

Born optimist takes on the children's agenda

● Dawn Primarolo, minister for children, young people and families

"I feel like I've won the lottery," proclaims Dawn Primarolo, the new minister for children, young people and families.

Two weeks into the job, she is bubbling with energy and enthusiasm for her new role – despite the fact that she's been up since 4.30am and has already hosted an 8am breakfast summit to celebrate the first year of the Youth Taskforce action plan. This plan pumped £218.5m into prevention and non-negotiable support for young people engaged in antisocial behaviour – a "tough love" approach that chimes with Primarolo's own priorities as she takes over from Beverley Hughes.

Tough love

"Early intervention is always better," she says. "I was a health minister two weeks ago, and one task was working with people trapped in alcohol and drug addiction. It taught me that it's not easier, but better to do that early."

With young people this means listening carefully to what they're saying and trying to understand why they've got into trouble. "It means believing in that person and trusting that they're going to make a difference," explains Primarolo, a self-confessed optimist. The flip side is that young people should be willing to listen and change their lives, and Primarolo supports the use of sanctions to enforce this if necessary.

"My over-arching goal is that I want every child to have the very best start in life. That means working with mum before she has the child and then believing that every young person has huge potential, which I want to make sure they can develop. But sometimes you've got to intervene – that tough but supportive approach for young people drawn into drugs, alcohol and crime."

At the breakfast summit, Primarolo met young people that were

once engaged in criminal activity and have turned their lives around thanks to this approach. There's Reece Davis, 17, who took part in a family intervention project with his mum after his criminal behaviour spiralled out of control. Now in the first year of a plumbing apprenticeship at his local council, he says he'd definitely be in prison now without the support of his key worker.

Primarolo says this example shows "how important it is to be prepared to listen and make changes in your own life, to recognise that while there are people to support you, you have responsibilities yourself." She calls the professionals who have helped young people like Reece "shining ambassadors of hope".

But experts fear the recession and much mooted public spending cuts are already undermining this preventative approach – especially in

children's and young people's services where budgets threaten to be stretched to breaking point.

In her first interview with the national press as children's minister, Primarolo tells *CYP Now*: "I'm going to be arguing very powerfully that now is precisely the time – when families are under pressure because of the economic crisis – that we need to redouble our efforts on early intervention and prevention because the costs are far greater a few years down the line."

And while the former Treasury minister doesn't promise new cash, or give anything away on possible future funding cuts, she argues that investing in preventative services makes economic sense.

Unclaimed assets

"To pick up problems when people are in prison, have no qualifications, are using drugs – it's far more expensive. The arguments for early intervention and prevention are always powerful, but they're most powerful in tough economic circumstances – I don't want to see us taking the foot off the pedal."

Primarolo offers the same reassurances over children's centres and youth clubs. "We will continue to make sure that children's centres are sustainable financially. Legislation will secure them as part of a universal commitment. And I'm going to spend my time as minister looking at every opportunity to make sure they are secure, although that's not to say they're not secure," she says.

On the subject of youth facilities, although she doesn't give a date for when the youth sector will get the promised unclaimed assets from dormant bank accounts, she says: "The Secretary of State Ed Balls is utterly committed to Myplace and investing in youth facilities. He's a very strong, powerful advocate for these services and is committed to



them. Everyone knows we're in tough economic times. But no-one should doubt that we're pushing the agenda forward as best we can."

Primarolo also promises to continue with the work Hughes started on encouraging more youth clubs to open on Friday and Saturday nights.

During her 10 years at the Treasury, Primarolo worked closely with the now Children's Secretary Ed Balls and then Chancellor Gordon Brown – work that she feels she can continue at the Department for Children, Schools and Families. For instance, she consulted young people in her Bristol constituency about the idea of using unclaimed assets to fund youth facilities before the concept became policy. "We had very sensible discussions, as you nearly always do with young people, on what they wanted to be delivered," she reveals.

Primarolo also worked on anti-poverty measures and Sure Start before they became policy. She



Primarolo: intends to prioritise early invention and take a multi-agency approach to the problems families face

mentions that she visited the Dundee Families Project in its infancy – the much copied Action for Children scheme that works with families about to be made homeless because of their antisocial behaviour.

This multi-agency approach, which looks at the problems families face in the round, clearly still inspires Primarolo. When asked what her top priorities are, she says she wants to spend a lot of time looking at the whole area of family relations and the health and wellbeing of children and young people, as well as their parents and wider community.

For instance, she hopes to work with her Department of Health successor, Gillian Merron, to see how ministers can improve joint working between health and children's professionals. She also plans to work with Phil Hope, care services minister, to see if there's more the two of them can do on mental health.

"It does help having health experience as there are some real

barriers, which I understand, but some things shouldn't get in the way," she says.

The soon-to-be published *21st Century Schools* white paper will also take up this theme. It will look at how to improve children's academic achievements, but will also examine how to better integrate the health, wellbeing and development of children into schools. "It's patently obvious that a healthy child learns better – every practitioner knows that," says Primarolo.

Open to ideas

So while families, children, health, wellbeing and early intervention are buzzwords that sum up her approach, what will Primarolo actually be like to work with?

At the breakfast summit, a youth professional from Tower Hamlets asks whether she'll fund a rollout of the Youth Opportunity Card, which the council successfully piloted. An official quickly whispers to Prima-

rolo that the cash was always meant to be temporary – if it worked, professionals should be able to make the case for local funding. But she laughs, reveals the advice and says: "I would find a discussion on that very helpful, even if it's within financial constraints. I'm happy to engage with that as I think we've still got something to learn."

Later, when asked for more details, she tells *CYP Now*: "In my new brief, I'm interested to look at how projects run, how successful they are, and what they tell us about how policy is delivered in the future. I'm always prepared to listen to a good idea. I don't have the answers to everything, it's a partnership."

It's why she's looking forward to visiting projects to see how things really work, and why she says she's already learned a lot from the young people she's spoken to. Time will tell whether she delivers – and how long she has to do so.

Ruth Smith

ON PRIMAROLO'S PLATE

What the sector thinks her first priorities should be

"Let's get the child health strategy and youth justice sorted, and let's get Ofsted and the inspection regime into a sensible state so it's not just about safeguarding. Lets also cut the number of field forces down"
Maggie Atkinson, director of children's services, Gateshead Council

"Renew the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy beyond 2010 and further"
Simon Blake, chief executive, Brook

"Take additional steps to make sure all schools are fully engaged in Every Child Matters. Another big issue to tackle is the involvement of health services in children's trusts"
John Chowcat, general secretary, Aspect

"A priority should be to make Myplace as high-profile as children's centres"
Anne Longfield, chief executive, 4Children

"The pressure social workers are under needs urgent action now"
Nushra Mansuri, professional officer, British Association of Social Workers

"We'd like to see more early intervention work to pick up mental health problems at an early stage"
Lucie Russell, director of campaigns, YoungMinds

"Sort out the administration of the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds, and make sure it truly reflects the cost for providers"
Sarah Steel, nursery manager and member of the Early Years Stakeholder Group

"The new minister should halt all new initiatives, giving the sector time to embed its work"
Dwynwen Stepien, director, Early Childhood Unit

"It is vital to look at enhancing and promoting children's centres"
Purnima Tanuku, chief executive, National Day Nurseries Association