



ADCS President's Opening Address

National Children and Adult Services Conference 2015

Thank you. May I add my welcome and thanks to the conference planning committee for putting together an excellent and diverse programme of sessions for us. I would particularly like to thank Isaac for the powerful reminder of the need for and benefit of co-producing services.

Next week I am going to a reunion of the four-year social work degree course I started in Bradford 41 years ago. And its 42 years since I got my first job as a welfare assistant in inner-city Derby visiting the vulnerable people on the closed cases list to see if they needed coal in the midst of the miners' strike. . I was essentially the forbearer of the winter fuel allowance payment that all pensioners receive today! So I am in reflective mode and bringing a long-term perspective to some of our current issues and challenges, even if I'm not bringing a bag of coal.

We are dealing with absolutely unprecedented challenges with a sustained and continuing increase in demand for all services for children driven by population growth, austerity and greater awareness of the

harm done by phenomenon such as child sexual abuse not even recognised 40 years ago let alone addressed.

The scale of reduction in **funding** for public services has been well described. But the full impact of reductions in planned spending by local authorities and others has still not yet been felt.

I have spoken before about my worry that a disproportionate impact of these reductions is bound to fall upon early intervention and preventive services. And that this could mean that we lose capacity from the system to prevent the need for greater levels of help later on. This is a real danger.

But it's important to recognise the cumulative impact of other reductions in the wider system too. The impact of reductions on public health funding and reductions in view for the Youth Justice Board are just a couple of examples of recent changes which will amplify this risk.

We know that local elected members across the country have protected spending in children's services as well as adults. But we know that this has already been at a heavy cost in terms of reducing other services.

There is a limit to how much more can be done. The next round of reductions will run the risk that in many places we will not be able to meet core requirements.

Of course we are looking creatively to find new ways of working which make better use of scarce resources. So local agencies are integrating their approaches and developing new models of working. In the midst of these challenging circumstances we are seeing creativity and the flourishing of partnership approaches. We are also seeing the emergence of a new relationship between local authorities and the communities they serve, putting more control with local people to co-produce new solutions.

But as we go forward we need to have robust national oversight of the impact of increases in demand as well as reductions in spending. So we welcome the work that has been commissioned by the DfE and MoJ to understand better the changes in demand and consider the resources that might be needed for the future. We have to find the right way of ensuring that sufficient resources are made available across the system to meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of our society.

It's undoubtedly the case that significant reduction in public spending has driven the need to **innovate and collaborate** across public agencies at a pace we have never seen before. We are seeing practice running ahead of policy. And in this hot house we're seeing experimentation and radically different ideas emerging including different ways of providing services and different ways of working. But in embracing the new we must not discard the lessons from experience.

So, the core function for Directors of Children's Services as envisioned in the 2004 Act, whatever else that role might combine with in local arrangements, is to keep a clear line of sight on how well these fast changing arrangements on the ground at a local level, work for local children. And our commitment to doing that has never been stronger and arguably has never been more needed. This is particularly pertinent in **protecting children from harm.**

Those of you with long memories will recall that Area Child Protection Committees were formed in 1974 because of a lack of inter-agency working between professionals which could have saved the life of Maria Colwell. Almost 30 years later and following Lord Laming's enquiry into

the death of Victoria Climbié, arrangements were made to put those partnerships onto a stronger and statutory footing- and LSCBs were created in 2004 by the same Act.

ADCS fully supports the statutory requirement, defined in the Children Act 2004, for every top tier local authority in England to establish an inter-agency **LSCB**

But there has been a loss of clarity about the role of LSCBs in some quarters. Not helped by confusion which has arisen because of mission creep, where additional expectations have been incrementally placed on LSCBs by OFSTED and government, which in turn is limiting the effectiveness of some of those Boards.

Today, ADCS will publish a policy position paper on LSCBs. We've thought long and hard as to whether there's a radical alternative to the LSCB. There isn't in our view. If we didn't have them, we'd end up inventing something similar. But, their role needs to be clearly focussed and implemented with confidence in order to fulfil the principal statutory objective of LSCBs – ensuring that work **to protect** children is properly co-ordinated and effective. Widening the preventative remit of LSCBs, detracts from the core function. Whilst the LSCB must be the fulcrum where agencies are held to account for their safeguarding

responsibilities, it may not necessarily be best placed to fulfil the wider preventative work. We are committed to working together to clarify and thereby strengthen the role of LSCBs and to establishing a more appropriate way in which to judge the effectiveness of the work of LSCBs.

And that of course brings me to **Ofsted!**

Our stance on the Single Inspection Framework together with the LGA and SOLACE is well understood. And yet OFSTED and government are determined to complete the cycle of this dysfunctional process which will inevitably carry on generating the kind of headlines over the next 18 months, that we have already seen: that two thirds of local authorities are failing in their responsibilities towards children. This is not only irresponsible it's plain wrong.

Why is it that we've arrived at a point where the overall findings from these inspections are weighted too heavily towards a negative? Ofsted is worried that later someone will say that they got it wrong and therefore default to defensive inspection. Defensive inspection is just as dangerous as defensive frontline practice.

And let's be clear conference, that despite inspection judgments, despite media coverage to the contrary, England remains one of the safest countries in the world for children. In June this year, the NSPCC published its annual *How Safe Are Our Children* research.

- There has been a 60 per cent decrease in the five-year average rate of child deaths due to assault and undetermined intent over the last 30 years
- There are more children than ever in the child protection system and being protected. Between 2002 and 2014 the number of children subject to CPPs increased by 88 per cent, in 2014 that means there were 48,300 children subject of a Child Protection Plan
- As the NSPCC report says “the number of children dying as a result of homicide or assault remains in long term decline”

Let me touch next upon **social work reform** – a matter that is close to all of our hearts in this room. Innovative approaches developed through the step up and front-line initiatives have introduced fresh momentum to the development of high-quality initial social work training. And social work educators partnering with local authorities through social work

teaching partnerships have great potential to drive stronger links between academia and current practice at a local level. But we must make sure that we don't create a two tier training system and we must keep an overview of the market for initial training to ensure we manage the supply of high quality social work staff in future. We must not inadvertently destabilise the system we are aiming to strengthen.

The introduction of three assessed and accredited statuses for children's social workers has potential to improve consistency of practice as well as confidence in the capability of those staff on the part of others. It will be particularly important that our learned friends of the judiciary have improved confidence in the quality of social work decision-making; social workers are experts and their role in care proceedings must be seen as such.

But we must make sure implementing accreditation doesn't become over-elaborate and must be embedded within arrangements that local authorities already have for career development and progression. We must keep coherence with adult social work. And, it must not become an additional burden or a distraction.

Let me turn now to **schools** which are another of the frontiers of rapid innovation where front-line practice, when unleashed, runs ahead of policy and strategy, inspection and regulation. We see this all the time at local level. If you empower frontline workers to solve problems in a collaborative way with their colleagues and service-users, without having to refer excessively to senior managers for decisions or for guidance, they come up with imaginative ways of doing things which you could not have invented top-down.

At a national level I believe we are seeing this effect in relation to the place of schools within our wider systems.

There has been a presumption in government that local authorities are reluctant to collaborate with the academy system in order to make sensible local arrangements to improve the standards in all schools. But here an important opportunity could be missed to make the most of existing local infrastructures and expertise, instead of implementing duplicate structures to oversee the improvement of coasting and failing academies and free schools.

So at national level there has been a policy stand-off, in which government is resisting a logical next development, which is to consider how schools across the whole system can use their combined resource for improvement more effectively. Actually the news is at local level people are getting on and making this happen already.

So we are already seeing productive relationships between Regional Schools Commissioners, academy chains and OFSTED Regional Directors engaging with schools and local authorities to think about how a combined focus on improvement can be orchestrated in a more coherent way.

At the same time conversations about **regional devolution** are being driven by the recognition that learning at all ages is absolutely central to the economic wellbeing of local places. Proposals from several regions to place education as a key strand of regional agendas could create new opportunities to think about how we can connect business and skills to growing the economy, with schools creating opportunity at the heart of local communities.

Think what we could achieve if we could join all this together! But it does require a relaxation of national constraints in order to flourish.

For the avoidance of doubt. This is in no way a manifestation of local authorities wanting to get into the business of "running schools". I'm puzzled by the re-emergence of this fallacy as far as I can see any such illusion died more than 20 years ago!

As well as frontline practice running ahead of policy I would also suggest that we are seeing **partnership working** progressing more quickly at a local level than nationally, with some notable exceptions, like the constructive work on the Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy "Futures in Mind" and cross governmental work to understand and explore ways of supporting work on child sexual exploitation. But, we need to see far more joined up approaches from government itself. We have high hopes of the Cross Ministerial Taskforce on child protection chaired by Nicky Morgan, Secretary of State for Education and we will do all we can to support this important work as we go forward.

How do we capture all the energy and goodwill as well as the effort which is already been putting into this **partnership and improvement** work for the benefit of others and for the system as a whole?

This is a fertile line of thinking for the future. In our relentless pursuit of improvement we are not, contrary to the position sometimes portrayed, constrained by ideology. Above all we are pragmatists. This is particularly true of course in my home region of Yorkshire and the Humber where pragmatism and plain speaking go hand in glove. Where all 15 authorities collaborate on all sorts of things.

Across the range of complex and difficult work which makes up children's services we are often succeeding. And, in the true spirit of sector-led improvement, we are sharing our learning not only within regions, but increasingly across regions, working closely with LGA and I hope in the future with organisations like SCIE too.

This is not a sector on its knees and feeling helpless, even if we are seriously challenged by the circumstances in which we are trying to do a good job for children and families.

This is a sector owning responsibility for the quality of what we do and driven to find ways of achieving better outcomes for local children and families about whom we care so passionately. This is what we are about. This is what we do.

And because of the clarity of the statutory responsibilities we carry as directors of children's services and lead members, we have the strength to pursue that responsibility relentlessly whatever the system might throw in our direction whether that be lack of resources, policy adhocism or system change.

Conclusion

Conference, let me draw my remarks to a close. We may be on the Jurassic coast here in Bournemouth, but there isn't a dinosaur amongst us – we're innovators, creative problem-solvers and most of all, we are driven by our commitment to continuously improve the lives of the citizens we are either elected or employed to serve.



I see that every day in Kirklees, where it's been my privilege to work for the last 10 years and I thank the elected members, Leader of the Council, my chief exec for their support over all those years and for giving me the opportunity to be the tenth elected president of ADCS!

Thank you. Ray, over to you.