

For immediate release

‘YOU CAN’T PARENT BY COMMITTEE’, SAYS NEW SOCIAL WORK PRESIDENT

Children in care benefit from a strong and sustained relationship with an individual social or care worker, said Harriet Dempster, the new President of the Association of Directors of Social Work.

Speaking in advance of the first Scottish meeting of the Care Leavers Association this Friday (June 26) she said: “We say that councils should be good ‘corporate parents’ and provide young people in care with ‘joined up support’. This is absolutely true - but you can’t parent by committee.”

The Care Leavers Association, which is run by care leavers and for care leavers, is working alongside the Glasgow-based Debate Project, which was set up by the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum and a group of young people who chose to stand up and fight for a better service for young people leaving care. The Debate Project works with young people across Scotland and supports them to express their ideas, experiences and opinions about living in and leaving care.

Harriet Dempster believes that social work departments need to listen to what young people who have been in care are saying: “Many care leavers say that a strong relationship with an individual social worker makes a big difference,” said Harriet Dempster. “The challenge for us is to get that relationship right for all children in care.”

Cheryl Leggett, who is a member of the Debate Project, was in care in Moray before going on to graduate from Glasgow University. She believes that the encouragement she received from her social worker was a key reason for her success: “My social worker made a big difference. She helped give me the confidence that nothing was out of my reach.”

Heidi McGinlay, another member of the Debate Project was in care in Edinburgh and is now a party manager. She emphasises how she benefited from having a single social worker from the day she went into care to the day she left: “She was always there when you needed someone to talk to. Because she had been with me from the start I felt she understood me and knew what I needed.”

Harriet Dempster added: “Vulnerable young people can find themselves going through residential care and several foster care placements. Added to this, there may be a wide range of professionals involved in their welfare. Against this background a continuing relationship with a single social worker can offer much needed stability.

“If you listen to young people in care it is clear that their lives are often turbulent. They talk of the need for someone who they can call on whenever they need an understanding ear. Above all, they want someone who is there for the long term. The challenge for us as social workers is to demonstrate the staying power to be there whatever and offer that consistency.”

Young people in care often come from difficult backgrounds which present them with real challenges, she explained. “However, we tend to focus too much on the negative rather than find the positive. The fact is that many young people in care develop the confidence and the ability to succeed.”

ENDS

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Notes for editors

1. Interviews are available with Harriet Dempster, Cheryl Legget and Heidi McGinlay
2. Harriet Dempster is President of the Association of Directors of Social Work and Director of Social Work for Highland Council.
3. At 31st March 2008 there were 14,886 children looked after by local authorities. Forty three per cent of children looked after were looked after at home with parents and sixteen per cent were looked after by friends or relatives. 28 per cent of children looked after were with foster carers. The proportion of children looked after in residential care was 11 per cent nationally, and is now at its lowest since data has been available.
4. The first Scottish meeting of the Care Leavers Association takes place at Room P450, Graham Hills Building, George Street, University of Strathclyde. This is open to all care leavers will be a chance for people to meet other care leavers, chat about their experiences and get involved with the CLA if they want to.
5. The Glasgow based Debate Project was set up in October 2002 by four young people who decided that they wanted to stand up and fight for a better service for young people leaving care. It aims are to empower young people who are currently leaving care or have already left by letting them know that they have a voice and giving them the opportunity to share their experiences with a view to improving the leaving care system for other young people in the future.