

President's address to ADCS annual conference 2022

11.00 – 11.30am Thursday 7 July

Welcome

Colleagues, welcome to the ADCS annual conference 2022. It has been three long years since we were last together in person and it is so good to be back together in the same room. A special welcome to the 130 ADCS members who are joining conference for the first time; please do come and say hello to me, John Pearce, our Vice President, or Charlotte Ramsden our immediate Past President (not all at once though). It's never been more important to get you involved as members. I'd like to welcome officials from the DfE and members of the press. I am grateful to Children and Young People Now, for sponsoring the ever popular ADCS *Little Blue Book*, which you will have received as you registered for the conference.

I'm normally a very forward looking person but so much has happened over the last three years that it's right that we take a moment to reflect. The pandemic has been a once in a generation event, like nothing I have experienced before. I know that everyone in this room, and I mean everyone, will have had to rise to challenges that they had never imagined would occur. I pay tribute to each and every one of you. You have played your part in a national effort to ameliorate the impact of Covid on children's lives. As President of this Association, I can only express my pride at what my colleagues, along with our partners, have achieved –thank you.

It must be said though, that although it affected every part of our lives, personal and professional, and has left a long lasting impact on us as individuals and our communities, we did not experience the pandemic equally as a country. As things start to look and feel more normal, we must not forget the health, social, racial, geographical and generational inequalities that existed before, but became even more pernicious over the course of the pandemic. Some may say that children paid a particularly high price. With a cost of living crisis, child poverty at record levels and a crisis in children's mental health, many in our communities continue to experience lives far removed from their previous normality. With children back at school and young people sitting exams, it would be easy to forget that we are only at the start of our work to reset and renew, and we have much more to do to ensure Covid does not become an unhealed wound for a generation.

While Covid has had a devastating impact, it has also taught us many things. We already knew the importance of relationships but the void of social contact over such a long period of time reinforced this. While virtual arrangements offer real benefits, not least in allowing us to squeeze yet another meeting into the diary, nothing can replace actually being in each other's presence. It's telling by the number of people in this room, we need to feel a sense of connection and presence that Zoom just doesn't deliver; and that's not just for us as professionals, it's the same for our children and families. We knew long before the Care Review that relationships are key, but more on that later in the speech!

Before turning to the future, I'd like to take a moment to remember those colleagues we have sadly lost since we were last together in this room in July 2019 and who we

so wish were here with us today. Dave Hill, former president of ADCS and DCS in Surrey and before that Essex, Merton and Croydon. Helen Blackman, from Nottingham City and who sat on our Board of Directors; and Carmel Littleton, the DCS in Islington and before that in Thurrock. And most recently, of course, Sarah Caton, the Chief Officer of ADCS whom so many of you will have known. We still feel their losses personally, and professionally, but take comfort from the tremendous impact they have had on the lives of children and families right across the country. Their legacy lives on.

I must also take the opportunity to acknowledge the ADCS Presidents who worked tirelessly on our behalf at different stages of the pandemic, Rachel Dickinson at the beginning, Jenny Coles and Charlotte Ramsden, each were relentless in pushing for a sharp focus on children, young people and families in national responses. And, it seems the learning of lessons will begin in my Presidential term, with the official Covid-19 inquiry now underway, it is in no small part due to the efforts of ADCS that the inquiry will now have a clear focus on the impact of the pandemic on children. While it wasn't all plain sailing, the intense joint working between ADCS and government colleagues, with a real sense of dialogue and listening, has helped to garner a new recognition for the indispensable role we play. Conference, we are not stakeholders in the system, we are the doers, it is our unique selling point. We fully welcome and embrace our greater involvement and influence in the development of the national policy landscape, recognising respectfully that, whilst we won't always agree, the way forward is always based on discussion, negotiation, compromise and with a laser like focus on children – of course this means that it is all about relationships, does that sound familiar?

Looking ahead now. When I was considering throwing my hat into the ring for this role, back at the end of 2019, Sarah Caton told me that it would be straightforward, oh yes, unless there was a major policy initiative, or a major child protection tragedy, or some unforeseen event, in which case it might get a bit busy, but not to worry as these things don't happen very often. So, three major policy initiatives have landed on my desk plus the national panel review plus the ongoing response to a global pandemic plus the response to the Ukraine crisis. Hmm, I think I fell for that one!

It does feel like we are at a critical junction in children's services. Now is a once in a generation opportunity on multiple fronts to realise the change that is needed to make the whole system for children not only sustainable but more importantly, better serve those it is designed for; children, young people and their families. From the conversations that I have had with fellow Directors of Children's Services, it is clear that we are hungry for change. We must seize the moment and embrace the opportunity but not curtail our ambitions, there are areas where we must go further and faster.

But this should be about a whole system for children and there is a gap. During my inaugural Presidential address, I called for a national review of children's mental health services; and I don't mean another clinical review of services, what we need is a review of the system that is simply not meeting the needs of some of the most vulnerable children and young people. Targets of 35% of schools having a mental health support team and a national community treatment target of 35% are nowhere

near ambitious enough. At the same time, access to hospital treatment beds for mental health has almost halved. We need to rethink this part of the system from top to bottom. The clinical model upon which services are designed also no longer serves us well. A simple example of what I mean is the concept of the waiting list. Something that was designed to ration hip replacements does not work for children in acute distress. An access target of 35% in children's social care would be unthinkable – can you imagine? – I just don't understand why this is acceptable elsewhere.

In case you were wondering colleagues why I feel able to speak out on this topic, it is simple, two reasons. One, as Directors of Children's Services we are responsible for all of the children in our area, and when we talk to those children they almost always point to mental health and wellbeing as their biggest priority, so I am duty bound to raise it on their behalf. Secondly, the crisis in meeting children's mental health needs threatens to overwhelm the social care system. What does anyone think happens when children are waiting 16, 20 weeks for an assessment or over a year for treatment? Families are under acute stress and breakdown with children ending up in a social care system that was never designed to meet their mental health needs. Make no mistake, this crisis threatens to undo any good work that stems from the Care Review. Since I called for the mental health review, I have had significant support from all sectors, but no action from the sector that counts in this regard – the NHS. It feels like the crisis in children's mental health services continues to languish in the too difficult pile and that simply isn't good enough for our children.

ADCS welcomed the publication of the SEND and Alternative Provision Green Paper and it is reassuring to see inclusivity at the heart of these plans. It is a definite step in the right direction. It has been evident for some time that the current national SEND policy, as devised in the 2014 Act, doesn't work and as a result, the system is increasingly unsustainable. Many aspects of the Green Paper are to be welcomed, including the focus on strengthening collaboration and accountability across all partners in the system, clarifying their roles and responsibilities, and creating a less adversarial, more child-centred system, one based on children's needs. The proposals around banded costing arrangements are also interesting and welcome. But, as always, we could go further. Bringing accountability where there is responsibility is essential, especially in the context of the ICS reforms where there is an ongoing risk that the needs of children are side-lined by the ongoing pressure in acute adult services. The House of Lords amendment ensuring each ICS has a children's strategic lead was a welcome development but does it go far enough? Time will tell.

Underpinning the reform programme must be a commitment to work in co-production with children, young people, their parents and carers. Change can be difficult and we need to embark on this journey together if we are to effect the real change that is needed, not only to make the system more financially sustainable but to create a system that adequately prepares children for an independent, good quality adulthood.

The piece of the jigsaw that's missing for me is any mention of the financial black hole that is high needs deficits, with most recent estimates suggesting this could

reach £2.4bn by March 2025. This poses an existential risk to the financial viability of many local authorities if the proposed changes to the accounting methods are introduced. And let's reflect on the fact that it would be a serious statistical anomaly if we are all getting this wrong in one way or another. ADCS looked for authorities that have no major deficit, no Ofsted statement of action and are meeting the timeliness target. We found just three. Step forward the Scilly Isles, the City of London and Calderdale. So clearly, this is not about local delivery but a major policy failure and we need to collectively ensure that the good intentions outlined in the Green Paper are implemented in a sustainable manner this time.

Since 2014, we have seen a near doubling of children with special educational needs, we need to reflect on why this is and what this says about us as a country. The costs associated with the current SEND system are baked in for years to come, this reality must be addressed alongside the reform programme. The spending review has been and gone and a recession seems like a very real possibility. It simply doesn't make sense that many schools and multi-academy trusts, often in some of the more affluent areas of the country, are sitting on healthy and rising balances and yet high needs funding is under such pressure. The reality is, a tweak in the national funding formula could help us to start to rebalance the books.

Work on SEND cannot sit in isolation, it's part of a wider education system and so we can't talk about the SEND and AP Green Paper without mentioning the Schools White Paper in the same breath.

The opportunity to be engaged in the development of the White Paper was truly welcome, as is the ongoing dialogue with the Department as it moves into the implementation phase. The opportunity to establish LA MATs is one I am sure many authorities will look to explore, either now during the expressions of interest phase, or down the line once the legislation has passed into law. The White Paper is about much more than structural reform and we must keep our eye on the other prizes here; the realignment of responsibilities with powers and ensuring the right accountabilities in the system which support the drive for inclusion. I am genuinely hopeful that the measures set out in the White Paper will take us towards a more coherent education system that works for all children, whatever their needs, wherever they live. And most importantly as we go forward, the acid test for a 'good' school should be that it is good for its most vulnerable pupils.

As we approach the end of this academic term, my attention has started to shift to planning for a successful return to school in September for all children. During the pandemic, for the first time we said to our children that it's ok not to be physically present at school. This was a moment in time and for the greater good. The status quo has now been re-established and never before has attending school been so critical. Some of us have history in this regard and you may remember that the Isle of Wight was a test case on school attendance fines, a case that I am happy to say we won and since then attendance has improved significantly on the Island. I want to say today that I am sure that all Directors of Children's Services understand the criticality of getting all of our children back in school and we stand squarely alongside the stirring work of the Children's Commissioner and the former Secretary of State in this regard.

We know though, that one of the things that helps children overcome obstacles to getting into school is relationship-based work. I am told that nationally, there are many fewer children on roll compared to pre-pandemic numbers. Each of these pupils would attract the Age Weighted Pupil Unit, a nominal per pupil amount which is paid to schools based on the numbers on roll. I'm not sure where this money is now, but it strikes me that it could be redirected to create the workforce needed to support children back into education. We will do all we can to support a full return in the autumn term, and with the right resources, we could do even more.

And the third review at the forefront of everyone's mind, although hopefully it won't be the last if I have anything to do with it, is the Care Review. ADCS warmly welcomed the report and its focus on the needs of children and families. We, the people in this room, didn't design the current system and we are not the custodians of it, on the contrary, we are probably the first to tell you where it doesn't work! ADCS contributed to the Review, and it is reassuring that as sector experts, we have been listened to. And, while we do not agree with everything in it, there is plenty of good stuff to work with – the 80/20 rule applies; it creates a platform and a clear framework for realising change.

On some of the more technical aspects of the report where significant, structural change is proposed we have to carefully test and try these proposals (or kick the tyres as others have said) to avoid any negative or unintended consequences. In particular I hear concerns from DCSs about the proposed interface between family help services and child protection, We need to really test these things to get it absolutely right for vulnerable children. Also, the concept of regional care cooperatives might make more sense if we were dealing with a traditional market, we're not, and I doubt very much that the purchasing power of regions will have any effect on a 'cartel' backed by private equity. We need to go further and faster on the issue of private profit in the children's social care – I'll come back to that later. We can't repeat the mistakes of the past in implementing well intentioned policy (the 2014 Act and SEND springs to mind) without carefully testing the consequences and then amending policy to get it right – and getting it right for children is what we are all interested in. But let's be clear, this is a good report and it's the only game in town. ADCS is committed to working with government on the reform programme – we are keen to maintain the momentum and get things moving quickly, so let's explore some of the things that we want to talk about.

When I spoke in April at my Presidential inauguration, I highlighted the increasing and ever present pressures around workforce and placements. I want to be constructive here. On reading the CMA report into the children's social care market, it struck me that one area to be explored could be to work with the sector to establish cost bandings for placements. Bandings would evidence what is available for identified needs, including the responsibilities on health to joint fund and invest in placements for children with complex needs, as per the proposals in the SEND Green Paper – surely what's good for the goose is good for the gander. Most importantly the long-term ambition must be a move to a not-for-profit care system.

And in relation to workforce, let's move quickly to tie an early career framework to a statutory provider, so social workers can't work for agencies in their formative

professional years. Graduates being drawn to agency work almost straight out of university is a relatively new phenomenon. The worry is that this could compromise on quality as access to support, supervision and reflection are critical to excellent practice. As employers, we must also be open to looking at our own offer to ensure it reflects the wants and needs of our workforce, a stable workforce is ultimately better for the children and families we work with.

Profiteering is again raising its head and I can't see that this is in the public interest, it's certainly not in the taxpayers interest. It can't be right that private social work agencies are contacting our social workers, hoovering them up and then selling them back to us at twice the cost. In a high stakes accountability regime, self regulation will always be impossible so I call upon government to help us by taking action in the public interest.

As a sector, we need to work with the regulator to clearly define what a social work function is, and where this isn't needed, let us use our most valuable resource, our workforce, to put in place appropriate arrangements. The expectation that social workers must 'case hold' child in need cases is an approach driven by inspection and a one size fits all approach doesn't work. This could be a huge step forward in recognition of the skills, experience and value of the wider workforce and what they offer to children and families.

While I'm on the subject of workforce, an uncomfortable narrative has started to surface in some of my discussions of late. I've heard that family support and early help is the solution to school attendance issues, colleagues in health have suggested family support could help with growing mental health pressure, child first policing – family support, anti-social behaviour – family support. I think you get the gist. There is a real risk that every part of the system sees a solution in the family support space. There are significant workforce implications if family help, like family hubs, are to be everything to everyone! I'm not saying that we don't do it – we can all see that the root causes can be helped by early intervention – but let's have a proper conversation about what it is that we are asking our workforce to do, why, with what evidence base and, critically who funds it. Which brings me on to...

The financial realism set out in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care is welcome and gives an indication of how much is needed to reset the system and get it to a place where significant reform can land. Action is also needed in the short term to get some clear blue water between the crocodiles and the canoe before we can implement reform....you can't build anything from unstable foundations. ADCS members will support the making of the case to HM Treasury for additional investment in children and families, but we also need government to allow us to use the money we currently have to better effect. Year on year we are stripping services back to fit the shrinking financial envelope rather than developing to meet the ever changing needs that are present in our communities. This is just storing up problems for the future and we are teetering on a financial cliff edge. I've already banged on about reducing profiteering in private children's homes so here are some quicker wins that ADCS would wish to see brought forward at pace:

- The government could take swift action to address the challenges around social work agencies, we could regulate or preferably ban them. We'd save millions from the public purse immediately
- Update the local authority funding formula prior to the next spending review, we need some financial resilience in order to implement the transformation that we all want
- Employers should be able to use unspent apprenticeship levy to create a care leaver bursary to tailor support for apprentices with care experience
- I've already mentioned tweaks to the school funding formula to address high needs deficits and what we could do if we could redirect the Age Weighted Pupil Unit money
- As a DCS in a large county, I can't resist the chance to mention the £1billion LAs spend every year transporting children to school. I almost spend more on home to school transport than I do on social workers, this can't be right and the legislation is ripe for reform
- Let's introduce kinship leave to match adoption leave
- Let's give care leavers priority access to housing
- Initiate a review of Working Together, especially in relation to multi-agency safeguarding arrangements
- Review the children's homes regulations given the impact these have on sufficiency of placements
- Revise the approach to regulation and inspection to reduce bureaucracy and cost
- And while it's not a quick win, driving diversity in our own leadership must be a priority.

Colleagues, with government's help, we can crack on with these things whilst we carefully test and try the other things that are in the recommendations of the review.

While there is much to do on the home front, I couldn't not mention the war in Ukraine and the tremendous efforts of local government colleagues to support those who are fleeing the conflict. The Homes for Ukraine and family schemes were operationalised in short order – quite rightly so. There are though still issues to iron out and in particular we need to look ahead at what now appears to be a lengthier and wider scheme than first envisaged, and make sure that we have all of the right safeguards for children in place.

For some time ADCS has been calling for the Home Office and other government departments to come together to develop a holistic view of the various resettlement schemes and the cumulative impact on place. Each of the resettlement schemes comes with different expectations, rules and funding, just in the last two years, we have welcomed families from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine, and the national transfer scheme has become mandatory.

We have real ambition to support children and families to start their new lives here, enjoy the freedoms we can offer and allow them to contribute back to our society. The various schemes need to be brought together in a coherent manner not only so we understand the impact on place, but so we can ensure parity in the treatment and support we offer anyone fleeing persecution, no matter where they come from.

Colleagues, just a few more words before I hand over to the young people from Wessex Dance Academy.

As an Association, our strength is here in this room. Our membership is unique and our shared commitment to working with and for children and families is what binds us together. Throughout this speech I have made, on your behalf, a series of, I hope, constructive proposals and offers. There is momentum behind the reform programmes, things are starting to happen, great! That is what we want and, whilst we probably all wish there a few more hours in the day sometimes, I absolutely know that we are all, every single one of us, up for the challenges and opportunities that lie in wait for us.

Bring it on!