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## Interview: Suzy Croft of the College of Social Work interim board

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Suzy Croft (right) (Pic: Tom Parkes)

**Some *Community Care* readers were disappointed by a lack of frontline social workers on the interim board of the College of Social Work. Kirsty McGregor spent a morning with one board member to find out more about those shaping the College**

Suzy Croft arrives at the temporary social work office in London's St John and St Elizabeth hospital at 9am and, within half an hour, has to rush off to a multi-disciplinary team meeting. Visible through the meeting room window is the social worker's usual base, St John's Hospice, which is shrouded in scaffolding due to ongoing refurbishment work.

The hospice provides palliative and end-of-life care for people with progressive and life-threatening conditions. Doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and social workers meet regularly to discuss new referrals to the hospice, admissions and recent discharges.

At today's meeting, Croft, a social work and bereavement team leader, suggests social work support for patients and relatives.

Immediately after the meeting, she sits down with a regular out-patient of the hospice; a cancer sufferer who has just moved house and needs help applying for benefits.

For the past two months Croft has been juggling work at the hospice with being an interim board member of the College of Social Work.

In its final report in December 2009, the Social Work Task Force recommended the establishment of an independent college of social work in England to "articulate and promote the interests of good social work".

Croft joined the board because she felt the College could raise the profile of social work in a positive, rather than a defensive, way. "I do feel quite passionate about social work," she says. "And I do think it's undervalued.

"I have felt for a long time that it's important to connect up the different kinds of social work, as well as academia, and find a way to have a voice with policy makers."

The college would give the profession strong, independent leadership, a clear voice in public debate, policy development and policy delivery, and strong ownership of the standards to be upheld, the taskforce said. And to do this, it would have to be developed and led by social workers.

But when the interim board was announced in October 2010, users of Community Care's forum, CareSpace, questioned whether the interim board members could truly be said to represent the majority of "grassroots" social workers.

"Where are the current practitioners?" asked one user, Grinch. Another said the board, which comprises four frontline social workers, an independent social work consultant, an academic, a service user, two directors and two voluntary sector chiefs with backgrounds in social work and social care, were people "who have not seen a client for many years, if at all".

But Croft argues that everyone on the board has a solid understanding of social work. She says: "Some of us have had a long history in social work and then moved into academic work, but the background is there.

"Social workers in the past have felt that what they do and think is represented by people who aren't social workers, such as directors who haven't come from a social work background. We really want social workers to be leading this."

Croft spends 30 hours a week at the hospice, allowing time to work on developing the College. That was, of course, one of the challenges of finding practising social workers to be on the interim board. As one CareSpace user, cb, said: "I'd love to have been involved in something like this but I work full time and, especially at the moment, can't see myself being freed by my local authority to attend many meetings."

"The hospice supports my work with the College," says Croft. "If I go to an all-day board meeting I can make up the time."

However, Croft says she has been surprised by the sheer amount of reading required before board meetings, adding that the meetings have been more businesslike than she expected. "There is a real sense that we have to get on with things, so the meetings are quite full-on."

Croft says everyone has a chance to get their views across and the recent decision to form a partnership agreement with Unison, which represents 40,000 social workers across the UK, was relatively easy.

"We had a good briefing paper and discussion about it," she says. "I didn't feel it was a difficult decision to make; we do need to attract a wide membership."

The board's next task will be to turn the College into a legal entity by March. Croft is confident that the board involves people with the right mix of professional and personal backgrounds to get the job done.

"Everybody on the board is committed to social work as a profession. That's a nice feeling."



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