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Why it's time to change the way we think about care

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A banker and university graduate, a college student planning for a career in the police, a brand executive at international press agency Reuters and a party rep for Ann Summers.

Would you guess that all four of these successful young Scottish women are care leavers?

We've become used to miserable statistics about the prospects of young people who have spent some or most of their lives being looked after by local councils.

Minimal success in school exams, higher likelihood of ending up in prison, a greater risk of homelessness and significantly more mental health problems are among them.

But a conference this Saturday in Glasgow aims to highlight the great things being achieved by some young people from a care background – and discuss what young people themselves think would help them do better.

Nicola McDade entered the care system when she was six months old. She went in and out of care until she was six, before being placed in foster care. She graduated with honours in economic and social history with film studies from Glasgow University and now works for Reuters in New York.

She says low expectations of young people in care can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and talks of the experiences that burned a sense of "difference" into her. "I recall one instance from my early childhood," she says. "A grandparent of one of my school friends gave me a watch – but on being handed it I realised it was broken. Even as a child I was aware of the significance of this gesture.

"Another young care leaver heard a housing director saying, 'Just give them anything,' about a group of looked-after children. I can remember sensing the change in attitude any time I divulged that I had been fostered."

Unless young people in care can be given the sense that they are worth more than second best, they can't thrive, McDade argues. Her foster mother was a major motivation, telling her: "Make sure you get in with the right crowd."

"I always felt she had an inherent belief in me and this alone was motivation enough to fuel my own self-belief and confidence," she says. "It made all the difference that someone cared about who I made friends with, what aims and ambitions I had."

McDade lived for 19 years with her foster parents and considers them very much family. But she knows she's lucky. "The issue of multiple placements and the high turnover of residential, care and social workers must be tackled head on," she says. "I spoke to one young person who had been in 13 different care placements within a short number of years. It is not difficult to see why the success rates are so low. The lack of resources – foster carers and social workers – is a nationwide issue and one which cannot be easily rectified."

The conference, Life After Care, is being held by the Debate Project, set up by four young people in 2002 to improve services for young people leaving care. It is aimed at young people but will result in a report that will be sent to the government and other decision-makers. The Debate Project previously contributed views to the former Scottish Executive which influenced a report on care, We Can and Must Do Better.

One participant will be Cynelle Smith, who currently lives in a children's unit in North Ayrshire. She too believes that high-quality support from social work services prevented her going off the rails. "Looking back, oh my God, what a screwed-up, angry, dislikable girl I was," the 17-year-old says now.

She spent time in care when she was still just a baby, then lived with her mother sporadically but without a true home, also staying with relatives or in hostels. A stay with respite carers on a farm was a turning point, and then she moved into a children's unit. She is now planning to move back to the farm while she attends college and works towards joining the police.



"I don't think anything can prepare you," she says of living in a children's home. "Group living with 11 other children and young people and 20-odd staff working shifts. You just get used to it."

"I could be the most obnoxious, rebellious, angry young person you could meet and if I had continued in that vein I would probably have been locked up."

Things didn't change overnight, she says – and rarely do for looked-after young people. "I think we live in a different world. It's a place where you don't show emotions or feelings, where you protect yourself at all costs."

However, her key worker and a teacher wouldn't give up on her. "Like a dog with a bone, my guidance teacher hounded me: 'Listen, girl, you have got potential'. She believed in me. She inspired me." Her key worker at the children's unit also stuck with her, and eventually she started to feel good about herself.

That's a point echoed by Heidi McGinlay, another member of the Debate Project who is now a party manager for Ann Summers after growing up in foster care in Edinburgh. Having a single social worker from the day she entered care to the day she left made a difference, she believes. Remarkably, her social worker postponed her retirement until Heidi reached 16. "She was always there when you needed someone to talk to," McGinlay explains. "I felt she understood me and knew what I needed."

The conference is timely, as children's minister Adam Ingram last week helped Who Cares? Scotland launch a new anti-stigma campaign, to counter negative impressions of young people in care and to publicise the achievements as well as the problems with local authority care. Cynelle Smith is among those who will be taking part in a trip to Nepal with Who Cares? to raise funds both for anti-poverty work in Nepal and for the Scottish charity.

A major review of residential child care is also about to be published, and social work leaders are eager to talk about the positives as well as the failings of the system.

Harriet Dempster, president of the Association of Directors of Social Work, told The Herald: "One of the things people don't do is talk about the successes of looked-after children, and we have seen fantastic success. They can be role models and inspirations for those who are coping with adversity and feel they have been written off."

At the launch of the Who Cares? campaign, Adam Ingram said stigma was a significant problem: "People haven't really got a clear understanding of looked-after children and they are bundled together perhaps with young offenders, which gives entirely the wrong impression."

"As a nation we should be ashamed of our record in terms of the support provided to our looked-after young people. We should be looking for the same outcomes for looked-after children that we want to see for our own. That is perfectly achievable – other countries have done it."

"The problem is we have somehow got ourselves in a position that we don't value these young people as they ought to be valued."

'We can help get the best decisions made'

Cheryl Leggett knew from the age of four that she wanted to go to university, she says.

The 25-year-old from Moray achieved that despite a breakdown in relationships within her family so severe she ended up in foster care, and spent six years looked after by her local authority.

Now living in Glasgow, she works in a bank, having graduated from Glasgow University with an MA in historical studies in 2006.

Support from Moray Council continued while she was studying, which was a huge help. "I wouldn't have been able to go without it," she says.

Knowing she was one of the few young people in care going on to higher education spurred her on too. "I felt like I couldn't back out because I knew other people couldn't have the experience."

She thinks many youngsters in care get a raw deal. "For young people leaving care, support ends at 22. I was lucky that I had help at uni, but I could probably have done with someone on the end of the phone just to help out that little bit longer."

Leggett has been involved in the Debate Project since it was set up in 2002. Supported by the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum, it exists to promote the views of young people in care and improve the way they are looked after. "We can help decisions get made based on what young people really need from the system," she says.

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