

ADCS President Written Address

(for publication Wed 8 July 2020)

In tribute to Dave Hill

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to our friend and colleague Dave Hill who died suddenly two weeks ago.

It's hard to find the right words to pay tribute to Dave in a way that he truly deserves, particularly because he has made such an enormous difference to the lives of so many throughout his long career in local government. He was a kind and compassionate man who was deeply committed to improving the lived experiences and outcomes of all children and young people, particularly children in care. A big man with a big heart and an even bigger talent, Dave was a charismatic and inspirational leader and will be missed by so many. Our heartfelt sympathies are with Dave's wife Jo and their daughters Laurel and Lydia. On Friday 26 June, ADCS re-ran the blog that Dave wrote as he became ADCS President, in April 2016. Entitled *What's LOVE got to do with it?* I urge you to re-read it.

Introduction

As some of you may know, I am a keen sailor so I hope you will forgive the occasional nautical reference. It is a truth universally acknowledged that a country in the grip of a pandemic is in want of a recovery strategy to help its people navigate uncharted waters as we tackle and learn how to live with Covid-19 and its many ramifications.

Councils have led their local communities at this time of crisis. Across the country, councils have worked hard with schools and early years settings to keep them open for vulnerable and key worker children, they have innovated to safeguard vulnerable children on child protection plans and supported children with special educational needs and disabilities. Children's services departments swiftly implemented new ways of working to ensure they were able to support vulnerable children, young people, and care leavers. Colleagues across children's services should be commended for their determination to keep children safe and well throughout the crisis. I also want to acknowledge the extraordinary leadership of my fellow directors of children's services and their teams. Somehow, they have kept their heads above water in the face of a tsunami of pressures. Thank you for all you have done. Our peak of activity is yet to come in children's social care, and it will land at a time when our workforce is fatigued.

ADCS discussion paper on the impacts of Covid-19 on children, young people, and families

"Doubt is uncomfortable, but certainty is absurd."

I've taken a minor liberty with the translation of the phrase from Voltaire's letter to Frederick William of Prussia in 1770, nevertheless, how true Voltaire, how true! And never truer than now as we attempt to look into the future to understand the impacts Covid-19, a nation-wide lockdown and a potential recession the likes of which this country has never known, will have on children and young people.

Next week, ADCS will be publishing a discussion paper which attempts to articulate some of the impacts that children, young people and their families may experience, now and in the future. It is not designed to be an exhaustive list; it is ADCS's contribution to the ongoing

national discourse about how we as a nation recover, re-set, and restore how we ready ourselves for 'the new normal'. It puts children and young people's experiences of Covid front and centre in a way that has been sorely lacking on the part of our national politicians, until latterly.

Let me take the opportunity here to thank Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education for being brave enough to say that the government "...should never be ashamed to listen..." as he announced that the national e-voucher scheme for free school meals will be extended over the summer holidays after all. I'm sure we are all grateful to the Premier League football player Marcus Rashford for highlighting that too many children and families are regularly going hungry. Often all it takes is a forthright Mancunian to bring people to their senses!

To return to the ADCS discussion paper, I'll give you a little teaser of its messaging about what ADCS members think the role of the DfE should be, working in conjunction with ADCS, in re-setting and restoring support and services for children, young people and their families. I am very clear that children must be the priority for central government and local areas. The impact on their future life chances of the pandemic, the lockdown and loss of learning cannot be under-estimated:

- DfE should be the champion across government in articulating and taking steps to address the impacts of Covid-19 on childhoods. This requires a joined-up cross-government, multi-agency conversation. This is not news to ADCS members. I've said it before, Rachel Dickinson said it last year, Stuart Gallimore said it the year before that...get my drift? I'm increasingly of the view that bringing together the various 'what works centres' from across government could create the right space and environment for such a joined up national conversation
- Restore the role of schools in relation to the balance between education and wellbeing, the balance between school autonomy and their accountability to the pupils and parents they serve
- Re-set on the role of LAs in relation to all schools as leaders of place – the planning and preparation for the wider opening of schools would quite simply not have been possible without the direct and intensive involvement of every LA in the country working in partnership with school leaders
- Part of re-set and restore will be acknowledging that some of the creative solutions that local government has found to ensuring that vulnerable children and young people are safe during lockdown, including those facilitated by regulatory flexibilities in children's social care, have been well-received by children, young people, carers and care leavers. We recognise concerns about the very existence of these regulatory flexibilities; but we know of no evidence of the inappropriate use of those regulatory flexibilities.
- What might be the 'new' relationship between families, communities, and the state? We know that lots of families have been pushed into poverty and many more parents are claiming unemployment-related benefits since the lockdown began. The UK government's furlough scheme has been the most generous in the world, costing the taxpayer to date around £28.5 billion – to support the job retention of 9.1 million people working in the private sector and 2.6 million self-employed people. Yet it took the government until mid-June to announce it was willing to spend a further £120m on free school meals for the summer holidays and £1 billion for schools from September to fund catch-up learning. We also know, as with all health emergencies, that the pandemic has put a spotlight on inequalities and social injustice in our society, some communities have been particularly affected. Addressing these

inequalities and injustices and actively promoting anti-racism should be at the core of our action to recover, re-set and restore.

Poverty

As you may have gathered, we like an anniversary in ADCS. This March marked 21 years since Tony Blair's Beveridge lecture at Toynbee Hall, where he made the unprecedented pledge to eradicate child poverty in Britain by 2020. It bears some re-quoting:

"We owe it to every child to unleash their potential. They are of equal worth. They deserve an equal chance. A failed education is a life sentence on a child."

"Our historic aim will be for ours to be the first generation to end child poverty and it will take a generation. It is a 20-year mission, but I believe it can be done."

No government before or since has ever set itself such an ambitious objective. But we should be ambitious for children and families, whatever your party politics. Sadly, Blair's government did not achieve its historic aim. Here we are in 2020, and despite the current government's assertion that work is the best route out of poverty, the majority of the 4 million children currently living in poverty, live in a working household. Proving work doesn't always pay. Last month (June) the IPPR published analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on poverty in the UK. The analysis estimates that another 1.1 million people will face poverty at the end of 2020 including 200,00 children. Without urgent action to protect families from the financial hardship caused by the pandemic, this would bring the total number of children living in poverty in the UK to 4.5 million by the end of this year.

Indeed, the government's own Social Mobility Commission reported in June "600,000 more children are now living in relative poverty than in 2012 but this is projected to increase further due to benefit changes and... COVID-19. Children from black and minority ethnic groups are more likely to be in poverty: 45% compared with 26% of children in white British families".

That same month, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children published a new report, *A lifeline for our children: Strengthening the social security system for families with children during this pandemic*. The report found that:

- 7 in 10 families receiving Universal Credit or Child Tax Credit have cut back on essentials since the start of the crisis. 6 in 10 have borrowed money and over 5 in 10 are behind on rent or other essential bills.
- Families who were in poverty pre-crisis are around 50% more likely to have lost their jobs than those not in poverty. Families where at least one parent has become unemployed have lost around £50 per week – equivalent to an average single-parent family's entire weekly food spend.
- Two-thirds of families said that concerns about money had had an impact on their mental health, with around a quarter reporting a severe impact.

There have been more than 3 million new claims for Universal Credit since lockdown began. About 65% of those claims qualified. Before lockdown, around 3 million claimants got Universal Credit, after 7 years of roll-out. It is now 5 million.

The Trussell Trust has reported an 89% increase in the need for emergency food parcels in April 2020, compared to April 2019. And then there's the unemployment forecasts. We know that the number of people claiming unemployment - related benefit has doubled since March – to 2.8million people. Unemployment rate is forecast to be 3.8% at end of June 2020; 10%

by end of September, falling to 8.5% by end of December and 7% by end of March next year, assuming no lockdown is in place (and no second wave of the virus). This does not of course take into account any possible impact of Brexit.

If we were to dust off the ambition to eradicate child poverty what would need to happen? What are the weapons in our armoury to fight child poverty? Firstly, direct huge resources at families with children. Secondly, direct huge resources at schools and colleges. Thirdly, direct huge resources at local government. Plainly this would require new additional money but it's also an opportunity for government to look at the profile of its investment across departments and change it. Don't get me wrong, I'm not advocating a return to Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets...remember them... to measure progress towards achieving the aim of eradicating child poverty. I am however advocating for an overhaul of welfare reforms – specifically in relation to the ill-fated Universal Credit, suspend the spare room subsidy, suspend no recourse to public funds and get rid of the loathsome benefit cap and 2 child limit. Let's be ambitious for children and families and support them to thrive, not just survive.

Education is a powerful agent in an anti-poverty strategy. The best way to tackle future child poverty is to ensure that the children of today are equipped with the skills necessary to find the well-paid jobs of tomorrow. But there is a widening gap between disadvantaged learners and their better-off peers.

The widening gap between disadvantaged learners and their peers

The difficult circumstances experienced by children and families who were disadvantaged before the pandemic have been exacerbated during the crisis. Whilst I do not believe we are facing a 'lost generation' of children and young people, I do not underestimate the enormity of the task ahead for central and local government, early years settings schools and colleges, mums and dads and carers alike in redressing vulnerability and disadvantage.

As the Education Endowment Fund has said, school closures will likely reverse progress made to close the educational attainment gap in the last decade. Sustained support is needed to help disadvantaged pupils catch up. Educational success is one of the best predictors of future success in life. Thus, understanding what causes attainment gaps and how we can address them is one of the most important policy challenges for any government and society. In England, educational inequality is well documented. Young people who are in receipt of free school meals do significantly worse in school than their more affluent peers. They earn less and are less likely to be in employment, education and training when they finish compulsory schooling. Education is about more than just what happens in school and during the school day. A child's school career is connected to the rest of a child's lived experiences. But the nearest thing we have in this country to a Department for Children – I mean the DfE – does divide off schools from the rest of the department's work to improve children's outcomes. This makes even less sense in a world where we are living with Covid.

The LA role in education and with schools

Education systems and school settings are part of a local eco-system, a system that is affected by social and economic factors outside of the school. This is what we mean when we talk about the importance of 'place'. Local authorities have a unique democratic legitimacy as the leaders of place and as such play an essential role in achieving a balance between school autonomy (we have one of, if not the most autonomous school systems in the world) and accountability; accountability to parents and to the local community. This

tricky balancing act is especially important in setting up new schools and providing for vulnerable pupils. Therefore, the LA is an essential actor in all aspects of the provision of education and schooling in its local area. We know there are some voices in central government that see no role for the LA in relation to school improvement. It is certainly true that England has been a world-leader in the move towards a self-improving school system where school partnerships lead improvement by sharing expertise and resources and building capacity. They do this within the frameworks of an inspection regime and a government-funded infrastructure, which includes National Leaders of Education (NLEs), National Support Schools (NSSs), Teaching Schools (TS) and Teaching School Alliances.

It is interesting to note that some of the highest performing school systems in the world (Estonia, Finland, Singapore, Ontario Canada) do not have school inspection. These places are all small compared with England of course, however another interesting aspect of these school systems is that they have a clear role for what's become known as 'the middle tier' – the local authority in England. Instead of external inspection, schools in these countries have a respected regime of self-evaluation and reflection and school staff and leaders are supported in this endeavour by a qualified and experienced educationalist in the 'middle tier' to provide regular challenge and support. I don't think our government-funded infrastructure (NLEs, TS, NSSs) comes anywhere close to replicating an effective, efficient, and sustainable 'middle tier'. I think local authorities could do as well if not better but, in this country, local government funding to support school improvement has been completely decimated. There are plenty who would say that ship has sailed, they may be right, but when the proliferation of admission authorities allows for in effect pupil profiling, I think that the LA, on behalf of the communities they serve, **MUST** have responsibility for pupil admissions and have the ability to intervene if our autonomous, self-improving schools are not following Fair Admissions protocols. As the nation is learning, closing schools is easy, re-opening them requires a Herculean effort on the part of many. LAs are principal amongst those actors working closely with schools to help government understand the myriad complexities involved in getting ready for a fuller return to school in September.

Schools are community assets and sit at the heart our communities. One of the things that that school closures has reminded us of is the dual role of schools – to provide a good standard of education and to safeguard and promote the safety and wellbeing of its pupils. Let's remind ourselves that The Education Act 2002 requires all schools to teach a curriculum that is "broadly based, balanced and meets the needs of pupils". And, to "promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society", and prepare pupils "for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life" while having a duty to keep pupils safe.

Heads, teaching and support staff have worked tirelessly, including during school holidays to provide teaching & learning and wellbeing support offers for children at home and those on-site. This blended offer has been challenging and will continue to be so as, despite all our ambitions, September may not herald a full return to on-site learning for all pupils. Local flexibility to continue the blended teaching and learning offer will be essential in local outbreak control plans.

Throughout the crisis and the lockdown local authorities and education settings have worked hard to support and stay in contact with vulnerable children and young people. Some of our most vulnerable children are in care and some of our most vulnerable young adults are care

leavers. One of the many things moored to the jetty during the lockdown has been the Care Review. I have written to the Secretary of State urging him to commence the Review as soon as possible.

The Care Review

I was delighted recently to hear the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, playing back to the DfE what we all know to be true. That responsibility for finding a placement to meet the needs of a child lies with the LA as corporate parent, however, responsibility for ensuring LAs can meet their statutory duties towards children rests with DfE. It is timely then to ask what is care for? What outcomes are we as a nation seeking to achieve through the use of public care?

ADCS believes that care should: protect children and young people from significant harm; address a child's basic need for good parenting; and improve the outcomes of vulnerable children and young people. If these are the outcomes we seek to achieve, what then are the most effective means of doing so? National policy, media and public discourse are largely focussed on individual aspects of the placement conundrum – we focus too much on where children live rather than focussing on meeting their specific and individual needs.

I sincerely hope the Care Review will start soon. At risk of offending Voltaire, I am certain that we can as a nation do better for our children in care and our care leavers. If Marcus Rashford's lived experience of childhood hunger can tip the balance for summer holiday free school meals, then the lived experiences of children in the modern care system can steer us to a better place.

Conclusion

It's time for me to draw these remarks to a close. The journey ahead for us and the children we work with will not be smooth. None of us is wholly sure what lies beyond the immediate horizon. But I know my ADCS shipmates will remain committed, as I am, to making this a country that works for all children.

Thank you for taking the time to read this address.

Jenny Coles

ADCS President 2020/21