

ADCS President's speech

Sub-plenary: *A country that works for all children*

I'm delighted to tell you that today, ADCS has published a position paper *A country that works for all children*. The paper is ADCS's contribution to the debate about children's services funding. It is a narrative to wrap around the LGA's estimate that by 2020, the gap in children's services funding will be £2 billion. Two billion pounds! Now that's a big number. Not as big as the number for what we as a nation spend on tackling the impacts of child poverty – that is estimated to be about £29 billion a year. Here's an even bigger number. The cost of HS2 is £56 billion – and that's just for a peak time return ticket! Seriously...

Let's begin at the beginning...

There are four million children and young people living in poverty today

I keep having to pinch myself every time I see that number. Can you believe it in Britain in 2017? Two thirds of those children live in working households. By 2020, the Institute of Fiscal Studies estimates there will **be five million children** and young people living in poverty.

Poverty constrains opportunities and contributes to rising demand for children's social care services

No one in this room needs me to describe the devastating impact of poverty and austerity on the most vulnerable citizens in our communities. Poverty damages childhood, poverty damages life chances, and poverty damages the prosperity of our country. We know that family income has a causal relationship with poor child outcomes. Poorer children have worse cognitive, socio-behavioural and health outcomes. There is a correlation between parental stress and anxiety linked to money and debt worries, and parenting capacity.

Neither central nor local government wants children's social care to be a blue light service but we cannot continue to function as we are with a £2 billion funding gap looming large on the horizon.

If we are not quite yet stood on the burning platform of children's services, the deck is most definitely smouldering.

We've cut costs by innovating, re-designing and reconfiguring our services – not least of which has been early help services, once abundant now thinly spread. We've merged back office functions and we increasingly collaborate across local authorities to create economies of scale and shape markets. But still councils up and down the land are grappling with unimaginably difficult decisions when trying to bridge this funding gap.

Local government can, and does every single day, improve the lives and life chances of the citizens it serves. It is uniquely placed to take a holistic view of the needs and

aspirations of its communities – their work, leisure, education and skills. Their childcare, transport and travel needs. Their health, wellbeing and social care needs. Their community, religious and cultural needs. The unique role of the local authority in the lives of children puts councils at the heart of local partnerships working on behalf of children and young people because councils are in the business of transforming places, making neighbourhoods, villages, towns and cities places that work for all children. So now we need a country that works for all children.

Despite the plethora of legislation and guidance in children's services, perpetual reforms to our schools and our NHS, none of it brings coherence to important preventative work. Instead, councils must do so for themselves in the context of unprecedented retrenchment in public sector funding.

A preventative approach to improving children's outcomes should be the golden thread running through all government policy. Let's get serious about this. Actually, there is a good relatively recent example of this kind of joined-up thinking from across government - *Keep on Caring* (published by the government in July 2016). The strategy aims to drive improvement in leaving care services. It asks central and local government to "...up their game" as corporate parents using the level of support that we expect a reasonable parent to provide for their child as a benchmark. It is a good example of cross-departmental approach. It is possible.

Few of the factors which lead to children and families requiring early help or social care interventions are new, but they are becoming more complex and more prevalent.

The effects of "the toxic trio" of domestic abuse, parental mental ill-health and substance misuse continue to be a major, and increasingly prevalent, reason for the involvement of children's social care in children's and families' lives. And, as I said early and I do think it bears repeating, domestic violence now eclipses all other triggers for children and young people to be in care proceedings.

A country that works for all children is one where children thrive not just survive

That means not living in poverty and not being hungry, but we know that in communities where Universal Credit has been rolled out early, referrals to food banks are more than double the national average.

It means having an affordable, warm, safe home for children and their families to live in. Other welfare reforms including the removal of the spare room subsidy (also known as the bedroom tax), the introduction of an overall benefits cap, cuts to housing benefit and who is entitled to claim it, and the introduction of the two-child limit of the individual child element of the Child Tax credit and the Child element of Universal Credit – all introduced at a time when house prices and rents are soaring, making an affordable, warm, safe home all the more difficult to find and crucially, to keep.

A country that works for all children means having access to an education that builds resilience, preparing children for independence and adulthood as well as exam success.

It means early help with physical and emotional health and wellbeing needs. Guidance, supporting children to make the right choices about relationships and careers.

A country that works for all children means that children are listened to and involved in decisions about their lives – they know what's going to happen and when.

It means work opportunities for their family, opportunities that do not involve juggling several low-paid jobs so that children get the chance to enjoy their family.

Now I'm sure everyone in this room welcomes the investment made by government into funding 30 hours of 'free', in inverted commas, childcare for working parents. I say 'free' in inverted commas, because it isn't entirely free, it's subsidised. Early years providers are reporting that they will still have to charge parents top up fees for food, nappies etc. Now, did you know that this 'heavily subsidised' 30 hours childcare is available to all working parents earning up to £100k a year...each. So, a household where both parents work and together they earn £199k per year – they get the 30-hours entitlement, just the same as a single parent who may earn £18k a year. While parents without work aren't entitled to this offer at all. Not really a good early start for social mobility is it!

ADCS urges the government to re-think the parental income threshold. Available funding must be spent where it is needed most – targeted at those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

The early years of a child's life are vitally important, yes absolutely, so let's have a clearly articulated and resourced vision for children's early years across government. The department of health, department for education and the department of work and pensions, working together with local government could achieve this.

Schools are a safety net being stretched ever tighter

As I mentioned earlier, the majority of children who live in poverty live in a household where at least one parent is working. Yet eligibility for free school meals remains focused on those with parents in receipt of Job- Seekers Allowance or Income Support. This means that almost two thirds of children living in poverty miss out on free school meals - a vital form of financial support and a daily hot meal. And when Universal Credit is fully rolled-out – and, by the way, I would add my support to Dame Louise Casey's recent plea that the government should pause and think carefully about the impact that delays of up to 13 weeks for claimants getting Universal Credit will have on families, many of whom are already in perilous states – when Universal Credit is rolled out it will be that much harder for us to know which children are eligible for free school meals.

There's some attraction to the simplicity of universal free school meals for all school-aged children, not least of which is the lack of associated bureaucracy. Certainly, in places like my own city Nottingham, it would make a massive difference. But in other places, that money could achieve greater things for children if spent otherwise.

Schools are the eyes and ears of our early help, safeguarding and wellbeing systems. 'Poverty-proofing' the school day helps families who are struggling to make ends meet but thousands of schools are running a budget deficit and class sizes are increasing. If as a country we are to keep up with the demographic pressures, we're going to need something like 2,000 new schools by 2020.

Local authorities are responsible for ensuring there are enough school places in their area, yet they have no say in the locating of new free schools. We are pretty much the only body not allowed to open new schools. Groups of parents can; groups of teachers can; religious and faith groups can; academy chains can; football clubs can...but not the local council which has the democratic obligation to work in the interests of children and parents in their communities – and to demand excellence of their behalf. Nor does the local authority have to be consulted when a non-maintained school closes. Even though in closing that school, the cost of transporting children to a different school, which could easily be several miles away in a large rural shire, would fall to the local authority. Already many shire counties spend more money on bus and taxi drivers transporting children from home to school, than they spend on social workers! As a nation we spend £1 billion a year on home-to-school transport.

Time for a change, I'd say. Perhaps we could start by making the local authority a statutory consultee when there are proposals to open a new school and when there are proposals to close an existing school.

I also think that the DfE, or is it the ESFA who knows, do more to ensure we're getting good value and good outcomes for Pupil Premium monies. Every penny counts and should be accounted for by schools

I'd like to talk briefly now about children and young people's mental health, because it matters...a lot.

Good mental health is essential for a healthy and prosperous society. Children living in poverty are several times more likely as those from the wealthiest homes to have a mental health problem by the age of 11. Indeed, the Chief Medical Officer says that 75% of need is present by 18 years of age. ADCS urges the government, and I know the LGA is doing so too, we urge government to do all it can to ensure that the recent, and most welcome additional investment in funding for children's mental health services is having the desired impact. And we in local government can help.

All local Sustainable Transformation Plans (STPs) should include expenditure relating to CAMHS, signed-off by the local Health and Wellbeing Board

But, adequately funding CAMHS is only half the battle. CAMHS services need to become more anticipatory, offering more help early to promote resilience and a sense of wellbeing in children and young people before their mental health reaches crisis point. Tier 4 in-patient beds for children and young people with severe mental ill-health are like gold dust. Well, we know that don't we. It took the public intervention of the President of the Family Division to find child X an in-patient bed – totally unacceptable.

We are, I think, still expecting the government to publish its green paper on mental health this calendar year. The focus is expected to be on early intervention – hurray – as well as CAMHS reform.

A country that works for all children is one where children can feel confident in their ability to look after themselves and their health and wellbeing. Resilience in other words. I welcome the news that sex and relationship education is to become compulsory in all secondary schools. This will be an important development which will hopefully contribute to building resilience in children and young people, which they need in bucket-loads if they are to navigate the risks facing them today that frankly we wouldn't have dreamt about when we were children – grooming and exploitation, 'sexting', cyber bullying, primary aged children who have been excluded from school being used by county lines gangs to trafficking weapons and drugs. And so on.

The impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing of sexual exploitation cannot be under-estimated – nor can the impact that the abuse has on a survivor's parents, siblings, carers and friends be under-estimated. And, we are seeing the impact on our services. For this reason alone, we need to see significant investment in children's mental health support and services. But, we also need to have an understanding of the way in which a sex offender's mind works. Not an easy thing to justify spending public money on in times of severe financial restraint. But I think we have to if we are going to equip our young people adequately. We need to do more than that of course – our justice system still doesn't serve the victims of sexual exploitation well, or any sex-related crime for that matter. Sex offenders target vulnerable people, the abuse suffered by the victim makes them even more vulnerable. If the crimes are reported, and if the CPS prosecutes more often than not a young vulnerable person, made more vulnerable by the abuse they've suffered, doesn't often make a 'credible' witness. Thus, justice is not served.

Conference, I don't want to end on a sad note.

A country that works for all children is good for adults; it's good for the economy. It's good for public services and it's good for public protection. A country that works for all children can reduce demand for adult social care and acute primary health



services later in life. But more important than any of that – a country that works for all children is good for the future of civilised living. Thank you. Councillor Madden, the floor is yours.