

President's Address to ADCS Annual Conference 2017

(Thursday 6th July 2.00 – 2.30pm)

Welcome

Welcome to the ADCS annual conference 2017, in this our tenth anniversary year. It's fantastic to see so many of you here. I particularly wanted to welcome the Children's Minister Robert Goodwill to what I hope will be the first of many visits to ADCS conferences. Conference, I know that you will want to join me in welcoming the Minister to our wonderful world of children's services. We look forward to working with him over the coming period. I'm also pleased to welcome Mark Owers, co-reviewer for the DfE's Fostering Stocktake and Andrew Christie, Chair of the national Adoption Leadership Board. A little later this afternoon, Mark & Andrew will be joined on stage by a quite inspirational woman, Kerry Littleford. Kerry is not only an amazing story-teller, she has a powerful story to tell. Kerry, you are most welcome too. Could I also welcome our select band of guests – Margaret Wilcox who is this year's ADASS President and our friends from DfE. Colleagues, you are most welcome. I would also like to 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, which you will have received when you registered.

I am delighted that Amanda Spielman, HMCI will be speaking to us tomorrow. So too will Sir Kevan Collins, Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation, which, I learnt recently, is one of the government's 'what works centres'. In a late addition to tomorrow's conference programme, Paul Marshall Manchester's DCS is going to give us a quick canter through the council and its partners' responses following the attack on the Manchester Arena. Following these terrible events, many colleagues from across the country have been in touch with Paul and his colleagues, not only to wish them well in their endeavours but to seek their advice on recovering from a major incident.

I am particularly pleased that we will be joined by two young people from the Manchester-based RECLAIM project. They have kindly agreed to come and talk to us about what they think a country that works for all children looks like. And that colleagues, is the theme of my speech to you today – A Country that Works for ALL Children.

Resourcing a country that works for all children

Children's services are enduring relentless pressure as funding decreases whilst demand most definitely does not. The task of balancing council budgets is tougher than ever before as we simultaneously seek to manage demand, reduce spending and improve outcomes. To protect vital statutory services, early help and preventative services have, in some places, been severely reduced despite our desire to help children and young people by intervening early.

Add to this the factors outside of our direct influence that increase demand on our services and strapped resources:

- the rapid rise in vulnerable unaccompanied asylum seeking and migrant children
- a series of increasingly hostile immigration policies which cut vulnerable people off from vital public services, including education and the NHS, leaving families destitute with no recourse to public funds
- the cumulative impact of welfare reforms on children and their families,
- lack of affordable housing

- rising levels of child poverty
- and, the demands of inspection.

...to name a few. It is unsurprising, therefore that the funding gap for children's services is as big, if not bigger than that of adult social care. The LGA estimates that the funding gap in children's services is likely to be £2bn by 2020!

You may recall that during the former Chancellor's tenure there were proposals afoot to remove completely the Formula Grant, which in 2010/11 represented almost 40% of local government's funding from central government. In its place, local authorities would be enabled to retain 100% of income from business rates. Such a proposition would surely have widened that funding gap even further. But, it would seem that the proposal is no longer on the table – huge sighs of relief all round. Nevertheless, the gap in funding needs to be plugged and it should be done, like all good social work assessments, on a needs basis. The future resourcing of children's services must connect need with funding.

If not, this figure will continue to increase as the pressures facing children's services, and the demands on our partners deepen. I know that government will want to do the right thing by children. ADCS urges government to think big, think system wide and think prevention. We urge priority action across government, so that resources for children are marshalled with a view to achieving a cross-party, long term, coherent, strategic whole system approach to helping early everywhere premised upon an inclusive 'societal' vision for all ages, abilities and communities of children.

Let's be absolutely clear, there can be no challenge more pressing than that of achieving the optimum balance between preventive and reactive services (prevention or protection) and between services for children living at home and those that do not or cannot be at home.

ADCS does not take a simplistic view that delivering better outcomes for children simply requires more spending. We know there is much to be achieved - both for children, and for more efficient use of resources - by transforming culture, practice and systems, but, to borrow that marvellous phrase of Dave Hill's, the government's touching faith in structure as a means of improving children's outcomes, is not one that ADCS members share.

The structuralist pursuit of creating trusts, and other arm's length bodies of various descriptions - social enterprises, staff mutuals and in fact Multi-Academy Trusts - can bring an 'accountability buffer' between service users and those accountable for ensuring services are provided, in all cases the council remains accountable because of its various sufficiency duties. The proliferation of distributed actors in our school and social care systems makes behaviour change even more complex amongst what is already an elaborate array of providers, watchers, checkers and doers.

There are more children in our society than at any time before and yet they are at risk of being short changed as the focus of attention, understandably has turned to the consequences of our ageing population. It is our duty to ensure that society prioritises its future citizens and that no child is left behind.

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, exacerbated by insecure jobs and an inflexible welfare regime. We should support and supplement families' endeavours, especially when parenting difficulties are compounded by poverty and deprivation, rather than pathologizing

their needs for early help. The most effective way of doing so is to prioritise and therefore resource, universalist, preventative children's services. Some may think this a backwards step, harking back to the days of every child matters. Well, the past can illuminate the present, every child does matter. We do need government to work with us to throw the juggernaut into reverse before our children's services become wholly reactive, specialist, blue light services funded on a fraying shoestring.

Social work is not an island. Its contribution to making meaningful and sustainable change in people's lives must be considered in relation to the wider system, wider even than children's social care.

A self-improving system for children's services

As the outcomes of inspection appear to suggest, a successful children's social care service can only operate in a successful wider children's services context. One where the corporate and political leadership is well informed and engaged, providing effective support and challenge. Moreover, wider children's services can only thrive where they are seen as an intrinsic means by which councils are transforming and shaping the places for which they are responsible. It is my firm view that councils are uniquely placed to transform local areas, making neighbourhoods, villages, towns and cities places that work for all children and their families. I do however acknowledge that in some circumstances a poor children's service may be symptomatic of broader council failings and in those thankfully rare circumstances a trust might be the right solution. This does not negate the fact that councils are responsible for their own improvement, but collectively we are all responsible for the performance of the sector. This must be our self-imposed improvement mandate. This is not about improvement in pursuit of a better Ofsted rating, it's about embedding improvement as a habit not a goal.

ADCS is working on a proposal in conjunction with our LGA colleagues, for the creation of Regional Improvement Alliances which we believe could take us closer than we've ever been to a sector-led, self-improving system in children's services. We believe the alliances could:

- Serve as the primary means by which the sector will address the early identification of concerns before they reach crisis point
- Build and share best practice, recognising that good practice must travel with nuance because the alchemy of councils and local places varies. What works in Nottingham City cannot simply be teleported to elsewhere and expected to work in the same way
- Alliances could contribute to an evidenced-based model of improvement, particularly if alliances can have access to research and practice evidence that is produced nimbly, is sector-facing and digestible. We don't want to wait two years for a weighty worthy tome. Some of the risks faced by our children today – online grooming, social media enabled abuse – require rapid real-time responses and some pretty nimble footwork on the part of practitioners and those who support practitioners to describe emerging practice
- And, with a fair wind, alliances could also create the conditions for a learning system which unites all stakeholders from regulation to delivery in a robust and collective approach to improvement. An improvement regime premised upon the elevation of some councils above others – hero leadership – simply will not work. Of course, not all councils perform to the standard of the best, but every one has something to give and every one has something to learn.

The purpose of seeking continuous improvement to our services is to create the conditions in which children and young people can thrive - not just survive. A country that works for all children is one that ensures children are kept safe; that their wellbeing is actively promoted and that they have accessible, inclusive educational opportunities. Schools obviously have a critical role to play as the eyes and ears of an early help system. Schools, and the dedicated people who work and volunteer in and around them, are best placed to identify issues early before they reach crisis point and respond quickly when concerns are identified. That's why it is so important that children go to school and those missing education – be they electively home educated or attending supplementary, illegal schools – do not become invisible.

ADCS has been raising concerns with the DfE about home education for some time. It's hard to be sure, but we think there are at least 30,000 EHE pupils in England. Some parents have legitimate concerns that their local schools are not catering for their children's needs and thus elect to educate them at home. Now I know that comparisons with continental European countries is not really *de rigueur* - but most if not all have very strict criteria if they allow home schooling at all, such as the home educator is required to be a qualified teacher. We know too from surveying our members that some schools use home education as a means of off-rolling pupils who are unlikely to hit their exams grades. And of course, there are significant safeguarding and child protection concerns if home education is used as a cover for attendance at illegal, unregistered schools. Might the answer be finding a way to incentivise schools to be inclusive so they are not tempted to exclude and 'off-roll' in the pursuit of academic excellence at all costs?

For example, more mainstream schools that are inclusive of children with special education needs and disabilities, thereby reducing the need to place children in distant special schools. More schools incentivised to offer a curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities that are relevant to children's lives today. Of course, passing exams is important but schools need to be freer to concentrate on what matters most – an enriching broad-based curriculum. I'm optimistic that under the leadership of Amanda Spielman, Ofsted will make a significant contribution to making sure that, if schools focus on the right things, then a good inspection outcome will follow. If you haven't yet had chance to read Amanda's recent speech at the Festival of Education, I commend it to you. We welcome HMCI's review of curriculum practice and I am looking forward to hearing from Amanda tomorrow morning, as I'm sure you all are.

Inclusive schools, adequately resourced

The Queen's speech contained, or in some cases omitted, three things in relation schools which I hope are the seeds of recognition that inclusive, adequately resourced schools, which are the eyes and ears of our early help system, are the essential building blocks of a country that works for all children.

1. A review of the planned shake-up to school funding. We hope that the returning Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening has been given a genuine remit to "look again" at the proposed changes to school funding. Now is not the time to cut schools' resources. In fact, the reverse is true. It's time to re-emphasise schools' role in early help and resource it – properly. School leaders know their pupils. Really

great school leaders also know the context and circumstances of their pupils' families and the communities they live in.

2. It looks like the proposal to change the policy of universal free school lunches for infants to providing instead a free breakfast is off the table. I accept that breakfast means breakfast, and that it is apparently the most important meal of the day, but, I don't suppose for one minute that the proposal to switch to a free breakfast meant the universal provision of a full English fry-up to all infants.
3. Quietly allowing the proposal for the expansion of grammar schools to slip away is welcome. A country that works for all children must have a school system that works for all. I know, you know, everybody knows, that selective schools do absolutely nothing to improve social mobility. Moreover, removing a cap on faith-based over-subscription criteria, principally to encourage the opening of new faith free schools would also be the wrong direction to move in. Children live in diverse Britain, schools prepare children for their lives as adults.

So, that's all to the good (she says with her fingers firmly crossed!). But, we still need more school places. Now, any reasonable person would expect a local authority to have a clear role in ensuring its children and young people have access to a good education service and a school place. A successful school system is mission-critical to the future of our economy.

Many have attempted to estimate the quantum of additional school places needed in England over the coming few years. On balance, we will need something like an additional 729,000 school places across England by 2020, this is equivalent to building an additional 2,000 schools. Shortages of school places in London, the south east and core cities such as Bristol, Manchester and Nottingham are particularly acute, while some rural areas are continuing to experience a surplus of school places. We need to remain vigilant however, because the Green Paper that contained the grammar school proposals also proposed allowing existing academy schools to become selective. This would add even greater pressures into the system and potentially create new ones too.

ADCS would advocate a twofold approach to the provision of more school places. Firstly, by increasing the number of good school places available to all families, in places where they are actually needed, ideally embedded in local communities, serving the needs of that community. Of course, this is rather more complicated in large or sparsely populated rural areas, but as a nation we spend £1 billion on home-to-school transport. Now I know Steve won't mind me using him as an example. Hampshire county council spends £30 million a year on bus and taxi drivers, transporting children from their homes to their schools – that's more than Steve spends on his social workers. Any other large county council has the same tale to tell. That's a hell of a lot of money tied up potentially in the wrong place within the system.

Secondly, by giving education providers with a strong track record the right incentives to expand their offer to more pupils. Let me be absolutely clear, I include in this local authority maintained schools, which are currently the only providers not allowed to compete to open new schools.

In conclusion

Conference, it's time for me to draw my thoughts to a close.

How we care for, educate and support the children of today is an indication of how successful our country will be tomorrow. More and more children are disadvantaged in multiple ways, their needs grow ever more complex. Those living in the most deprived areas in England are 10 times more likely to be on a child protection plan or become looked after than their wealthier counterparts. At present children and young people are not a policy priority for our government as we enter into Brexit negotiations, and as a result our country does not yet work for all children. Directors of children's services and the teams of dedicated, fantastic staff whom it is our privilege to lead, have a clear responsibility to champion children and young people in wider society and to advocate on behalf of those who are unable to do so for themselves. It is our job to put children first. Children should have the opportunity to lead happy and fulfilled lives, no matter where they are born or live. Everyone in this room agrees with that. Ministers believe in that too. We need to start by making sure that families have the economic means to succeed and public services are well funded and they help children to thrive. Children and young people in care who cannot live with their birth parents need to be loved and supported by well-trained carers and helped by a well-regarded and well-trained workforce.

Colleagues, I hope you enjoy the conference.

Thank you for listening.