

ADCS President's opening address to NCASC 2017

Hello conference, I'm Alison Michalska, DCS Nottingham City and this year's ADCS President.

It is such a pleasure to be here in my capacity as ADCS President. Being President is giving me the opportunity to work with government and partners in the wider system and join forces with passionate and committed people across the sector. It has been a real privilege so far and I must take a moment now to acknowledge the support that I have received from my council to do this important national role. I would like to thank the Leader of Nottingham City Council, Cllr Jon Collins, the Lead Member Cllr David Mellen and portfolio holder for schools Cllr Sam Webster and the Chief Executive Ian Curryer for generously allowing me time away from the ranch to carry out my ADCS duties.

As many of you will know, the Association of Directors of Children's Services was launched in 2007, so we are delighted to be marking our tenth year this year. Like other 10-year olds, we are very fond of cake and drinks with bubbles. Unlike other 10-year olds, however, we are not on the cusp of those difficult years – adolescence - where we become sullen and uncommunicative. On the contrary, and this is true I think across local government, not just in children's services, we are a positive bunch of public servants. We are eager to do the best for the communities we serve and there is no danger of the local government sector going quiet.

I've worked in local government all my adult life. I've seen social care practice and standards improve beyond recognition. I've seen policy initiatives come and go, and sometimes come back again. You won't be surprised to hear that one of the very best initiatives that I can recall, was The Children Act 2004. That piece of legislation and the framework that sat beneath it, brought together a council's education and children's social care functions and responsibilities under the Lead Member for Children's Services and the Director of Children's Services – clear lines of political and professional responsibility and accountability.

Protecting children from abuse and neglect is one of the most important responsibilities we have – as a society, as citizens in a democracy, as leaders of our local areas and as public servants. It is the responsibility of central government to ensure our taxes are distributed fairly so that each area of the country can afford to meet the needs of its most vulnerable citizens. It is the responsibility of local government collectively to secure a reliable, predictable and adequate funding source for services to children and families. It is the responsibility of individual councils to spend those funds in a way that promotes resilience in people of all ages, helps prevent the escalation of need to crisis point; and, where intervention is required, ensures it is timely, proportionate and effective and doesn't engender a sense of dependency– we have to move in and out of families' lives. And we need to do that in the most non-stigmatising way we can. So rather than focussing on parental deficits with regard to their abilities to care for their children, we need to reorient our focus to one which acknowledges the challenges faced by parents, particularly when those parents are struggling financially and builds upon the strengths within the family.

Now I'm one of those directors we refer to within ADCS as 'twin-hatter', which means I'm also responsible for adult services as well as children's services. There are those who have argued that bringing together those two very demanding (and high spending) local government roles has the potential to dilute focus either way. My view is that is a decision for individual councils to make locally, and

We've got more in common than divides us across children and adult services

Here are just some of our shared challenges:

- **Commissioning for sufficiency** – we have some shared challenges, particularly in relation to care placements that can be made locally
- **Managing demand** – I think there's something that children's services can do to help manage future demand in adult social care particularly around SEND. For too long adult services have been blamed for the cliff edge that families describe as the disabled child reaches adulthood. For some of our most vulnerable children and young people with the most complex needs this support is vital. For others, we can and should be helping to build resilience and promote independence earlier to ensure we are enabling them to play as full a part in society as possible. In Nottingham we have brought together our children's and adults disability services and the service rightly sits in adult services - as you know how to build on ability and strive for independence. Helping our children become independent, healthy, resilient and responsible adults is one of the best early interventions we can make to reduce demand on adult services.
- **Reducing costs** – the only way we can do this is to get right into the heart of the prevention space. Now, I'm no fan of ring-fenced funding. It is for councils to determine the best way to spend their resources in relation to the needs of their citizens, including those citizens who cannot vote and who have no wealth-generating capacity – aka children. But, public health grant funding has really helped local areas to marshal resources around preventing ill-health early – public health IS early help
- **Demographic pressures** – there are more children than at any time before in our society; and an increasing aged population. These demographic factors alone will increase demand on our services
- **Tackling domestic abuse** – prevalence is shocking, almost at epidemic proportions. Domestic violence now eclipses all other triggers for children and young people to be in care proceedings. The current and former Home Secretaries are committed to bringing visibility to these issues. I applauded their efforts, but we need much more traction
- **Tackling county lines** – this is an area that exemplifies the importance of working together across local government, fire & rescue, police and probation services through local Community Safety Partnerships, led by the local council. County lines is a widespread form of harm, present in many areas. It is a major cross cutting issue involving trafficking, gangs, drugs, violence, criminal and sexual exploitation and missing persons.
- **Tackling modern slavery** - The broad nature of the threat of modern slavery means that effective partnership working is key to tackling the issue successfully. Community safety partnerships, local serious and organised

crime partnerships, Health and Wellbeing Boards, Local Strategic Partnerships, as well as multiple safeguarding boards all have a role to play in sharing information, tackling and disrupting modern slavery and supporting its victims. That's a lot of partnership – a tad too many perhaps. Moreover, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 requires some commercial organisations to produce an annual Slavery and Human Trafficking statement showing what they were doing to identify, prevent and mitigate modern slavery within their supply chains. It seeks to make supply chains more transparent for consumers and to push for a movement for the eradication of modern slavery from the supply chains of businesses operating in the UK. Procurement of services is an important part of councils' expenditure. Councils are not required to produce the statement, but will want to ensure that the risks of modern slavery within their supply chains are understood. Councils will wish to show leadership in promoting a human rights approach towards procurement however, mapping and monitoring supply chains is expensive, we'll need to share costs with other public authorities.

- **Deprivation** – we are I think, I hope, beginning to see a move away from some aspects of austerity, which are welcome. But families living in deprived areas will continue to suffer unless some flexibility can be introduced to the currently inflexible benefits regime. Welfare reforms always hit the most vulnerable hardest – single parents, children, people with disabilities and larger families
- **Supporting migrant and asylum-seeking children and families** – is a massive challenge for us all. Nevertheless, it is a moral duty to support people fleeing from unimaginable horrors. It's hard to know with precision just how much money local government spends every year supporting families who have no recourse to public funds. These vulnerable families have no legal entitlement to financial support or assistance from the state. But councils cannot and will not leave these families in destitution. We think it entirely possible that local government spends well over £100 million a year supporting these families, whose circumstances have been exacerbated, albeit unintentionally, by the introduction of provisions in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 which significantly reduced the breadth and depth of support available via Legal Aid
- **And then there's increasing the amount and availability of affordable housing** – this is a real dilemma for us, isn't it? In those parts of the country that still have 'social housing' run by councils we are seeing some really intelligent work undertaken around single affordability assessments – what's the point of the council chasing its tenants for rent arrears, fining or even evicting non-payers, and then having to step in and support those families to avoid them becoming homeless and destitute. It will be interesting to see how the government's recent commitment to making it easier for local authorities to borrow money to build more council houses plays out. I hope it will result in more affordable council houses for families.

So colleagues, we have lots of things in common which should keep us all busy for a while.

I'd like to move on to say something about **systems leadership and sector-led improvement in children's services.**

Local government children's services have been practicing systems leadership since the creation of the roles of DCS and LMCS in The Children Act 2004. The notion that our accountability & responsibility for children goes way beyond the services we manage, deliver or commission is embedded across the children's sector locally. I was asked recently at a conference I was speaking at, what would be the one thing I would ask of the Prime Minister if she was in the room. The answer was easy...please Prime Minister will you be a systems leader for children across government, exerting your influence, and perhaps banging some heads together, in the interests of children, i.e. visible leadership that models behaviour for Secretaries of State to act well beyond the bounds of their departmental territories, in the interests of children.

Clark's the shoe company have a deceptively simple strapline that underpins the business's mission statement and all they do flows from that. They always ask themselves one question - "But, does it sell shoes?" If the answer is 'no' they don't do it.

"But will it improve outcomes for children?" is my equivalent. I use it locally and I really want the Prime Minister to use it nationally. Improved outcomes for children must be the golden thread running through government policy and I include in that Brexit negotiations. Indeed, it must be the foundation of building a country that works for all children. I want the Prime Minister to be a super-DCS seeking policy coordination and the marshalling of resources from across the multitude of central government departments with responsibilities for aspects of children's lives.

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. This took real leadership, not only to look beyond the bounds of individual agencies' budgets, but to look beyond the parameters of political election cycles. That's what it takes to prioritise spend on prevention to give children the best start in life. More of that in the session that follows this one.

So, I urge local and central government alike to think big, think system wide and think prevention.

Tomorrow we will hear from the children's minister Robert Goodwill. ADCS, the LGA and Solace have been working together on a proposition for the creation of a trusted, effective and coherent sector-led improvement model in children's services. That model will be underpinned by robust self-evaluation, peer challenge and review processes supported by inter-authority improvement offered principally through **Regional Improvement Alliances**. A model that not only catches authorities before they fall, but also matches the strengths and areas for development in authorities on an improvement trajectory, with those that have something to offer. Actually, our view is that every council has something to give and every council has something to learn regardless of the dangerously over-simplistic one-word judgement labels

bestowed upon them by Ofsted. A static label attached to a dynamic and highly complex local ecology purely reflects a moment in time.

Currently however, there is insufficient capacity and funding within the sector to support sector-led improvement across children's services at the required level of regular engagement and consistency of practice. I'm pleased to say, and without stealing the Minister's thunder, that he too sees that the expertise and the skills required to improve children's services lie within the sector itself but that the sector needs resourcing so it can build capacity that can be released and shared safely. There are some points of difference of course, like the best way to beef up peer capacity to support councils in, or on the cusp of intervention. Whilst there is much to learn from the highest performing councils, I firmly believe that those who have traversed the Ofsted grade boundary from inadequate to better, have some genuinely beneficial wisdom, nay gold dust to share with authorities that may also be struggling. It would be foolish to overlook this.

Of course, councils are responsible for their own improvement, but collectively we are all responsible for the performance of the sector as a whole. This is local government's self-imposed improvement mandate. Improving children's services is not simply the pursuit of a better Ofsted rating. It's about children's life chances and opportunities. What we are seeking to achieve is about embedding **improvement as a habit not a goal**. And it is absolutely clear that children's services flourish where they are at the heart of efforts to transform and shape the places for which councils are responsible. For this reason, it is important to set children's services improvement within the wider context of the political and corporate leadership of a council – leadership that is well informed and engaged in providing effective support and challenge to DCSs and their teams.

Anyway, more of that from the Minister tomorrow...hopefully.

Conference, let me draw my remarks to a close.

I am looking forward to the conference; the programme is full of interesting and diverse issues for us to grapple with, showing the breadth and complexity of the work we do in local government children and adult services. I hope you enjoy it.