

Steve Crocker Inaugural Presidential Speech, 6 April 2022

Introduction

Thank you Charlotte.

My fellow Directors of Children's Services, elected politicians, senior officials and to all of our guests I say Hello and welcome to the Museum of London, it is genuinely exciting to be here in person with you all, if not a little terrifying to be removed from the comfort blanket of being able to turn my camera off and feign wi-fi issues if nerves strike!

The last two years have been unlike any other, and are hopefully never to be repeated in my lifetime. I'd like to take a moment to just thank and recognise the sterling efforts of those who have gone before me, the presidents who we did not get the opportunity to say a proper thank you and goodbye or even a hello to. They are in the room today and I am talking about you Rachel Dickinson, Jenny Coles and of course, Charlotte Ramsden.

We have shared our appreciation with Charlotte earlier today in a private meeting but let me take this opportunity to recognise publicly your tremendous commitment and dedication to the Association and of course to children and families, over the last 12 months as President. On top of your day job as director of both children and adult services in Salford, you have generously given up your time to input into important national reviews, the development of green and white papers, the ongoing response to a global pandemic as well as two international humanitarian crises! It is no exaggeration to say you have engaged in hundreds of meetings over the last year, offering advice and guidance, experience and challenge to government departments, ministers and others. Working as your vice president I dare to say that we have made a formidable team. A huge and heartfelt thanks from me and from your Association. I am looking forward to working with John Pearce this year to create another different but equally formidable partnership.

I'd like to continue the theme with some personal notes of thanks. I want to thank my political leaders in both Hampshire and the Isle of Wight and my senior leadership team who have been so supportive of me and this endeavour. I give a special thanks to my PA Danielle Hayes who keeps me on the straight and narrow. I also want to thank my family, Clare, Eve and Ruby who are with me today and without whom none of this happens.

But before I really get started with the order of the day, I just wanted to pause and remember the colleagues we have sadly lost since we were last together in spring 2019, and who, in ordinary circumstances, would have been here with us today. Firstly, the irreplaceable Dave Hill, a former president of ADCS and DCS in Surrey and before that Essex, Merton and Croydon. The kind hearted Helen Blackman, who worked in Nottingham City for many years and sat on our Board of Directors and the fabulous Carmel Littleton, the DCS in Islington and before that in Thurrock. Carmel was a member of the ADCS Council of Reference and was involved in our education committee for many years. And most recently, of course, the indomitable and utterly authentic Sarah Caton, the Chief Officer of ADCS, and predecessor organisations, for 19 years. 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 continues to live on in everything we do.

On to our policy priorities for 2022/23

The experience of the last two years has affected almost every aspect of our lives, our work and our communities, exposing health, social, racial, geographical and generational inequalities that have existed outside of mainstream consciousness for many years, and will take many more years for us to fully address.

There is a risk that as life looks more normal by the day, we slide back into familiar routines and ways of working and do not seize this opportunity to make fundamental and lasting changes for the better. During the pandemic, children often felt like an after thought in national planning, with some hospitality and sporting venues opening before schools after the first lockdown and delays in decisions about practical support for children receiving free school meals, on alternatives to exams and access to vaccines. There is fundamental learning that we can take from the last two years about how we, as a society, prioritise, or not as the case may be, our children and young people.

We have heard much about levelling up but I believe the wellbeing of children and families should be at the heart of the levelling up agenda and that this ambition is best set out in a long term plan for children and young people, which starts from universal principles and has a sharp focus on reducing the inequalities that have existed for some time but have become ever sharper under the lens of Covid. Let's take child poverty as an example. We know that pre-pandemic, 4.3 million children were living in poverty, 75% of whom were living in working families and 46% were from black and other ethnic groups. Since the first lockdown in March 2020, there has been an almost 50% rise in the number of families claiming free school meals, and this was before the perfect storm of rising food, fuel and energy prices alongside increasing tax bills.

Added to these financial pressures on families, we still do not have a comprehensive, multi-year, ambitious strategy to help children catch up on lost learning and experiences whilst also supporting their emotional and mental health needs and addressing the social injustices that have continued to permeate our society throughout the pandemic but haven't been acknowledged in plans to date.

It's five years ago since ADCS published a country that works for all children and we are still waiting for such a strategy. I'm not sure that the burning platform for change could be burning more fiercely could it? Which brings me to...

The Reviews

How does the saying go, you wait all day for a bus and then three come along at once. It's a little like that at the moment in children's services, with three significant and transformational developments all landing at roughly the same time, namely the schools white paper, the national SEND review green paper and the final report of the Independent review of children's social care. That's on top of white papers and new legislation dealing with health and social care, levelling up, youth justice, policing, online harms and domestic abuse. Not to mention all of this during a global pandemic.

We welcomed the publication of the schools white paper and SEND green paper last week, the ambition of inclusivity at the heart of education which runs through both is a principal ADCS whole heartedly supports. I welcome the attention that these reviews are drawing and the way in which they have been conducted with a real sense of dialogue and listening from government; they are all the better for it. There is no doubt that very significant challenges exist in each of these spheres and change will take time but there are also huge opportunities to improve children and young people's lives, their outcomes and experiences of our services and support. It's an exciting time and we now need to turn our attention to the next stages and making this ambition a reality. There is a lot resting on our collective shoulders, and I don't just mean DCSs. It is more important than ever that government finds a way to join up practically, financially, strategically and ideologically to maximise change for the benefit of children and families. I, along with ADCS colleagues, are ready and willing to work in collaboration with government and other stakeholders to make the most of this opportunity.

I do fear though that some challenges have outpaced the reviews and some alligators are now circling the canoe. The crisis in placement sufficiency is well known and the recent CMA report has reiterated what we have been telling government for some time - access to and costs of suitable placements for children

in care are unsustainable, all whilst the largest providers make “materially higher profits”. Let me be clear, profiteering through public money on the basis of meeting children’s care needs is unacceptable. I am hopeful that the independent review of children’s social care will make strong recommendations on this front.

Focus on people, on the workforce.

For some time ADCS has been raising concerns about the sufficiency of the workforce, I fear we are blindly sailing into the eye of a storm without heeding to the warning signs. I can’t emphasis enough that everything we do hinges on our workforce, they are our greatest asset.

Over the last two years, key workers and public services have been in the spotlight like never before. Understandably in a global health crisis, the NHS has been at the forefront of awareness, but teachers, social workers, staff in residential children’s homes, youth workers and yes, DCSs, have been working round the clock to support and sustain children and families. Our staff and everyone working with children and families continue to run on good will, which is now running low.

In particular, we need a more sufficient and stable social work workforce. ADCS is ready to work with government to achieve significant national change which must include addressing the challenges associated with agency social work head on – profiteering is again becoming an issue and yet we don’t see this happening in other sectors, such as police, health and teaching. To really tackle this, we need to recognise some of the drivers of instability, the unintended consequences of authorities under Ofsted and DfE pressure due to performance dips and the impact of knee jerk reactions when things go wrong as well as understanding what works well in other aspects of the public sector.

Boosting the numbers of social workers, along with teachers, has long been the priority focus for the DfE, and whilst this is desperately needed and welcome, they are only one critical piece of the jigsaw, there are lots of other roles in the wider workforce in children’s services that are central to our work with and support for children and families. As well as social workers, we need more speech and language therapists, more educational psychologists, more health visitors, youth workers and managers of children’s homes. But this is more complex than just a numbers game. We are now living with Covid and we need to be acutely aware of the additional pressure this places on individuals and the system as a whole, as well as lifestyle changes in the workforce and a restructuring economy; it all feels uncomfortably fragile at the moment.

We need a national review of children's mental health services.

You might think we've got enough to contend with, well, I'd like to make an opening pitch for a further national review, of children's mental health services.

Children's wellbeing is a sign of the overall health of public services, and society. In children's services our work overlaps with and is dependent upon the police, the NHS, schools and a wide range of voluntary sector groups. When things go wrong in one part of the system, it affects all of us – just look at the recent Child Q case for example in London.

The alarm has been sounding for some time on the growing mental health concerns amongst children and young people, longer waiting lists, more children reaching crisis point. Notwithstanding pockets of transformation in localities, children and young people's mental health services need radical reform, they're too rooted in clinical diagnostics, adrift from the child-centred, whole family and relationships-based working that is increasingly the norm in wider services for children and too adrift from other community based services such as ours. They no longer reflect the needs and preferences of children and young people, particularly after the experience of the last two years. Furthermore, in those last two years we have seen a huge increase in poor mental health and wellbeing amongst children which makes it even more bizarre that the number of bed nights available to treat the most seriously traumatised children has declined rapidly during the same period. This can't be right but I fear this has landed in the too complicated pile, not least because it is so difficult to comprehend funding arrangements at the community level and evidence the impact this is actually having. I hate to say it but failure to act now will only store up trouble for the future. Would I go as far as to say children are being failed? yes, I would.

Requiring Integrated Care Boards to have an executive children's lead is a welcome development and a step in the right direction but we must go further. Let's grasp the opportunity and use ICSs to achieve greater alignment of place based governance arrangements across children's mental health services and local authority service delivery to better meet the holistic needs of children and young people and let's give the only system leaders with the word 'children' in their job title a bit more leverage in this area.

And on the theme of cross cutting priorities I do also want to add my support to the government's campaign to end violence against women and girls. We are honoured to have with us today Maggie Blyth who is the national lead for the police on this topic and I will be taking forward work with Maggie and others on this crucial issue. And in case any of you were wondering why this old bloke is passionate about this

issue then I'll introduce you to my daughters afterwards. Yes, men need to get on board this campaign and help to lead the change that is urgently needed.

And finally, the money.

We have heard time and again that there is sufficient resources within the system, we're just not spending it right! As you'd expect, I don't necessarily agree with that simplistic view of the world of local government finance, however I do agree that there are resources within the system that could be used to better effect. Over £1 billion spent on home to school transport each year, private children's home providers with operating profit margins of 22%, an NCS scheme costing £171 million, additional costs of employing agency staff are approximately £22,700 per worker per year, and a 126% increase in the use of independent non-maintained special schools over the last 6 years. Yes, there is money in the system. Is it being used to best effect? No, and our hands are tied. If we are serious about the opportunities presented by the White Paper, Green Paper and the yet to be published independent review, we need to make sure that funding within the system is available to support reform for the benefit of all children, young people and families. That will require some bold steps, and to be clear, I'm not proposing this is a silver bullet, this won't solve the funding challenges across children's services, but it would be a welcome start.

Before I draw this to a close, I want to continue Sarah's time honoured tradition of managing to include a literary quote within any speech she was involved with. We both loved the classic American novel, *The Great Gatsby* – a print of the cover of the first edition hangs on my wall. Some of the themes of wealth, power, class, loss of dreams, a changing world and hedonism, seem all too prescient for these times so I will leave you with these words: *"Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And then one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."*

So as Fitzgerald says, let's run faster, stretch out our arms and look to the future.

Thank you, I'd now like to handover to Indra Morris, Director General for Children's Services, Communications & Strategy Group at the Department for Education to say a few words.