

Alison Michalska keynote speech, EIF National Conference, 11 May 2017

Check against delivery

At the start of April this year, I became President of the Association of Directors of Children's Services – a role which is an absolute privilege and I am honoured to be undertaking.

In my inauguration speech I outlined my priorities for ADCS in the coming year. I am looking forward to furthering the priorities of the Association whilst ensuring that my golden thread of 'a country that works for children' is driven through my presidential year and beyond.

So why do we need 'a country that works for children'? It is estimated that there are 4 million children living in poverty – that's almost one third of the total child population. A growing number of those children live in working households, this is a relatively new phenomenon. We need a country that is preparing its children to thrive - not just survive; that ensures that children are kept safe and that they have accessible, inclusive educational opportunities. If the current government wants to achieve its ambition to create 'a country that works for everyone', we must first start with one that works to get the best for our children.

It seems to me like it would be a pretty good start if we agree what 'a country that works for children', might look like. Here's what it wouldn't look like:

It wouldn't be a country that makes children and their families, particularly families in receipt of benefits and even more worryingly those who are working, poorer. With food banks in every supermarket.

It wouldn't be a country that criminalizes young people, especially those in children's homes, for trivial matters.

It wouldn't be a country where excessive profiteering by a small number of private fostering agencies generates significant wealth for a few private individuals on the backs of some of our most vulnerable children.

It might be a country that actively supports public sector agencies to engage in partnership parenting – one where not only the local authority (LA), but police, health, probation, schools and colleges really feel and understand the part they each play in being a corporate parent for the seventy thousand children in our care currently.

It might be a country that commits a fixed percentage of its GDP to be spent on children's services – you know, like we do for defence, foreign aid and so on...

What it might also be is a country that uses evidence of what works when planning services with and for children; one that prioritises early help and early intervention to give our children and families the best chance to stay together and live happily and safely in their communities. It would also be a country that recognises that sometimes the best interests and outcomes for children mean they have to live away from their birth families,

and that LAs would be properly resourced to ensure the children who need to be in our care receive this in safe, loving substitute families, with access to the best schools, the best physical and mental health care and are supported by well trained, properly supervised and dedicated social workers (SWs) and other professionals who care deeply about the children's individual, unique needs and continue to care for them into their independent adulthood.

Returning to my presidential priorities, one of my key policy priorities for the coming year is to 'mobilise knowledge and learning from improvement and innovation and share it across the sector'.

You will have heard the phrase 'data rich, intelligence poor'. We need to be an intelligence rich sector supported, but not enslaved by the data that matters. So, on the one hand, I'm intensely relaxed about many of the projects the DfE's Innovation Programme is funding. What I am bothered about though is how we mobilise the learning from those projects, and other sources of innovation and practice excellence, and share it.

We need transparency and visibility about the good work of all LAs. But, also honesty with ourselves and each other as a sector.

We need to grapple with the conundrum of 'what works'. It is rarely the case that any initiative or intervention can be simply lifted and shifted wholesale from one place where it appears to work, to another place, without contextualized modifications. This is at the heart

of implementation science. So, whilst we must share learning, we need to think hard about the practicalities of replicability.

The importance of intervening early is a priority area for many local authorities. However, the difficulties can often lie in evidencing that early help is working. We all believe in its efficacy instinctively but if we are using it as a tool to manage demand on statutory children's social care services it could be perceived as failing - given the rising number of referrals, child protection plans and children in care. Or, (and this is my preferred narrative) are we, through early help and early interventions identifying children who need the protection of statutory services earlier, and as such, protecting them from further harm and making long term plans for these children to thrive?

Measuring the effectiveness of early help is tricky. Outputs such as the number of early help assessments (EHAs) completed, can be easily measured (207,636 EHAs completed in the year 2015/16). However this tells us little, if anything, about the range or effectiveness of early help services. The evidence base that underpins our commissioning and indeed de-commissioning decisions needs to be built on evidence beyond what can simply be counted.

Nottingham City has a proud history as an Early Intervention City and continues to commit to prioritise spend on early help, and prevention. Our children's early help locality hubs bring together schools, health, children's centres, youth & play services, family support workers and SWs. Recently described by Ofsted as outstanding, they are a key component of our ability to manage demand, especially for our most expensive tiers of support - children subject to a child protection plan and those in our care.

We are increasingly taking the learning from children's services and applying it across wider council services, building capacity in families and across communities, encouraging looking after each other rather than reliance on the shrinking state. I shall return to tell you more about the Nottingham story shortly.

In response to our desire to understand early help and interventions better, ADCS undertook it's own soundings and found that:

- There was no common definition used amongst LAs of 'early help', we talk of early help, early intervention, family support, all broadly meaning the same thing.
- There are no longer any dedicated, ring-fenced funding streams other than 'Troubled Families' and small strands within public health grants. For many LAs, funding early help is increasingly difficult to sustain even with new and innovative ways of working in light of the removal of the Revenue Support Grant in 2020, the end of the Troubled Families programme in 2020, which is part of many local authorities core early help offer, together with other pressures local authorities are facing, most notably in adult social care.
- There are no statutory data collections on early help so LAs do different things in respect of recording and monitoring early help indeed some do not record at all, so comparisons have no meaningful statistical basis.
- Despite the plethora of legislation and guidance in the children's services policy terrain, none of it is designed to bring coherence to important preventative work, instead, LAs must do so for themselves in the context of unprecedented retrenchment in public sector funding.

- In these cash-strapped times LAs struggle to divert funds from statutory services, such as children's social care, to fund early help efforts. We'd therefore welcome the DfE's innovation programme focusing in this space in the future.

Despite all this, ADCS still assert that there are indications that early intervention should be a priority:

- Parents have the biggest influence on their child's early learning. Talking and reading to a baby can stimulate language skills right from birth. This can help prepare children so that they are ready to learn at two and ready for school at five.
- Children who cannot read well at the end of primary school are less likely to succeed in secondary school, and in adulthood, are likely to earn less than their peers.
- Evidence shows that good early development is crucial for later life. For example, in communication and language outcomes:
 - good vocabulary at 18-24 months predicts reading accuracy and comprehension five years afterwards
 - children with poor vocabulary at five are more than twice as likely to be unemployed at age 34 as children with good vocabulary but similar non-verbal skills
- Well targeted and implemented programmes in the early years can improve behaviour and achievement at school. However; there is urgent need for more high quality empirical evidence and testing of the effectiveness of programmes in the UK.

Let me talk to you about my day job.

I am the Corporate Director for Children and Adults at Nottingham City Council, responsible as the statutory DCS for all children's services, and also accountable for the DASS and DPH.

Nottingham is ranked 8th most deprived district in England in the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD):

- The employment rate is comparatively low (63.5% in 2014/15)
- 11.7% of people aged 16 to 64 have no qualifications (compared with 8.6% nationally)
- 67% of Nottingham's children live in workless or low income households
- By the time they start primary school:
 - the vocabulary of children from low-income families is 12 months behind the national average
 - reading skills are likely to be 14% behind the national average
- At the end of primary school only 66% of Nottingham children achieve at expected standards compared to 74% nationally.

What are we doing about it?

In 2008, leaders in Nottingham made early intervention a top priority for the City and committed to a 20 year journey to significantly shift outcomes for individuals and families, and to enable a great start for children. The principle is embedded within Nottingham's strategic planning framework and is championed by our local strategic partnership (One Nottingham), and our Children's Partnership. Early intervention, prevention and early help apply to all ages and are needed at all stages of the support system. Nottingham has a proud history as an Early Intervention City and continues to commit to prioritise spend on early help/early intervention/prevention.

Our aim remains to break the intergenerational nature of underachievement and deprivation in Nottingham by identifying at the earliest possible opportunity those children, young people, adults and families who are likely to experience difficulties and to intervene and empower people to transform their lives and their children's lives.

Our key criteria include:

- Tackling intergenerational issues
- Focusing on those activities that, if delivered, can reduce the number of specialist interventions
- Bringing partner resources together to make this happen
- Targeting work at those individuals or families who are very likely to have difficulties without effective support/ intervention
- Focus on coherence for the children, young people and families within the delivery model
- Shifting resources to tackle the complex causes of problems, rather than just treating the symptoms.

Our programme is structured around five key work streams:

- Governance – aligning priorities, engaging partners and decision-making through the Children's Partnership
- Projects – trialling new work or re-engineering services to meet needs through 16 pilot projects
- Finance – understanding the relative cost and impact for services and gradually shifting more resource to preventative services
- Learning and evaluation – being robust about what does and does not work and strengthening the links between research and practice
- Knowledge management – understanding need and creating a hypothesis of what work will have the greatest impact.

Critical to our success has been implementing both national and international programmes with proven evidence based outcomes. This has included; Family Nurse Partnerships, Stronger Families and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. These have been complemented by locally developed programmes which we have critically evaluated and continue to go from strength to strength. Including:

- Active Families - increasing opportunities for families in areas of the City with the highest child obesity rates, to engage in physical activity
- DrugAware – supporting schools to address drug and alcohol issues (this received national recognition and accreditation as an evidence-based programme by EIF)
- Maths Mastery – an approach to teaching Maths in our early years setting based on schemes in China and Singapore. It is a scheme where there are no ceilings to

expectations of what children can achieve.

Despite relentlessly rising demand, we have managed to keep relatively stable our CIC numbers through a comprehensive range of intensive interventions with families and children on the edge of care, successfully keeping 90% of the children they work with at home with families rather than them needing to come into care. We have a variety of edge of care services which include; MST, MST-CAN, Family Intervention Project and my particular favourite Safe Families for Children.

In Nottingham City we are aware that it is easy to become swamped by lots and lots of new initiatives. Therefore we concentrate our energy on embedding evidence based approaches that are working for us, for example the use of Signs of Safety methodology right across the local children's partnership (not just in children's social care).

The strength of our approach to early intervention, which in partnership with the Early Intervention Foundation led to us becoming one of just 20 early intervention pioneering places, was behind us successfully securing £45million from the Big Lottery for our Small Steps Big Changes programme.

Small Steps Big Changes is a partnership of parents and professionals working together, through co-production and parent powered change, to drive the delivery of the programme and focus on helping children to live happy, healthy and fulfilled lives. The programme seeks to positively impact outcomes for 0-3 year old children in the areas of communication and language, social and emotional development and nutrition.

Time doesn't allow for me to go into detail of this highly successful programme, but suffice to say it owes at least in part, its success to the commitment of our local MP (Graham Allen) and City Council Councillors. Achieving one of the Small Steps Big Changes ambitions, that every child under five be enrolled in the Dolly Parton Imagination Library is one of Nottingham City Council's top Council Plan priorities.

I want to bring us back to where I started, taking the opportunity to remind you all that as champions for our children ADCS believes we need 'a country that works for children'. A country where help is provided to our children and families sooner, where schools and health - our big universal services for over and under five's respectively, are focused upon and resourced to facilitate early help. Where we recognise the need to learn and remember:

'we become experts at whatever we practice' and 'are not afraid of making mistakes – indeed mistakes are magnificent if they lead to learning'.