

## An interview with Sharon Adamson

*This paper has been written by Healthcare Improvement Scotland's Strategic Planning team. It contains an interview with Sharon Adamson on her retirement from a long career as a Strategic Planner in health and social care. The interview was conducted by Greg Hill O'Connor, Strategic Planning Advisor. The purpose was to capture the learning from a long and influential career in strategic planning so it can be used as institutional learning for the next generation of strategic planners.*

Sharon Adamson was the Director of Regional Planning for the west of Scotland for eight years until January 2023. She has a total of 37 years' experience within the NHS. I spoke to Sharon about her experiences in planning work, hearing about her route into planning, how the discipline has changed and where it might be going. The aims of capturing these insights are to transform these tacit reflections and learning into explicit learning for the wider planning community. This is hugely important for such a small, interconnected community with individuals who build a vast amount of experience over their careers, operating in a complex and highly influential context.

### How did you end up in that position?

There is no strategic planning school in the same way there is medical school, law school and other such professions. Sharon describes strategic planning as a "vocational skill", one that has been developed over time. Sharon started in clinical services as a speech and language therapist, then as a service manager, general manager for surgery and then planning. This was supplemented by an acceleration management programme that aimed to support clinical leaders into management posts.

### What are the key features of the role?

Sharon has been the Director of Regional Planning for the West of Scotland Region. This incorporates NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, NHS Lanarkshire, NHS Dumfries and Galloway, and NHS Ayrshire and Arran, along with the Golden Jubilee. As an indication of the complexity soon to come in our conversation, Sharon's role also involves working with NHS Highland including Argyll and Bute in relation to the services that they 'buy' from Glasgow.

**“ it's about  
having consistent  
pathways ”**

“My role is very much about planning for service delivery where you have to work across board boundaries” along with establishing “planning scenarios that say strategically we want to get from this point to this point.”

The elements of the role described by Sharon fall into one of these categories – getting different services aligned to the same goals; and supporting systems to shift from one way of working to another.

A lot of what Sharon discusses is the expertise of the strategic planner is problem solving – looking at how to ensure “deliverability and sustainability” of services within certain constraints, usually centred on supply and demand.

### Why do you think planning is so important?

Strategic planning is about “trying to work through whether they [models of care] make any sense or not and whether they're going to have the intended impact and over what timeline. Some of these things will come to fruition because if you're looking at the population health component of that, it's a long-term strategy. It's not something you're going to get any real return on”.

Strategic planning staff and the approaches we use can support services to “hear people and be able to make sense of that”. Further to this, in an increasingly complex service landscape, strategic planning can “bring people together to talk in a way that allows you to get beyond taking a side and help find a way through”.

### In your experience what do you think has been the biggest change in planning?

“There's a lot of information” Sharon explains the importance of information quite simply as allowing planners to “look at the whole system in a different way depending on how you do it, to try and understand if you do X, how does that impact on Y”. The information Sharon describes ranges from modelling data that allows for understanding around affordability, workforce etc, but also “what does that do to impact another part of your system at this stage?”.

**“ We can't afford to be replicating and duplicating ”**

She also noted the wider importance of information in shaping the very models of care you might want to implement – “People need to understand the cohorts of people were trying to do something with, because unless you can identify who they are and what you're going to do, how will you know if it will be a success”.

In discussing information, Sharon alludes to the other big change in strategic planning, which is the increased awareness of and engagement with complexity. Complex needs and complex systems.

“To understand what good would look like in terms of service delivery systems delivery, moving into a more systems management and understanding that you're all part of something that needs to come together, and you need to be able to balance it.”

### What do you think are the main challenges facing planners today?

Within the context of planning, there is discussion around the role of planning and planners in a complex environment: “I think one of the challenges we've got just now is we'll get lots of pockets of things that develop, and they may have lots with similar things. But we can't afford to be replicating and duplicating what we're doing.” This is something that Sharon discusses with great emphasis, the need to reorganise things, challenge current practice and make fundamental changes, stating that “we give up nothing and we add on layers and layers and layers”.

Making change and removing practice that we know doesn't have an impact can be difficult within big organisations with lots of people:

"You do need to win hearts and minds" and focus on meaningful change to practice and behaviour rather than just "moving it to a budget with a new heading to try and restart it". Part of this is about moving away from traditional ways of managing performance and the role of targets that can drive unintentional behaviours. Sharon asserts: "you've got a lot of champions out there who really do want to do things differently".

Sharon also notes the personal challenge of working in a complex system, where planning interventions are about making connections and creating the conditions for widespread services improvement. Meaning that sometimes "it's hard to show that personally, you made a difference" as often "you don't get to deliver it yourself", rather you support and enable others to.

### Where do you see the future of planning?

After reflecting on her time in the NHS and in the planning role, Sharon is very clear about the future of planning, we need to "grasp some of the nettles".

**“ It's important to understand what it is we are trying to fix ”**

"I think we talk about doing things strategically and looking at things, but we don't change anything fundamentally".

This is likely to involve moving away from "fixing it in these different areas" and "going back to fundamentals":

"Start with what are we going to try and do here? What do we see and what will that involve? and who are the people we are looking after in those environments?"

A key element to this is looking at the role of the community and working more intentionally to build community capacity and ways of working to be a catalyst to wider change:

"I've bought into the model that we will keep as much in the community as we possibly can" as "the reality is you need to build capacity somewhere and my view would be you need to go back to the drawing board and understand what you're going to do with the population health. What do you need in the community to manage that and then look to see what the art of the possible is there".

Within this there is a big challenge around "what is the intervening period looking like? Because you're still going to need a set of intermediate actions to hold all of this together while you change it".

**If you would like to share your story about working in a strategic planning role, we would like to hear from you. Please contact the team at [his.transformationalsystemchange@nhs.scot](mailto:his.transformationalsystemchange@nhs.scot)**

**“ We need to work collectively to deliver ”**

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This resource has been developed by Strategic Planners within the Transformational Change - Systems Unit within Healthcare Improvement Scotland. It is designed to support the Strategic Planning Community of Practice by providing introductions to concepts and topics relevant to Strategic Planners.

**Healthcare Improvement Scotland**  
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