

President's address to ADCS annual conference

(5 July 2018 1.30 – 2.00pm)

Welcome

Welcome to the ADCS annual conference 2018. I particularly want to welcome the Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds and the Children's Minister, Nadhim Zahawi to what I hope will be the first of many visits to ADCS conferences. We look forward to working with each of you over the coming period. We've always seen our work with the DfE as really important. Like any good relationship we've had our agreements and disagreements but always remain focused together on achieving the best possible outcomes for children.

I'd also like to welcome our select band of guests – Glen Garrod who is this year's ADASS President, our friends from DfE and our press colleagues, you are all most welcome. I am grateful to Children and Young People Now, for sponsoring the perennially popular ADCS *Little Blue Book*, which you will have received as you registered for the conference.

Conference, watching my lad work far harder than I can claim to have in completing his A levels last week, and hopefully fulfilling his ambitions to go to university, I was struck by how much the picture of education has changed. I cannot claim to have felt the pressure young people are reporting now as a result of curriculum and exam reforms. Four in five teachers have reported seeing pupils struggling with mental health problems in the past year.

Like so many in the room, I was the first in my family to go to university, at a time of full maintenance grants, no tuition fees to pay and housing benefit in holidays. Certainly the financial investment that today's students, and where they are able their parents, make in a university education would have been an insurmountable barrier for me and my parents. What my parents never lacked for was a sense of aspiration, but I share Amanda Spielman's concern that "as a result of suffering the brunt of economic dislocation there are communities and groups of young people who feel increasingly marginalised".

Role of LA with schools

Another change has been the effective removal of local government from education management which has skewed policy development. The publicly accountable LA with its historic and democratic legitimacy and its effective record as a school improvement partner has been side-lined – this is not good for children or their families.

Instead the DfE now seeks to perform that traditional LEA function itself, centrally, for several thousand academies and free schools. There must always be oversight, not just because of the spending of public money, but because no school should become unresponsive to its community. Schools are the heart of their communities, and they must remain accountable to them.

There's a veritable theatre company of actors overseeing schools' performances currently: MATs, LAs, RSCs, headteacher boards and sub-regional improvement boards, the national schools commissioner and countless committed civil servants in DfE and the ESFA. We're in danger of falling over each other. Moreover, the discordant and unconnected actions of this multiplicity of players is in danger of doing our children and young people a lifelong disservice.

What's the answer?

An inclusive education system

There are some relatively straightforward things we could do, several of which are elucidated in the ADCS policy position paper published today on the ADCS website - *A Vision for an Inclusive and High Performing Education System*. This paper follows on from the important work that Alison Michalska started last year when she was the President, on creating the conditions for a country that works for all children.

Let's be clear, children are rarely excluded from school for their own best interests. A country that works for all children does not permanently exclude 35 pupils per day. An inclusive education system would not see 48,000 learners educated exclusively or primarily in the alternative provision sector. Alternative provision is an intervention but for too many young people it is becoming a destination. Children eligible for free school meals, with special educational needs or disabilities, or children who are in care are more vulnerable to exclusion than their peers. ADCS is calling for LAs to be invested with the power to compel the admission of any vulnerable child, particularly a child in care, to any publicly funded school. I don't want to spoil anyone's bedtime reading by telling you everything that's in the new position paper; in many ways the messages are nothing new – they've been made by ADCS and plenty of other august bodies before, including the NAO and the Education Select Committee:

- The schools landscape requires transparent accountability arrangements
- We need a wholesale review of admissions arrangements; and, an open and honest discussion about the return of an academy to the LA family of schools when a MAT fails
- At a time when social mobility is a government priority, investing £6 billion by 2020 on broadening access to subsidised childcare for 3 and 4-year-olds in working families earning as much as £199,000 a year, rather than developing high quality early education for the most vulnerable children, seems like a false economy.

I'd like to move on now to talk briefly about another extremely complicated landscape – our health service.

Children's health

This week is the 70th anniversary of the creation of the NHS. What a bloomin' marvellous achievement then and now. It is the envy of the world.

The total budget for the NHS in England is approximately £100 billion. What proportion of that £100 billion do you think is spent on children's healthcare? You don't know? Well, neither does the NHS; neither does the IFS – but their best guess is about £9 billion – so, 9% of the total budget. That doesn't seem like the right apportionment to me, because addressing children's health needs early, particularly their mental and emotional health, equals early help to break the generational cycles of adult disadvantage.

The complex nature and fragmented organisational structure of the NHS and its significant data shortcomings mean that it is not straightforward to establish **how** the NHS budget is spent on children. By far the largest component is hospital spend, and something like £113 per child was spent in 2015/16 on children's community health. I'd like to strongly encourage the DfE to open discussions with the Department of Health & Social Care about transferring some of the NHS's budget for children's community healthcare to local authorities – I reckon

we could do a damn good job of it – and government would be better sighted on how the money was being spent.

There's a precedent we can look to - the return of public health funding and responsibilities to local authorities. This was a good thing, after all, public health is early help on a grand scale. And we've done it really well in local government; I think that things like health visiting are more effective with us in the lead. I want to put down a marker though - I am worried about the ring-fence coming off the Public Health Grant.

We must act to redress the imbalance in health spending on children - the moral imperative is clear. As we know, there are something like four million children living in poverty today. The physical and psychological health costs for children experiencing poverty are demonstrable and well-documented.

Child poverty

Furthermore, recent studies have shown the cognitive damage that living in poverty does to children. The harmful effects become more severe when their families remain in poverty for longer periods. Data from the Millennium Cohort Study demonstrates that family income is a powerful determinant of children's level of cognitive development. Regardless of whether initial test results at age 7 are high, medium or low, the gap between the performance of children from the most and least deprived backgrounds widens as they get older, whilst children from the least deprived families either maintain their initial high score or improve their average or low scores whereas children from deprived backgrounds see the scores decline. What does this mean? It means that family background trumps 'natural ability'. Differences in cognitive development and intelligence are the consequence of inequality.

A sobering thought; and so is this - by 2022, the IFS predicts there will **be 5.2 million children living in poverty**. We are seeing families at our front doors or in the MASH that we have had no previous knowledge of, or engagement with. There are foodbanks up and down the land helping working families to survive and whilst I salute their work it really is a stain on our society that they need to. There are new glass ceilings in place for young people today, in addition to the old glass ceilings that never were quite shattered. That feels like a burning social injustice and it's our job colleagues to help children and young people through that.

The bottom line is this - reducing child poverty is justified not only from a social justice perspective, but from a cost-benefit perspective as well. For central government, investing in strategies that reduce childhood poverty is both smart and efficient economic policy as well as the right thing to do. In the meantime, it's our job in local government to do all we can to reduce the impact of poverty on children. This necessitates a wide lens view of social policy, an integrated approach that seeks to ameliorate the impacts of poor housing, family poverty, insecure work, social isolation and mental ill-health. If that is not a public health challenge for the 21st century I don't know what is.

Funding

Did someone mention money?

I know there are doubters who think that there's enough money in the system and the problem is it's just spent disproportionately on care placements instead of earlier help and support. I don't agree. Nor do I agree with the intellectually dubious notion that if there are variations in costs that there must be room for efficiencies. Conference, be very clear –

there is not enough money in the system, full stop. There is simply no fat left to trim, instead authorities up and down the country have found themselves having to cut back on early help services which makes no financial sense. The frankly bonkers notion that the future of local government funding might be fairer if more of it was generated through the retention of business rates or new homes bonus will unequivocally not be in the best interests of children and will increase the disparity in local and regional funding. Spending money on children and young people, investing in the skills they need for later life, can combat the effects of disadvantage and improve social mobility. That's what meaningful social work is all about.

A workforce fit for a country that works for all children

Like many of you, I warmly welcomed the DfE's focus on social work reform. I'm delighted that Social Work England is about to get going and I am looking forward to hearing from the LAs in phases one and two that will be the pioneers in implementing NAAS. I'd like to see us focussing next on the wider children's workforce.

A month before the NHS act came into effect Bevan opened a speech with the simple statement 'nurses are the most important part of the service', well for us it is our front-line staff whatever their title and background. Social workers, key workers, early help practitioners, youth workers, our unsung residential workers, and the health visitors I mentioned earlier. It is the quality of the relationships they forge that make the difference. Their emotional wellbeing is key if they are to be effective as they bear the brunt of the public service reductions. I qualified as a social worker over 30 years ago, but I cannot claim to have had to deal with the volume and complexity that is taken for granted today. It is why I go out on a monthly basis with them, so I know exactly what it's like. It is incumbent on us to find ways not only to encourage the next generation but to support our current ones who make a difference day in day out.

As you may know colleagues, I believe that the children's secure estate is in a parlous state.

STCs and YOIs sit in yet another confused and confusing accountability landscape – individual governors, the MoJ, DfE, Home Office, YJB, Youth Custody Service...the list goes on. Indeed, it may become even more unclear if, as it looks, we are to embark upon secure schools as an alternative to "child prisons" as Charlie Taylor colourfully alludes to them.

As I've said before, if any LA children's services department got the inspection lambasting that Medway STC got there'd have been all hell to pay – the DCS would have had their head chopped off and the whole service would have been compelled into a Trust. I'm not proposing decapitation; rather, governors of STCs and YOIs should at the very least be required to make an annual report to their LSCB to account for the safety, education and wellbeing of the young people remanded to their care.

Thankfully there are far fewer young people in custody these days. LA children's services have done a really good job of reducing the number down from around 3,000 a few years ago, to just under 1,000 today. I hope those numbers will stay down. I hope we don't see more young people criminalised as agencies seek to grapple with complex safeguarding issues such as criminal exploitation, 'county lines', modern slavery and radicalisation where children can be both victim and perpetrator.

In Conclusion

Conference, it's time for me to draw my thoughts to a close. Despite the many challenges, this is not a counsel of gloom. Local authority children's services are doing well despite a prolonged period of public sector austerity, significantly increased demand for our services, and a 49% real-terms reduction in local authority budgets since 2010. Let us remember that England remains one of the safest countries in the world for children to grow up. It's true sadly that our children are facing new, complex safeguarding challenges. But we are good at child protection, we've become good at listening to and hearing children's voices, and we're infinitely better than we were at understating what works in improving children's outcomes and sharing that expertise. That's a big part of what our work is all about in establishing Regional Improvement Alliances, which are operating in shadow-form this year for a full year. Local government is good at co-operation; and, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say we're probably the most efficient wing of government.

Conference those in this room are the system leaders. It is on our watch that we must work with partners to encourage and enable a more inclusive, child focused, education and health system. To ensure families are supported and children grow up able to not just dream but achieve those dreams. To fight for a fairer funding regime for children's services and a workforce fit for the challenges of the 21st century. I hope you will leave conference encouraged and energised to ensure we play our leadership role in ensuring this is a country that works for all children.

Thank you for listening.