Sorry, John, I was just going to say I think as a regulator Maureen, picking up on that point about how sometimes we've been cautious in the past about pointing towards something. But actually, as a regulator, there's something about we like to be very evidence led, very evidence based in the choices that we make, and the actions that we take..

Maureen Mallon 13:17

We should.

Laura Anderson 13:17

We should, you're absolutely right. And I suppose that makes me think about the kind of key priorities that we've got outlined in our new Corporate Strategy, and

what those actually are going to mean in practice for OSCR and our work in working with all charities right across Scotland. One of the priorities that we've got in there, and it links into something that you spoke about earlier, Marieke, about the public having access to more information that they need about charities in Scotland and about how those charities are regulated. And I'm interested maybe in understanding a wee bit more about the sort of information that we've published previously, how maybe useful that has been, what that's been used for. And what additional kind of benefits might the public get from additional information that's published going forward about charities that the public hadn't been able to have access to previously?

Marieke Dwarshuis 14:06

Well, that sort of information that as I understand it, because of course, I have come to this and I have watched this, rather than having been part of this, that has been previously published have been reports that tell us something about the state of the sector in Scotland based on the information that we get that we collate on charities through the returns that they give us for the charity register. So we get a Sector Overview Report that tells us about numbers of charities, size of charities, maybe about where they are located, what their purposes are, but also we do a charity survey every few years, I think it is. I'm looking at...

John Fellows 14:41

Every couple, I think.

Marieke Dwarshuis 14:42

Every couple yeah, John knows. Where we asked charities questions about what's going on for them and what's important for them at that moment in time. But those are general reports. And it doesn't necessarily tell you anything about one particular charity as a member of the public that you might be interested in, because you might, perhaps think about donating some of your money to them or some of your time even to them. And you might be interested to know what it is they're doing, you know, how they're run, how well they're run. So there'll be much more information about individual charities available through our register that members of the public can look at if they have a particular interest, including, as I said, also those who are responsible for running the charity. But we will also, as I understand it, John might actually keep me right in this because he'll know better than I do. But we have an intention to use the information that we

collate through the Annual Report process in such a way that we can actually tailor reports, and that we can make reports about a particular area and say, well, this is actually what's going on in this particular area. And that can inform all sorts of things, that can be useful not just for members of the public, but for other policymakers. It can be useful for people in Scottish Government, it can be useful for local authorities, it can be useful for funders, it can be used in all sorts of ways. So as long as we have the capacity to do that, we will certainly have the capability in terms of the information and the digital infrastructure to pull out that sort of information. So I don't know, John, do you want to add to that?

John Fellows 16:24

Oh no absolutely, it was just I suppose, my perspective as the Comms guy. There's two things. The first one is, I think it's about transparency. And I think if we can help shine light on to charities in general, and individual charities, it keeps everybody honest and right. And so that's a good thing for people that it's not done in the dark, it's done in a new open, and people can take confidence from that. And some of the things we've talked about in terms of the legislation about the potential for publishing accounts in full and for trustees and other things, it breeds more transparency, I think. And that's a good thing. Second thing is, I think we need to, if we can make, we've got data and 25,000, charities, and what they do, and their purposes and other things, and if we can make that data more accessible, and be more proactive about getting it to the right people when they're making decisions, then I think, you know, then people will make better decisions that impact charities and their day-to-day work, so whether that is government or local government, or funders, or others, you know. In practical terms, making changes to our website and the register so that people can use a live version of register through an API, and plug that into their own system and use the public information more smartly. That will help charities and reduce the burden on charities going forward. So I think there's great potential in the next couple of years for us doing that sort of work. It's an exciting thing for us.

Maureen Mallon 18:01

I think you're right John, I think the thing I would say about that is, I think we're already well down the journey with a lot of that. So what's really nice about this, as Marieke was mentioning the capacity in the organisation, and we're always thinking, what do we actually have time to do and what's the biggest thing that we've got to prioritise? For me, what we've done with this, which is really neat, is that we've made it very self service. And we already had pretty good responses

from some from MSPs and MSP offices a year or two ago, when we started on this journey of saying, you want to go in and take this information down and download it specifically for the geography that you represent. Here it is, here's the link, and here's the process for doing that. And I think the more that we can enable people to go and actually extrapolate what they need from that public, publicly available data, really smart funders, really smart organisations, smart charities use that for really good effect. And we've said to some charities before, if you're really smart with this, and you're going into a new geography or a new thematic, come in and already looking and use that stuff to show why you're needed. So I think the endless possibilities about that, that great data, because there's nothing worse than us collating lots of data, and then nobody using it. So I think we're getting better and better and better at sharing that.

John Fellows 19:20

I think that makes sense to me. I think there's an obligation for us to be proactive about this. And that's hopefully what we want, what we want to do. Maureen, one of the next parts of the Corporate Strategy talks, this touched on somebody mentioned a minute ago, and it's about providing, it says that we will provide charities with the tools and the guidance they need to meet the regulatory obligations. So that sounds that sounds quite efficacious and quite a lot of work. So could you give some reassurance, I suppose about the sort of changes that we want to make. So you've talked about OSCR Online, and we updated the way that we collect information, what sort of further changes can charities expect in broad terms over the next few years? Will we move other things online? What's our kind of general direction of travel?

Maureen Mallon 20:16

It's about streamlining and making things more simple in many ways. One of the things that we're looking at that I think is really exciting is the annual return approach that we're taking. We're trying to make sure that as people are thinking about sending us information, they're not thinking, right, that's that stuff I need to send to OSCR for no apparent reason. And Laura and I are looking at each other and smiling, because we've been talking about this on public platforms for a few years now. But it's really exciting to me to say, we want charities to be getting information together, that it's actually beneficial to them, that they're stopping and thinking about it in a self evaluation process, using our annual return approach, to actually enable them to think, oh, I hadn't thought about that that way. So we're actually trying to make sure that charities are using the approach

that they are required to give us because they're registered with us, and then that that's actually useful to them as well as to us.

John Fellows 21:11

Aye.

Maureen Mallon 21:11

So there's something about that type of improvement. One of the other weird things that we're trying to do is to try and stop doing things. And so the reason it says...

John Fellows 21:19

That sounds innovative.

Maureen Mallon 21:19

Well, fingers crossed, what we're trying to do when we said, it's about meeting our regulatory obligations, we found over the last few years that people came to us for almost everything. I met somebody who runs a really big charity recently and she said, in all honesty, Maureen, we come to your people all the time, because they know what they're at. We'd rather come to them, than all sorts of other people, whether it's intermediary bodies, all sorts of specialist agencies, we just come and ask OSCR because we know we're going to get the right information. Well, that's great. But that's actually not what we're for, we're not there to provide general advice and services to people in the round. So what we are trying to do is to really hone into, we're the regulator, we do that part, we want to do that brilliantly. And we want to enable others to do that. So we're changing our concerns forms, all sorts of things to signpost people to the people who can do that best, who are actually paid to do that type of work, and who are labelled to do that work, rather than us becoming a little bit more of the generalist that we maybe we had a few years ago. So this is about us trying to tighten up and streamline what we do. And what we are for, and to enable others to get on with their business as well. Make it easier for charities to get to the right place. There's nothing worse than going to people and saying, I thought you could tell us the answer to this. And you say, I can give you all sorts of general things, but you need to talk to somebody else.

John Fellows 22:38

Yeah, that sounds like it kind of ties in with the next priority as well a little bit, Laura I think you're going to talk about that?

Laura Anderson 22:46

Yeah, I think it does. Because, you know, one of the priorities that we've got in there is about the delivery of smart, responsive, effective regulation, you know, buzzwords that naturally make you feel you know, they are the right things to be doing, things that positively impact on Scotland's charity sector and its beneficiaries. Maureen, do you want to talk a little bit more about the thinking around that, that those references to being smart, responsive, effective in our role as a regulator? And what does this you know, maybe look like for the average charity in Scotland? If indeed, there is such a thing as an average charity?

Maureen Mallon 23:19

You and I both know, there's no such thing as an average charity! And that's, that's the thing. I always get scared when people say, oh, well, I've worked for a charity, I know all about charities. I think, no, you really don't, you know about your subset or a discrete component. 25,000 extraordinarily diverse bodies out there, and we're trying to look after them all. And I think that move to smart, responsive and effective regulation is, in the nicest possible way, going back to some of the stuff that John talked about at the top of this, is saying kind of getting out of the way of some people. And we're also trying to say to some people who's come and say, oh, I don't like the way he did that I would like him to, I'd like you to go and shout at him about that, no, actually, we're trying to empower people to go back and engage in debate properly, and to take things up with charities directly rather than trying to use us as the middle brokers, if you like. So that smart, effective, responsive stuff is about us getting into the heart of the things that we need to do to make sure that charities are run extraordinarily well, and to make that cleaner and clearer, rather than finding ourselves in that brokerage space. Where we're actually charity trustees really need to take the space and to own the space of being really proud of the fact that they're driving that charity. They're running that charity, and they should be accountable back. And so I think one of the things we've tried to do is make sure that people talk about empowerment and a bit of a corny way sometimes, but it's actually about saying to people, that's not our job, that's the charities job or that's the membership bodies job.

That's the other person's job out there. And for us to then get into the really big nuggets, the big, big priority things that give public confidence in charities – that's ultimately what we are for.

John Fellows 25:00

Thank you very much. So we're about two thirds of the way through the priorities, and this one is a slight change. It's more internally focused than externally focused. We've talked a lot about improving our digital processes and making it easier for charities and legislation and other things. But the fourth priority is about how OSCR will focus on our people and have a motivated, flexible and well supported workforce. So you know, how central, I suppose, are the staff to this plan, Maureen, and what sort of, briefly, what sort of employer are we going to be over the next three years?

Maureen Mallon 25:50

So we're in a really, I think, a really interesting position. We are small, non ministerial office, we employ about 50 people, but we are all civil servants. And so there is a really nice opportunity of being here to hone skills to really focus in on service delivery, and so on. And to then actually be part of the civil service family and move in and out. One of the nicest things that we've actually seen in the last few years is people actually starting to move in and out of the organisation that little bit more. And we had become quite an internal focused organisation and people stayed an awful long time. That's a brilliant thing because it builds up a specialism. But it also stops people being able to go and find a great career progression, it's hard to get career progression and an organisation of 50. So we've been shaking that up a bit. But ultimately, regulation's a people business, we need people here to understand that regulation thoroughly, we need to be specialists, we need to also be agile and be able to move across the departments and so on.

Laura Anderson 26:51

Marieke, we all of course know that the current economic environment is immensely challenging for us all, not just for charities, but indeed our families, our local communities as well. I think this really strongly links into that last priority that we have in the in the new Corporate Strategy about maintaining a focus on best value, continuous improvement, collaboration, and we've touched on a few of those in the discussion that we've had today. But how do you think that the

tightening of public sector funding over the next few years will particularly impact upon the plans that we've got so far? And will we just be expected to do more with less? Or how are we going to maybe find efficiencies in these challenging circumstances?

Marieke Dwarshuis 27:32

Well, it's a very good question. And I think it won't have escaped anybody's notice that the economic environment is also very challenging in the public sector. It's all over the news all the time, how the public sector finances are constrained, and how there is huge pressure on public sector finances, and OSCAR is not isolated from that. So what I would say about that, in OSCAR's context is that we have set out our ambitions in the corporate plan. So the direction of travel isn't going to change, that is where we want to go. What might have an impact is that if we are having to travel in that direction, with fewer resources at our disposal, the speed of travel might be impacted, but the direction of travel won't change. So if I say the speed of travel might be impacted, the other the other thing that we may have to get even better at than we already are, is to be very, very clear about what we do and what we don't do, that we're very clear about our priorities, and that we target our resources there where they can have the most impact. People say, oh, you know, is that is that just doing more with less? That's not really how I see it, I see it and say, well, we have a certain amount of resource at our disposal, and we will use that to greatest effect. We will therefore do things that have the greatest impact. So that is...

John Fellows 28:58

That sounds very much like every charity I'm aware of and I'm quite...

Marieke Dwarshuis 29:02

Yes, yes. I mean the challenge is...

John Fellows 29:26

This won't be an unusual situation for the people that are listening.

Marieke Dwarshuis 29:03

Yeah, the challenges that we face in that respect are very different from most of the charities that we that we work with, you know, we have a genuine understanding in that respect, and also in respect of the fact that we are not in full and ultimate control of the resources that we will have available to carry out our work. And that will also not be unfamiliar to quite a number of charities that we work with. So the strategies that you deploy, to deal with that will be familiar to lots of lots of people. And collaboration is something that will be required of us in any case in the public sector reform agenda, but it's something that as a regulator, you have to do anyway, we cannot regulate in isolation. We rely on other organisations, we rely on information coming from organisations, we've relied on shared agendas. And so we will seek to collaborate even more with other regulators but also other organisations that have an oversight function with some of the charities that we work with. And continuous improvement I think our recent history in the organisation that which is what Maureen really started this conversation with, shows that really, we are very much focused on continuous improvement and really seeking all the time for ways in which you can do routine business even better and being a very sort of being quite small and close knit organisation where people are empowered to make suggestions and to make improvements within their own areas of work. Because it is not a very large bureaucratic organisation, we can see continuous improvement on a day-to-day basis in action. So I am very heartened by that. So it won't be without its challenge. You know, the next few years as we will all find in our personal lives and in our working lives wherever we work. But I don't think we should be disheartened by it and actually find it a way to make us focus on those things that are truly important to us.

John Fellows 31:16

That sounds like a really lovely way to finish. And actually there's a kind of full circle there, you know, I think what we've talked about since the start is that as a regulator I don't think, certainly before I came here I wouldn't have thought of a regulator as a dynamic organisation, but over time we're changing, we're trying to improve, we're trying to be cognizant and understand the situation of charities and make it easier for them so we can spend, we can focus our time better. I think that's certainly what I see is going to come out of the next three years. So on that point, I think that probably wraps up our discussions for today. I'd like to thank Marieke and Maureen for joining us and giving us your overview and your experience and your wisdom. And Laura for giving the gravitas and the expertise that she brings to these calls as well, I'm always grateful for that in the office as well as on the podcast – so thank you Laura. If you're listening and you've got any ideas for topics for any future podcasts just drop us a line at info@oscr.org.uk

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