

## **Why not Yes, Minister?**

### ***NCERCC campaign progress report by Vic Citarella***

The Institute for Social Care and Education (ICSE) was first set up about fifteen years ago, when it campaigned in Parliament for the registration of child care workers. Past government support for the successful National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care (NCERCC), the agreement to registration by the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and the creation of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) – all now removed as supports to children's homes – led to dormancy and possible complacency. After a quiescent period ICSE has now been revived to act as a professional association for people working with children and young people.

In addition to providing membership services through dual membership of the Social Care Association (SCA), ICSE is campaigning once again. Now we are seeking to position the professional residential child care worker centrally in sector-led improvement initiatives. This latter approach is the Government's unfunded self-help approach to leadership. Our view is that NCERCC (abolished in 2009) was actually a sector-led improvement body that was well on the way towards becoming self-sustaining. We are fighting to get support for a much needed replacement body which we feel will be the most cost-effective way of drawing on the strengths of the sector for the benefit of all.

An ICSE delegation recently made the positive case for an NCERCC type body to children's and families Minister Tim Loughton – a meeting kindly facilitated by supporter Norman Lamb MP. How was our case received?

Tim Loughton told us unequivocally that he fully supports the residential care sector. He was very clear that he does not see a hierarchy of services with residential care as the least favoured option, which is an important message. Children and young people living in homes and people working with them can be reassured that they are not locked into some sort of 'last resort' provision. Rather that residential care is the right positive option for some children. Every incentive there then for professional best practice and that is what ICSE promotes.

Secondly, Tim Loughton gave a (very welcome) shared commitment to the kind of representative and professional body that has been lacking, viz. one that:

- DfE's Support & Improvement Programme can engage with in dialogue and which can be consulted on regarding issues of design, development, dissemination, implementation, and evaluation;
- forms a cost-effective option for supporting and improving residential homes using sector skills, experience and delivery mechanisms to deliver programmes;
- provides assistance in the identification of homes that require improvement;
- gives the professional residential workers input into improvements in commissioning practice;
- could be an ally of DfE in the event of scandal or crisis (abusive practice or failing business models) – identifying, anticipating and mitigating risks to the sector's credibility and DfE's role, for instance;
- supports Local Authorities and the Children's Improvement Board in tackling significant under-performance of children's homes in their areas

(action to meet OFSTED requirements when owner's efforts are not effective).

Finally, despite supporting the service and our intentions, the Minister was adamant that government had no intention of funding such a body and he went to some lengths to justify both the absolute curtailment of funds in 2010 and the deployment of his in-house team. What we did establish was that his team may consider innovative proposals that meet the work programme and/or support us in bidding to relevant sources of funding. He was open to ideas around models of social investment but was not persuaded that developing such ideas required his assistance in getting the sector organised to use its time and expertise to such ends.

If not encouraging on money, he was more forthcoming on message. The delegation saw benefit in the Minister being seen and heard to overtly support residential child care and to encourage investment from diverse sources. We intend to take up his offer of a conference address through an invitation to speak at the SCA annual seminar children's services day on 13 March 2012. Whilst this will not re-establish NCERCC, it is step along the road for ICSE in gaining greater momentum and a vibrant membership.

It is our opinion that the establishment of a professional body for residential child care workers will do nothing but good. We can promote standards and best practice, we can provide support in times of trouble, we can avert the 'knee-jerk' responses to crisis but most important we can create value for children's homes – by valuing the young people who live in them and the staff who have them as a place of work.

Therefore, through ICSE with employer body and sector support but without Government fiscal backing, but at least support as to principle, we must press ahead together as a sector to set up a replacement for NCERCC.

Our campaign looks like being a long and incremental one – we must be alert to steady improvement in residential child care over time and pick up early warning signs of any drop in standards if we are to build credibility. The Department is receptive to our ambitions, but we need to keep the pressure up and ensure that good intentions are realised.

If nothing else, what is already clear from this process and other attempts at grassroots driven reform is that organisations like ours need as much support from our peers to keep the campaign on track as we can get. To that end, we have launched an online campaign to urge the Coalition to address this issue as a priority.

So knowing how busy you all are, nonetheless, can we at the Institute of Childcare and Social Education ask that, if you haven't done already, please sign the e-petition to re-establish the NCERCC, which can be found by searching on 'NCERCC' at [epetitions.direct.gov.uk](http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk).

In short, as we said to the Minister, you have to have a sector to be sector-led. So if you do nothing else, join ICSE [www.icse.org.uk](http://www.icse.org.uk).

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