



**ADCS President's opening address**  
**National Children and Adult Services Conference 2022**  
**Wednesday 2 November, 10 – 11am**

Thank you Sarah. Hello conference, I'm Steve Crocker, Director of Children's Services in Hampshire and Isle of Wight and this year's ADCS President. I'd like to echo Sarah's comments in welcoming you to Manchester, it's great to have so many of you here after what's been a really difficult few years for many of us, on both a personal and professional front. May I add my thanks to this year's conference sponsors, IMPOWER. Your support of the work local government does for children and adult social care is greatly appreciated.

Conference, whilst we're in reflective mode, it's exactly five years since ADCS published the position paper, *A Country that works for all children*, which has been central to our policy work and ambitions ever since. In the original paper, published under the then ADCS President, Alison Michalska, we set out half a dozen or so conditions for children to thrive. After five years it's now time to review our progress and I'm sorry to say it's quite a mixed bag. So, what were the aims?

In a country that works for all children we said that children and families do not live in poverty, they are not hungry. Their home and environment are affordable, warm and safe. Families have the economic means to succeed and public services are properly funded to help them thrive. Children and young people are supported to grow and develop, through an education system that prepares them not only for exam success and the skills of the future, but also for adulthood. Children and young people who cannot live with their birth parents are cared for and supported by well-trained carers and are helped by a well regarded and well-trained workforce. Emotional, mental and physical health needs are met within a system that does not unnecessarily criminalise them and where their contribution to the community and wider society is both recognised and valued. Not a bad set of ambitions. So, where are we now?

On hunger and poverty, I think we all know we're heading in the wrong direction and are staring down the barrel of a very difficult winter. The Trussell Trust has recently launched an emergency appeal as they do not have enough food to meet demand, they issued 46% more food parcels in August and September compared to the same period in 2021. On safe and warm housing, it's much the same story, with too many families stuck in cold, damp housing or temporary accommodation, many of whom report facing an impossible choice – do we stay warm or do we eat? This is 2022!

Our children's education had been improving, but any gains have been wiped out by the pandemic and there is not yet a coherent plan to gain back the lost ground evident at all key stages and phases. We now know that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has widened and is the largest for a decade with attendance now a major post-pandemic issue. Schools also report that they face significant funding challenges as they struggle to keep up with inflation.

We all know the health service is in a very difficult position, with record waiting lists and ongoing pandemic impacts. Children's mental health during the pandemic has severely deteriorated and services have not been able to meet their needs, the recent increases in childhood obesity have been described as unprecedented.

Conference, you will know this, but I feel I must reiterate; the pandemic did not affect us all equally. The GCSE data is just one aspect of this, there are many more evidencing how the pandemic has disproportionately affected children who are from Black and other minoritised communities, those who are disabled and/ or have special educational needs and those growing up in poverty. I don't yet see the national response that firstly acknowledges this reality, but more importantly, addresses it, in a coherent, long term way. Stay with me, there is some better news coming...

On not criminalising children, there have been some gains with record lows in custody, however there is more to do here and some entrenched issues requiring serious action, including the overrepresentation of children in care, with special educational needs and from Black and ethnic minoritised backgrounds. And in terms of our work with children and young people at risk, there has been real progress. The leaps and bounds in social work practice and the shift from a criminal justice response to a safeguarding response to abuses and exploitation outside of the home has been heartening.

And finally, on children's contribution to society, conference, can there be a more stark example of this than the sacrifices millions of children made during the pandemic, staying at home for weeks and months on end, missing school, missing their friends and missing out on milestones and rights of passage, for the benefit of us grown ups? Children have been selfless during the pandemic.

Continuing my theme of looking back in order to look forward, in 2010, ADCS published the first phase of the longitudinal research, Safeguarding Pressures. There have been seven phases and in each one, we make a number of predictions, and guess what, these have been spot on every time.

Today, we have published an interim report of the eighth phase of this research, alongside a supplementary report on children's mental health – we had to do this as a separate report as respondents had so much to say about the impact on children's services.

Let me give you just a flavour in case you haven't yet had a chance to read the report.

In 2021/22, there were 2.8million initial contacts to children's services 'front door', a figure that has doubled since we first started collecting this data, and just over 650,000 referrals to children's social care. As at 31 March 2022, there were

- Over 404,000 children in need, of whom:
  - Approx. 51,000 were subjects of a child protection plan; an increase of 72% since 2008
  - Approx. 82,040 children in care, an increase of 35% since 2008
  - Collectively local authorities are supporting over 32,000 care experienced young people aged 19-21, a 22% increase since 2015 and a substantial proportion of whom are care experienced former UASC.

Is it any wonder that, despite some investment over the past two years, the budget gap continues to grow, it's now £778m just to stand still and that's before we even mention special needs funding and the high needs block!

The findings of the research weren't a surprise to me and they won't be to you. Poverty can and does impact upon parenting capacity but children's social care should not be the default response here, each of us are supporting families at risk of destitution, buying school uniforms, mattresses and at times paying rents to keep families together.

There continues to be significant demand for children's social care and the complexity of needs is escalating in response to the multi-faceted challenges children face in their day to day lives. We are still seeing the impact of Covid and the changes that it has brought about play out, and it will be some time before we can capture the full impact - but it will come and at this rate, the system won't be in a position to respond.

What the research does clearly evidence is that the foundations needed to support a strong and sustainable system simply aren't there. Whether it's sufficiency of the workforce, placements, funding...we just don't have enough and we don't have enough levers to pull to create headroom in the system. Every local authority needs a flexible workforce and the ability to draw on temporary workers but we are being put over a barrel by unscrupulous employment agencies which won't now provide

me with a single agency social worker, but they can provide me with a team of them, and a manager, so long as they have protected caseloads and are paid two or three times what their colleagues are receiving. It's not right.

Similarly, we have a placement sufficiency crisis where demand is outstripping supply and outdated regulations no longer reflect the needs of children or the risk profile local authorities are managing in the community. Isn't it time we stopped regulating buildings and put that focus on providers? And the elephant in room is profit, ADCS is clear, there should be no room for private profit in children's social care. Generating significant profits on the back of vulnerable children and cash strapped local authorities is quite simply, wrong.

We know how we have got to this position, it is the lack of leverage for Directors of Children's Services and local authorities over the system as a whole whilst being part of a high stakes accountability framework. We are entirely aware of the irony of a legislative framework that places 298 (at the last count) statutory duties on us, but not a single lever that gives us significant influence over the system as a whole. This needs to change and, conference, I have some optimism that it will, I'll come back to that later.

Safeguarding Pressures shows that there has been an increase in expenditure in children's services over the last two years, mainly driven by local decision making to pay the bills of the private providers. But these decisions have been made to paper over the cracks, not to plug them. It's not clear what this means for the financial future of local government but one thing is for certain, local authorities can only increase spend by 2.99% (council tax) minus inflation. So that's currently sitting at -7% then.

There's clearly no more fat to trim but at the same time we do have a blueprint for reform and here's where I can sound a note of optimism. The independent review of children's social care talks about significant investment and quite rightly looks to the sector to help reform children's social care. ADCS welcomes this; we didn't design the current system, if we did it would look a lot different, and when I talk to my colleague directors I sense a real appetite for change. We want to test out and try the proposals across a wide range of local authorities so that we can measure success and guard against unintended consequences, but it needs investment to have the full impact. There is also some good stuff that doesn't require legislation or changes to regulations, so while others are distracted by the notion of structural solutions, let's get on and do what's in our gift to make the system better for children and young people.

The research also shows that directors of children's services are concerned about the pressure in the SEND system, just as much as they are in the social care

system. The SEND and AP Green Paper and its focus on inclusively is what is needed to rebalance the system towards a better mainstream offer for children with special needs. We look forward to reading the government's response by the end of the year, I hope it is reflective of the challenges on the ground and enables us to make the progressive changes that we need to, we simply can't afford to take the easy route and have it kicked into the long grass.

Over the course of my presidency, I have repeatedly raised the issue of children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health services. I am duty bound to do so, not only because it's their number one concern but because children's social care is not best placed to deal with this and yet, increasingly, we are. I find myself sourcing placements to keep children safe due to their mental health needs, at a direct cost to my local authority – because we will always do the right thing by children. Despite the best of efforts of those dedicated professionals in health services and in local authorities who work with children who are in crisis, we're in a very difficult position. I and many other directors and our teams are trying to navigate a system where both mental health services and registered providers do not or cannot support young people with the most complex needs. Waiting lists for treatment of over a year are not uncommon and nobody is surprised when this leads to family breakdown. This is playing out in the number of applications to the new national DoLs Court – over 200 applications were received in the first two months of operation, compared to 400 across the entirety of 2020.

I don't immediately know what the alternative is, and neither do our health partners but it must lie in joint commissioning, joint working and new ways of working that get help to children in the community in a timely fashion...more of the same simply won't do. Waiting lists for children in distress are anathema to me, the increased demand for children's social care and resultant cost and responsibility shunting has the very real potential to derail the progress that is on offer through the independent review of children's social care. This is why I continue to press for a wholesale review, from top to bottom, of the way in which we, as a country, support children with mental health difficulties.

Conference, it feels like there are so many challenges that it would be easy to despair or become disillusioned. But we don't, do we, the cohort of directors of children's services is as strong as I have ever known it and the next generation of leaders, currently going through the Upon programme will be even stronger, we need to keep this pipeline going. As we've shown in the past, most recently though Covid, if anyone can deliver for children, families and communities under tough conditions, local government can. And collectively, working in regions, we can affect real change. The work that we do via Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances is having a tangible impact, especially in our peer to peer improvement programmes, just look at the changing profile of Ofsted judgements if you don't believe me.

As I said earlier, we've got the appetite and leadership skills to deliver change and we have a real moment of opportunity if we can create the collective strength to grasp it.

Despite the fact that this country still does not yet work for all children, local government elected members and officials work tirelessly up and down the country every day to mitigate this and meet the needs of our communities. Quite frankly, it's an honour to be part of it. We repeatedly see the strength of local government shine through these difficult times, finding new or different ways of working. We can do this because we understand our local places, can make the right connectivity and deliver because we know our children, we know our families and we know our communities. This is our USP.

Before I pass over to Cllr Jamieson to wrap up, I want to leave you with a quote from Dame Louise Casey, which I think captures the essence of why we do what we do, and what we will need to hold dear as we look to the future, together:

"Local government at its most effective is jaw dropping. It can inspire its citizens. It can stand up for doing things that are right. And sometimes I feel 'come on you lot, show the country – show the bloody country – local government is worth something'".

Thank you