

Who Cares? Scotland: 25 Years and Still Moving Forward...

Deirdre Watson

Director, Who Cares? Scotland

Who Cares? Scotland was established in 1978 to act as the consumer voice of young people in care. Initially, the organisation provided the opportunity for young people to comment on the care services they received. For the first ten years, Who Cares? Scotland operated on an entirely voluntary basis. 'Supportive adults', mainly employed in social work and residential care, worked with young people to set up a network of groups bringing young people together. These groups enabled young people to comment on care services and the adults to promote their views to relevant people in the Scottish Office and Regional Councils.

The first major achievement, apart from surviving without funding for eight years, came in 1986 with the production of the first *Charter of Rights* for young people in care. This was produced through consultation with young people and was jointly written by supportive adults and young people.

In 1988, Who Cares? Scotland received funding from The Scottish Office, Regional Councils and Save the Children for two development officer posts. The main function of these posts was to co-ordinate the 'local groups' of young people around the country. However, Who Cares? also carried out consultations with young people resulting in contributions to a range of publications, policy and legislation. As well as contributing to *Another Kind of Home* (Skinner, 1992), the organisation also produced the second (and more comprehensive) version of the *Charter of Rights* in 1992 and was involved in contributions to the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

Through the 1990s, the organisation continued its steady growth and the focus of the work of the organisation began to shift. Young people were increasingly requesting an individual advocacy service. After a period of uncertainty in relation to funding at the time of local government re-organisation in 1996, the organisation stabilised and continued to increase in size.

At the end of the 1990s, a number of significant events occurred which were to lead to the significant growth of Who Cares? Scotland over the next five years. The *Children's Safeguard Review* (Kent, 1997) was published in 1997 and this was followed by *Feeling Safe – The Views of Young People* (Who Cares? Scotland, 1998) and *Edinburgh's Children* (Marshall et al., 1999). These reports were an important factor in the setting up of the Children's Services Development Fund

by The Scottish Executive. One recommendation in relation to these funds was increased local funding for Who Cares? Scotland.

The result has been the growth of Who Cares? from thirteen members of staff in 1998 to a staff team of thirty-two at the start of 2003. With the success of our application for the 'Better Outcomes for Young People in Secure Accommodation Project', our numbers will rise to forty by the end of 2003.

In this our 25th year, Who Cares? Scotland is looking forward to the future. We will continue to build upon the now more secure (but never assured) financial foundations that we have established in recent years, and to mark this special year, we have planned three major events and one major publication.

During 2002, in preparation for our 25th year, Who Cares? began a series of consultations with young people from all over Scotland. We wanted to identify those issues which were currently of most importance to young people and to take these issues forward as a basis for more extensive consultation and reporting throughout 2003. The young people identified four key areas which they wished to explore more thoroughly. These were: feeling safe and being protected; trust and quality of care; relationships and support; and family.

The organisation's first major event around these themes will be our Annual General Meeting and Residential Conference to be held at the Inverclyde Centre in Largs from 22-24 April 2003. Over eighty young people between 12-16 and forty staff will attend this event which will include detailed consultation with both young people and adults, together with recreational activities and a challenge football match against the Association of Directors of Social Work. Over a two-day period, each delegate will attend four workshops. The workshops will use a variety of ways (language, art, drama and music) to promote the consultation process. The findings from this consultation exercise will be written up by an independent consultant and will form a part of our 25th year report.

In August, Who Cares? Scotland will host a one-day national event for under-12s and some of their carers and will look at the four themes and will seek their views. Again the independent consultant will bring together the findings from the event for inclusion in the report.

The culmination of all of this activity will be Who Cares? 25th Anniversary Conference to be held over three days: 21st - 25th November 2003. The first day will be a celebration of 25 years, and will see the launch of the major report highlighting the views of young people in relation to the four key issues they identified. The anniversary celebration event will be followed by a two-day professional conference to examine the report's findings and to consider recommendations for future action.

In addition to our planned activities in celebration of our birthday, Who Cares? has a detailed three year plan to take us to 2005 and beyond. Whilst the organisation has a very busy year ahead with celebratory activities which consolidate our growth and enable us to take stock, we still have a long way to go. There are still important areas to be tackled in respect of listening to children and young people. For example, Who Cares? is only just making in-roads in reaching out to those in foster care and children and young people who are in special needs placements.

The last 25 years have been exciting and as an organisation Who Cares? Scotland has matured and grown. We shall embrace the opportunity over the next 25 years to continue to work towards ensuring that children and young people who are looked after and accommodated have a voice, and that their words are heard and acted upon.

References

Kent, R. (1997). *Children's Safeguards Review*. Edinburgh: Scottish Office.

Marshall, K., Jamieson, C. & Finlayson, A. (1999). *Edinburgh's Children: The Report of the Edinburgh Inquiry into Abuse and Protection of Children in Care*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh City Council.

Skinner, A. (1992). *Another Kind of Home: A Review of Residential Child Care*, Edinburgh: Scottish Office.

Who Cares? Scotland. (1998). *Feeling Safe? Report: The Views of Young People*, Glasgow: Who Cares? Scotland.