

ADCS President speech to CYP Now Early Help conference

(25 September 2019)

Thank you for inviting me to speak here today. ADCS really values its relationship with Children and Young People Now. Some of you may have read about my policy priorities in an earlier edition of the magazine, but I wanted to re-state them briefly here today. They are:

1. To maintain visibility on child poverty
2. 15 years on from Royal Assent for the Children Act 2004, to re-assert the system leadership role of the DCS as champion for children through a relentless focus on the lived experience of and outcomes for children and young people
3. To re-voice the language of closing, not just narrowing the gap in children's outcomes by foregrounding the need to incentivise inclusivity in schools
4. Funding for children's services
5. To celebrate the successes of the Children Act 1989 and urge a reclaiming the its core principles of prevention and the primacy of the child.

This conference is about early help, the challenges of delivery in the financial context and how we can refocus resources towards early help to avoid statutory children's services becoming a 'blue light' service.

We are working with more pressure in the system now than ever before and working with a level of pressure that the system was not designed to cope with. Current system conditions are alarming – over-demand, under-supply and no cap on costs. This is an unstable system and we've not yet reached the 'new normal' on demand.

We can see just how much pressure there is across the children's services system from ADCS's Safeguarding pressures research.

Safeguarding pressures

In 2010, ADCS published its safeguarding pressures research for the first-time using data for 2007/08 onwards.

In October last year, we published the sixth iteration of this research using local authority data to 31 March 2018. This unique longitudinal research seeks to quantify a whole range of early help, safeguarding and child protection activity undertaken by LAs; to identify the trajectory of demand; and, to understand how all of that impacts upon budgets.

Guess what? Demand continues to increase over and above the growth in the child population. Let me give you just a flavour of the research findings:

As at 31 March 2018, there were:

- 2.4million initial contacts
- Just under 660,000 referrals (of which approx. 20% are re-referrals)
- Just over 400,000 children in need, of whom:
 - Approx. 68,500 children are subjects of a child protection plan; and
 - Approx. 75,500 are looked after children
- Collectively local authorities are supporting at least 45,000 care leavers (aged 18-25), 5,150 of whom are UASC care leavers.

For the first time ever, we're supporting as many UASC care leavers as UASC. And still we wait for the Home Office to draw its conclusions on the UASC care leaver funding review.

It remains the case that the overwhelmingly predominant reason why children come to the attention of children's social care is due to neglect. We know that very few parents wilfully neglect their children, their circumstances drive it. **Poverty can and does impact upon parenting capacity**, but this is complicated. Work with children and families happens in complex multi-agency systems with many variables. There are just as many variables complicating the lives of children and families and these inevitably differ from place to place. Making a meaningful and sustained improvement to children's lives takes time and tenacity. Generally speaking it takes 18-36 months to see any positive signs of sustained change for children and families.

What our research (and that of others) has found quite clearly is that poverty, as a result of the cumulative impacts of 10 years of austerity and welfare reform, is a primary cause of increased demand for early help and children's social care. You will know the child poverty figures as well as I do: currently around 4 million children living in poverty, projected to reach 5 million by 2020. Shockingly, more than 50% of children currently living in relative poverty live in working households. Let me say that again...**working households!**

Welfare reforms and the lack of affordable, secure housing are having a disproportionate impact on already vulnerable families and have increased the number of children living in poverty and at risk of adverse childhood experiences.

The 'trigger trio' of parental mental ill-health, problematic substance use and domestic abuse are also driving significant demand pressures. Together with child poverty, these represent the most prevalent risk factors in children's lives. So it makes absolute sense, doesn't it, to address the cycle of adult disadvantage in order to help improve outcomes for their children. The unmet needs of parents are adversely impacting upon the wellbeing of their children.

Funding

The recently announced 1-year funding settlement for 2020/21 was better than expected – the most investment we've had for a decade but that's not saying much. However good the proportion of the funding for social care pressures is that comes to children's services, it still won't even cover a year's overspend on children's services.

ADCS – the national association for children's services leaders is deeply concerned at the government's piecemeal approach to funding children's services. Small, ad hoc, short-term pots of funding from central government in response to single issues, made available for some but not all local areas, are particularly unhelpful. They fall woefully short of the sustainable and equitable long-term investment strategy we need to ensure that children receive high quality, safe services at the earliest possible opportunity. This approach can absorb significant resource locally in putting together bids for different funding pots from central government. All too often it seems the effectiveness of the bid writer is rewarded over actual need.

Between 2010 and 2020 it is estimated that spending of early help services will have declined by 71%. This is concerning and deeply frustrating.

We also know that government funding and council spending on youth services have been severely reduced except of course for the National Citizen Service with a budget of £140million - never has so much been spent on so few. That level of investment would have all but halted the demise of locally based youth service facilities. I know too that voluntary sector organisations have been hard hit by funding cuts such as these.

Colleagues, we should not have to choose between investing in early help and fulfilling our statutory responsibilities. It's not either-or, it's both. Children's services cannot be a 'blue light' service.

The LGA has estimated that the funding gap is likely to be £2billion by 2020, rising to £3billion by 2025! This figure will continue to increase as the pressures facing children's social care, and the demands on our partners deepen. We cannot go on as we are. 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. Local authorities know that a strong, adequately resourced local early intervention offer can reduce the need for more intrusive and costly interventions in the lives of children and families. Securing good outcomes for children and young people must be an absolute priority for government and this can only be achieved by ensuring that the full breadth of services that touch the lives of children, not just social care and schools, but also housing, welfare and health services are properly funded.

Early help

Early help is not a panacea for addressing disadvantage. It does not reduce the pressure on children's social care **in the short term**. Nor does it generate short term cashable savings.

Early help seeks to address complex and often deeply entrenched problems for children and families. Success depends on **long-term investment**, co-ordinated across all agencies with an interest. This task is impeded by a funding system biased towards short-term spending in response to immediate pressures.

As the Early Intervention Foundation has said, "We need to change the rules of the game" when it comes to how government spending operates in relation to prevention services if we are going to start to invest at the levels needed to make significant improvements in outcomes for children and their families.

The evidence suggests that less intensive earlier interventions, such as light touch parenting support will often not be suitable for families where there is risk of child maltreatment, especially when parents are struggling with complex issues that limit their own capacity to benefit from interventions.

Supporting children and families with complex problems requires a resource intensive, long-term response. In these cash-strapped times LAs struggle to divert funds from statutory services, such as children's social care, to fund prevention efforts.

A six-year study on the impact of children's centres demonstrated improvements in maternal mental health and family functioning (DfE, 2015) while a more recent report found a reduced use of acute hospital care for children in deprived areas who had received SureStart services (IFS, 2019), resulting in savings for the NHS.

Evaluations of the Troubled Families Programme have consistently reported better outcomes for families (MHCLG, various). Some of these claims have been challenged but the importance of this funding cannot be overstated given our early intervention grants have fallen by two thirds. Despite criticisms of the Programme, it is a lifeline. For many LAs its propped up early help services.

The Education Policy Institute's 2019 annual report showed that progress on closing the attainment gap at GCSE between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils has stopped to the extent that **the five-year rolling average now suggests that it would take 560 years to close the gap**. However, the most recent data shows an increase in the gap in 2018 suggesting there is **a real risk that we could soon enter a period where the gap starts to widen**. Compared to our OECD counterpart countries, we are now in a situation in England where educational attainment does not aid social mobility. I'm shocked by that. I am also shocked at the disparity in children's outcomes across education and children's social care – England has one

of the safest child protection systems in the world; I'm proud of that, yet our education system is stalling, particularly in secondary schools.

The importance of prevention work has been a priority area for many local authorities. However, the difficulties can often lie in evidencing that our work around early help/intervention is working. We all believe in its efficacy instinctively but if we are using it as a tool to manage demand on statutory children's social care services/interventions it could be perceived as failing- given rising number of referrals, Child Protection Plans, children in care - or, (and this is my preferred narrative) are we, through early help and early interventions identifying children who need the protection of statutory services earlier, and as such, protecting them from further harm and making long-term permanent plans for these children to thrive?

Outputs such as the number of EHAs completed, can be easily measured (**227,000 EHAs completed in the year 2017/18**). However, this tells us little, if anything, about the range or effectiveness of early help services. The evidence base that underpins our commissioning and indeed de-commissioning decisions needs to be built on evidence beyond that what can simply be counted.

- There is no common definition used amongst LAs of 'early help', we talk of early help, early intervention, family support, all broadly meaning the same thing. So maybe it is best to just refer to **prevention** and to start thinking about prevention as public health colleagues do, on a population scale
- There are no longer any dedicated, ring fenced funding streams other than 'Troubled Families' and small strands within Public Health grants. For many LAs, funding preventative work is increasingly difficult to sustain even with new and innovative ways of working in light of the removal of the Revenue Support Grant in 2020. There are no statutory data collections on early help so LAs do different things in respect of recording and monitoring early help, indeed some do not record at all, so comparisons have no meaningful statistical basis
- Despite the plethora of legislation and guidance in the children's services policy terrain, none of it is designed to bring coherence to important preventative work, instead, LAs must do so for themselves in the context of unprecedented retrenchment in public sector funding.

Refocussing resources towards early help

The core principle of preventative work, enshrined in the Children Act 1989 remains relevant – as does the other core principle of the Act, the paramountcy principle. Our preventative work has never been adequately funded. I am clear that my role as a systems leader, as a DCS, is to act as a champion for children. By having a

relentless focus on their lived experience it is clear to me that the state's response to child poverty is wholly inadequate; the response of some schools to exclude pupils or otherwise 'off-roll' them is almost always the wrong thing to do. It's certainly never in a child's best interests to be excluded for school. Schools should be incentivised for inclusivity. Curricular should be broad and all but the most severe and therefore complex SEND needs should be met locally.

So, how do we refocus resources towards early help?

If government invests properly in LA children's services:

- LAs would be able to re-invest in services and crucially in staffing. It would allow children in need of help and their families to be supported by us for longer, thereby smoothing the cliff edge for families as they transition to accessing support from adult services. As an aside, in my own authority, Barnsley, we have an all-age early help service that we have fought hard to protect
- Youth services could relatively quickly be re-invigorated locally
- More early help targeted at teens could diminish the cumulative impact of previous Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) which tend to make the needs of teens more complex generally.

The government could re-focus some of its existing spend to target help where it's needed most. I've already mentioned the National Citizenship Services but there's also the £6billion for subsidised childcare for 3 and 4-year-olds of working parents. This is an incredible amount of investment and it could be re-focussed and targeted at vulnerable families. And finally, as you will know, aspects of children's services policy are presently spread across nine different central government departments. This is plainly inefficient and expensive and militates against taking a strategic whole-system approach to helping families. Remember the DCSF anyone? The Department for Children, Schools and Families.

In a country that works for all children, children and young people should thrive, not just survive.

In a country that works for all children, help is provided to our children and families sooner, where schools and health - our big universal services for over and under 5s respectively, are focused upon and resourced to facilitate preventative work alongside the LA.

Thank you for listening and thank you for all you do to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families and carers.