

## Presidential address to ADCS annual conference 2016

(Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> July 1.45 – 2.15pm)

### 1. Welcome & Introduction

Welcome to the ADCS annual conference 2016 our tenth annual conference since the establishment of the association. It's fantastic to see so many of you here. I particularly wanted to welcome **the Children's Minister Edward Timpson, Chief Social Worker for Children, Isabelle Trowler and David Reeson from KPMG all of whom will be speaking this afternoon.** Could I also welcome our select band of guests – Margaret Wilcox who is this year's Vice President of ADASS and Andrew Christie, erstwhile DCS of the Tri-borough and now here in his capacity as Chair of the national Adoption Leadership Board and our friends from DfE. Colleagues, you are most welcome. Can I thank *Children and Young People Now*, for their ongoing and continuing coverage of the work that we do, and also for sponsoring the ADCS *Little Blue Book*.

I would also like to commend to you a piece of research that will publish today. The Staff College commissioned the RSA to research the theme of how today's leaders of children's services are not only managing shrinking budgets but also managing new conversations with their communities – conversations that recast expectations and

responsibilities, to agree sustainable ways of building capacity and securing service delivery.

Tomorrow, we will be joined by two care leavers who will speak from this platform about their experiences of the care system. To complement their input I am delighted to tell you that we received well over 100 contributions from children in care councils across the country and from individual children in care themselves describing the people who have made the biggest difference to their lives. You will see that we have visual materials displayed around the conference venue to reflect some of those messages and we have also made a short video which we will show you tomorrow.

As usual the conference programme contains an array of workshops as well as plenary sessions. We know how much you value the sharing and learning that takes place particularly in workshops. So, to that end we are trying something new this year. Friday's workshops come at the end of the conference programme in order to prevent workshop time being squeezed.

Colleagues, I did a risky thing recently. I sent a tweet asking what people in the Twittersphere thought I should talk about in my Presidential address to this conference. Amongst the repeatable suggestions were: the corporate parenting role of local authorities; how best to achieve

continuity of care for children in our care; and, the intrinsic link between good social work and early help. Happily, these things are right up my street; as you know I'm big on love and creating meaningful, sustainable relationships for children in care and care leavers. So I shall touch on these things...and more. In case the golden thread of my speech doesn't become obvious, let me tell you now that it is about how Local Authorities, DCSs and their staff can make life enhancing improvements for children, young people and their families.

## **2. Improving the wellbeing of all children and young people**

At ADCS we are concerned about the whole child, our colleagues across the water in the Netherlands are just embarking on the journey of having local children's leaders who, as we have done here, will take responsibility for the whole child and for systems leadership across all agencies concerned with the wellbeing of children. For me the 'wellbeing' word has never quite captured it, where our system works best, children's lives have been enhanced, turned around and in many cases dramatically transformed, through greater resilience and by nurturing hope possibility and determination. As the DCS role is reviewed we must be clear about the advantages of having one voice for children – not because we seek to be defensive or protectionist about our role, but because it works.

### **3. Creating the conditions for meaningful and sustainable relationships between central and local government and schools**

There is a clear case to ensure that between central and local government and schools the collective responsibility for children is properly and effectively calibrated, and that it is clear to all where these critical responsibilities and overall accountability are held, at both local and national level.

Events over recent days and weeks (and I do not mean the football teams elimination from Euro 2016!) in our national and political life have accentuated difference, rather than common cause, the recent debates on the white paper and academies max had a similar effect. ADCS is seeking to draw attention to how, when well marshalled, collaboration and partnership are the key ingredients of success in our education system and schools. The binding objective and aspiration is that of better outcomes for our children and young people, this is a goal that demands our continued attention.

So, please can we stop the pernicious narrative that goes: local authority involvement with schools is *de facto* a bad thing? Let's focus instead on creating the conditions for establishing a meaningful relationship between central and local government working together with schools to

improve outcomes for children and young people, including a relentless focus on educational achievement, acknowledging that schools are responsible for their own and each other's improvement. I'm not interested in 'controlling' schools. But I am interested in ensuring they are effective and that all children and young people are treated equitably in and by schools.

#### **4. Ensuring school effectiveness**

We are all alive to the risks and nervous about consequences of the removal, completely, of ESG funding from local authorities. Many of us have used this funding, augmented by our own councils' funding to provide school improvement services. School improvement is but one aspect of school effectiveness. LAs provide a range of services and support to aid effectiveness e.g. leadership advice on tackling extremism and radicalisation that could well be put at risk. We are not obsessed with LAs doing school improvement; pragmatically RSCs and DCSs are working together to improve outcomes for children in their areas in a variety of ways. We recognise that ultimately schools are responsible for their own improvement but we have a collective responsibility across central government, and local government working together with heads to make sure that schools operate effectively not only in terms of educational standards but in their holistic roles as providers of universal

service for all children and young people. Acting alone, central government cannot adequately ensure, nor assure, school effectiveness.

Therefore, I want to keep my statutory **duty to promote high standards in primary, secondary and special education because it's a** helpful/necessary proxy for other possible interventions and gives a way into all schools for the LA which is the only agency in a geographical area that has a whole-locality focus. With the best will in the world, a Multi Academy Trust isn't going to spend any time or energy thinking about the life chances and attainment of pupils that attend other schools or colleges. But I am, we are, because we care about the wellbeing of every child and young person on our patches – that's what councils do.

### **5. Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in care**

The responsibility of the local authority to improve outcomes and actively promote the life chances of children in care has become known as 'corporate parenting' in recognition that the task must be shared by the whole local authority and partner agencies. The role of the corporate parent is to act as the best possible parent for each child they look after, safeguarding and promoting their welfare and securing the best possible outcomes in particular a duty to promote the educational achievement of children in care. This duty underpins everything the LA does in relation to the children and young people it looks after. Now, as a sharp-elbowed

corporate parent, I don't want to wait 9 months for my request to the EFA to direct a recalcitrant academy to admit one of my kids. We have high aspirations for children in care, including their educational attainment, so let's have a bit of devolution, let's devolve the EFA's power to direct an academy to admit a pupil to directors of children's services in respect of children in care. This would represent a much more efficient and effective system, particularly as we all gear up to take our fair share of UASC, all of whom have a right to an education, as every child does under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Another key responsibility we have as corporate parents is to create the conditions where children in care can create meaningful relationships and go on to sustain those relationships when they leave care.

## **6. Establishing the conditions for creating meaningful and sustainable relationships for children in care**

Every one of us in this room knows only too well how important positive and meaningful relationships are to children, particularly children and young people in care. It is these relationships that children tell us they value most and can help them overcome challenges in life. The display materials you can see around the conference are a graphic demonstration of the centrality of caring, affectionate relationships between children in care and their carers, their residential workers, their

social workers, their IROs and many, many others. These children deserve more than simply just our care, concern and attention, they also deserve our love and affection. I wonder though if sometimes the trajectory of years of policy development focussed upon protecting and safeguarding children from physical and sexual abuse has had an unintended consequence – that many adults, be they members of the general public, or the dedicated professionals who work in a wide range of roles with children and young people, are hesitant, reluctant or downright scared of having physical contact with a child. We know that new-born babies in part at least form their attachment with their principal care-givers through physical contact. Children and teenagers need that too, don't we all colleagues!

We value adoption as a means to finding a loving, forever family and look for these traits in our adopters, but love is also present in foster placements and in residential care too. Over the last six years, there has been a focus on adoption as the gold standard of permanence. The national political focus has helped us all to shine a spotlight on improving the timeliness with which we assess and approve adopters and more importantly the timeliness with which children in care are placed with adoptive families. This is all to the good. But ADCS members around the country see no hierarchy in different forms of permanence. The

overwhelming majority of the 70,000+ children in our care currently, are in foster placements – it's time for a focus on fostering. We are pleased to see that Sir Martin Narey's report into his independent review of children's residential care has been published this week. We note his recommendation that a fundamental review of fostering is overdue and that this should be a priority for the DfE.

Last week I was due to attend an informal roundtable discussion at No. 10 on fostering which was to have been co-hosted by the Minister Edward Timpson and the Head of the PM's Policy Unit. The roundtable was 'cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances'. I look forward to that discussion being re-scheduled. In the meantime, given we have the Minister here present, let me say a word or two now that I would have said there.

Minister, I urge you to bring your considerable passion and knowledge about fostering to bear on some pretty sharp practices in the private for-profit fostering world. Making millions of pounds of private profit on the back of vulnerable children and young people is quite frankly immoral. As an aside, if I may, colleagues I noted with interest that the Scottish Parliament has recently passed legislation to make it illegal to make private profit out of fostering.

Fostering placements are a vitally important aspects of the continuum of care and we need to take a holistic strategic approach to children in care, whatever form of placement they happen to be in.

## **7. Creating the conditions necessary for successful social work to thrive**

What are the conditions necessary for successful social work to thrive?

As with the children and families we seek to support, showing solidarity, valuing relationships and showing empathy and understanding are the counterbalances to the distress and pressure that comes with the job of being a social worker.

I'm up for innovation and creativity but I'm also clear that in many ways, good social work with children and families is about getting the basics right. What do I mean by that?

- A clear philosophy and approach to the work
- Strong, stable leadership and management (good Senior Management Team) with sufficient focus and direction from officers and Lead Members
- Permanent Social Workers - less reliance on agency staff - allows one to create the conditions for stability and continuity of relationships between Social Worker and child or family

- Stable workforce (low staff turnover) across children's social care, but also crucially across other parts of the council's business
- Manageable caseloads for Social Workers
- Timely intervention in cases to avoid drift
- Fewer out of area placements of children in care.

Each of these things is more readily achievable if we take fewer children into care in the first place. Have I shocked you, colleagues?

Let me be crystal clear, I know that the longer a child is in care, the better their outcomes. This is the protective factor of care. But as corporate parents I think that local government should lead the debate about taking fewer children into care and doing even better for those children that we do take into care. But how do we get to that turning point safely? We've got to change the shape of children's social care not through the lens of the government's touching faith in structural reform, but by investing in prevention and early help. For a while of course, maybe 2-3 years, you have to double invest – money into early help and money into statutory child protection work, but eventually the balance can begin to shift. Less child protection work, fewer children in care resulting in more manageable caseloads for Social Workers meaning they are better able to achieve continuity in case-holding, forming

meaningful sustainable relationships with children and families and thereby making more meaningful, lasting interventions in the lives of children, young people and their families.

But, in the current climate of severe financial cuts to local councils, achieving these conditions for success, being able to invest in early help, is increasingly a pipe-dream for many. Here's a suggestion or you... might we achieve some aspects of the social work reform agenda, which is a welcome reform by the way, by pump-priming local authority investment in early help and preventative services.

## **8. Must do better for care leavers**

Many moons ago I worked for Westminster council; it was there that I did something I was, and remain really proud of to this day. I established a leaving care service. One of the drivers for doing so was that we wanted to create what we would now call 'resilience' in our care leavers, helping them to become independent adults able to cope with their dysfunctional families.

Today, the cliff edge of support faced by care leavers is as steep as it ever was. As a child in care there are myriad professionals involved in your life and your family's life. As a care leaver, you have a Personal

Adviser. ADCS welcomes the government's intention to extend Personal Adviser support to all care leavers up to the age of 25 (subject to adequate funding of course). The role of the PA is vital. It's a hybrid role blending mentoring-style personal relationships with a signposting/advisory functions. Someone said to me recently, doesn't that make it an impossible job? Well, no; Personal Advisers need access to a wide range of often specialist knowledge – benefits and housing advice, legal advice, careers advice, access to and provision of FE and HE – they don't need to know all of these things themselves. I worry that we may see this role become increasingly regimented in terms of the qualifications or professional backgrounds of those doing the job. Seems to me this is ripe for an apprenticeship approach and that young people who have experienced being in care themselves are likely to make some of the very best Personal Advisers of the future.

### **Anchoring accountability**

The recent white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* made a commitment to “review the responsibilities of local authorities in relation to children, including the implications for the roles of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children.” This review will take place over the coming months. Former ADCS President Alan Wood

has been invited to chair the advisory group. The review will have three core aims:

1. To set out the future role of the LA in relation to children, with a coherent set of expectations and responsibilities
2. To ensure that LAs have the right powers and levers to carry out those responsibilities effectively
3. To consider any necessary transition and implementation arrangements for LAs to help them manage change over the coming months and years

Alan will be with us later this evening ready to participate in a panel session tomorrow to do some horizon scanning. I know you won't hesitate to share your views with him. It's clear to me that one of the key responsibilities of the LA in relation to children and young people is to make our towns and cities not only child friendly (to borrow a Leeds phrase), but to place children and young people at the heart of everything we do as place-shapers. There is not only a moral argument but frankly an economic imperative to ensure all public services improve opportunities and outcomes for our children, who will be the tax-payers of the future; afterall somebody has to keep us in our dotage.

Effective public services can only be delivered in partnership. The local authority leads these partnerships on behalf of the citizens its elected members represent.

Moreover, it is responsible for ensuring that the arrangements made by itself and other local providers are designed to benefit children, young people and families and are not predicated on a profit motive or the needs of a single organisation, agency or provider alone. Make sense therefore doesn't it, to anchor accountability for children's outcomes firmly at a local level?

## **Conclusion**

So, once again colleagues we find ourselves in the midst of busy times in children's services:

- education, adoption and social work reforms;
- reforms to the way we care for and support migrant children and their families;
- new and refreshed strategies for children's social care, for missing children, for children in care, for care leavers, for tackling CSE, trafficking and other forms of child sexual abuse;

- reviews of children's residential care, of the secure estate, of how best to keep young people out of the youth justice systems, and of our approach to child protection.

I could go on. What we need a coherent vision and strategy for children and young people instead of attempting to tackle individual risks, vulnerabilities, and aspects of children's services policy in isolation. We welcome the publication, on Monday of this week, of the *Putting Children First* which describes the DfE's vision for excellent children's social care. I've been thinking recently that what we need is a national children's plan, hopefully this policy paper acts as a key first step towards that.

Colleagues, I hope you enjoy the conference.

Thank you for listening.

It is now my pleasure to introduce Edward Timpson Minister of State for Children & Families. Minister, would you join me on the stage please.