

Front-line workers at children's homes not qualified, inquiry told

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Former Barnardo's chief executive Sir Roger Singleton has been giving evidence to the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry.

Some staff in children's homes were promoted beyond their abilities simply because they had a qualification, an inquiry has been told.

Sir Roger Singleton – a former chief executive of the children's charity Barnardo's who has since been working in the field of safeguarding – said it was “unquestionably” the case historically that residential care providers would struggle to recruit and retain workers.

The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (SCAI) heard that a considerable number of front-line staff in residential care establishments could be unqualified and inadequately trained, despite having to deal with children with special needs and emotional problems.

My recollection is that we probably succeeded in achieving about a third of our staff who had had appropriate training for their work.

Sir Roger Singleton

The SCAI is currently looking into the care given to youngsters living in non-religious and voluntary institutions run by Quarriers, Barnardo's and Aberlour.

Sir Roger, chief executive of Barnardo's from 1984 to 2005 and the deputy director from 1974 onwards, told the inquiry in Edinburgh that he had been involved in overseeing a move away from the charity running residential homes in favour of having more specialised care in community settings.

James Peoples QC, a senior counsel to the inquiry, asked whether the issue of recruiting staff for residential care establishments was difficult during his time as director and deputy.

“I think that is absolutely true,” the witness replied.

“My recollection is that we probably succeeded in achieving about a third of our staff who had had appropriate training for their work and that, frankly, was a very generous ratio compared with the residential care sector in particular.

“I, for a relatively short period of time, was the tutor to a course for staff wishing to work in residential care. I think there were about 16 such courses throughout England, probably with about 15 to 20 students on each and the course lasted a year.”



Sir Roger was chief executive of Barnardo's from 1984 to 2005 (PA)

Compared to the 30,000 children in residential care, the number of would-be staff emerging from those courses was “frankly a drop in the ocean”, he said.

Asked whether staff recruitment was an issue in general for care providers, particularly prior to 1970, Sir Roger replied: “I think that was unquestionably the case.”

Mr Peoples suggested that of those who were qualified, the majority would be in more senior positions in residential care homes, with front-line care workers less likely to have relevant qualifications.

That meant that front-line workers in the main were not qualified.

Sir Roger agreed and added: "The market situation was such that if a person actually had a relevant qualification then they would almost automatically go to the top of a shortlist for any job.

"I think I would have to say that probably some people were promoted beyond their competence and their experience simply because of the possession of a qualification.

"That meant that front-line workers in the main were not qualified."

Mr Peoples later continued: "Yet they would be dealing, certainly from the 1960s maybe earlier, with children who had special needs, behavioural challenges, emotional problems and the like?"

Sir Roger responded: "I think that the reports and reviews that were done really from the end of the war onwards, that was an absolutely recurring theme."

The witness, who has been involved in safeguarding reviews and currently advises organisations on safeguarding issues, was later asked for his views on why the abuse of children in care has taken place on a "significant scale" in the past.

The "closed" nature of some institutions, children feeling they had no say over what was happening to them, their fears that they would not be believed, and the absence of training and positive guidance for staff were among the reasons suggested by the witness.

"I think it is undeniable that the level of risk to children living in residential care is higher than it is for children living in families," he said.

The inquiry, before Lady Smith, continues on Thursday.