

President's address to ADCS annual conference 2015
Thursday 9 July 2.15 – 2.45pm

Introduction

Welcome to the ADCS annual conference 2015; it's fantastic to see so many of you here. I particularly wanted to welcome **Sir Peter Fahy and Sir Martin Narey, both of whom will be speaking this afternoon.** Could I also welcome our select band of guests from the DfE, colleagues, you are most welcome. Can I thank *Children and Young People Now*, for their ongoing and continuing coverage of the work that we do, and also for sponsoring the ADCS *Little Blue Book*, which is a publication used up and down the country, and pored over furiously so people can see what colour code they've been given.

I would also like to commend to you two pieces of research that are being published today to coincide with the ADCS annual conference.

The first is a suite of materials, produced by a Task & Finish Group convened by the VSC on behalf of ADCS, on *The role of serious case reviews in improving the child protection system*. Together these materials are essential reading about the history of how the processes of reviewing serious cases have evolved and also offer useful contemporary practical advice and guidance on some of the complex issues involved in multi-agency child protection, managing the public and political responses to serious incidents, and, crucially, how best to identify and disseminate learning in a timely and appropriate way.

The second piece of research also published today is *Leadership in a contested space*. This work explores how the effects of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity significantly influence leadership demands under exceptional circumstances. It has now become clear, as this important VSC research shows that these forces are not merely a feature of exceptional circumstances, but have become the new norm within English public services.

As we sit here (literally) up-and-down this country extraordinary people are doing extraordinary things. Foster carers are persuading children to go to school. Social workers are making life changing plans. Teachers are noticing something isn't right and taking the first steps which will lead to children being protected from harm.

All of this is being commissioned, nurtured and paid for by local authorities.

And Directors of Children's Services are orchestrating how it all comes together at a local level.

We have the privilege of occupying that role. Surely the best job there is! I for one would not swap it for anything.

And it's deeply personal. Holding the statutory role is not something any of us take lightly and it has real meaning. I'll explain, and with uncharacteristic lack of British reserve.

The statutory nature of the role is more than just an administrative detail. When we get up in the morning and when we go to bed at night we feel the responsibility. It lives with us.

It lives with us when we go to get a call to say a child has been harmed or, as I have done twice in my career, signed to agree to the withdrawal of life-support for a looked after child.

We feel it when we get hauled over the coals by our Cabinet for overspending the budget.

We feel it when our staff are castigated in the media.

Lest we forget, there's also much to be proud of. We do have one of the safest child protection systems in the world in 2013/14 58,700 children became the subjects of child protection plans whilst the number of children killed has fallen by a third in the last decade.

Make no mistake - we are the first to recognise when things are not good enough and we feel it more keenly than anyone else when standards fall short or things go wrong.

Our association tries to reflect that passion and that ownership. And it's my huge privilege to do this on your behalf this year.

So what are the biggest issues facing us today what should be highlighted at our annual conference? Well, how long have you got?! I'm going to talk briefly about: schools, permanence, social work reform, child protection & safeguarding, inspection, leaving care, early intervention, and funding.

(Schools)

It's time government worked with us to develop a more constructive and collaborative relationship on schools.

For too long we have been in what can only be described as a stand-off. It's time that national policy reflected the groundswell which is the reality of collaboration at a local level. There is no stand-off at the school gate.

It's undoubtedly the case that the bold, ambitious and rapidly implemented policy of the previous government to increase the number of academies generated a mixed response amongst local authorities and Children's Services.

But everyone in our world recognises that this policy is now the bedrock of the desire that this government has to see accelerated improvement of schools and of the education of our children. Be in no doubt. Everyone in this room and everyone in Children's Services shares that ambition to improve. We are all driven to achieve the best for our children.

We now need to find the right way of signalling and enabling better collaboration; collaboration between central and local government and collaboration between schools themselves.

Local authorities, by their very nature, build and sustain local relationships for the benefit of their populations. As such they have a unique democratic mandate to ensure that all parts of the local system work together to achieve improved outcomes. They are passionate about learning for all and about their local economies. They connect learning institutions and local businesses because only by doing so can we ensure that young people become not only well-educated but rounded citizens for the future, who will live prosperous lives and contribute to the local economy as well as to the success of their local communities. All local schools are a central part of those relationships.

So we need meaningful dialogue between the arrangements to support academies, local authority schools and indeed the independent sector. We need to draw upon the best of the expertise we have from across the whole system for the benefit of all of our children. Like the Secretary of State, we too want excellence for everyone, everywhere, including for those pupils educated in academies –which, we must remember are amongst the coasting schools we all want to see getting better.

Let's get together to explore how learning alliances across clusters of local authorities might engage really positively with regional school commissioners, who let's face it have their hands rather full. Let's look at how school improvement capacity might be pooled in different ways. Let's look at how the best expertise and practice can be not only shared but also made available across the whole system for the benefit of all of our children. And let's do this now.

You can't maintain the stand-off if there is only one of you.

I'd like to talk now about the other half of the Education and Adoption Bill

(Adoption and Permanence)

The recent period has seen a welcome focus on adoption.

Finding a secure loving permanent home for children who cannot live with their birth parents is one of the most important things that we do. Much progress has been made but there is more to be done. We must continue to focus upon all parts of the journey towards permanence because adoption is not the right outcome for every child. For some it is right that they live with kinship carers under Residence or Special Guardianship Orders, for others long-term fostering creates the right balance between security and maintaining close contact with their family and for others it's right that they should be supported to live at home with their family.

I'm convinced it is possible to take a rigorous approach to permanence as a whole whilst at the same time keeping a clear spotlight on adoption.

As part of that we must pay close attention however, to decision-making and ensure this is timely and of the highest quality. These are complex judgements, nothing is black and white. Central to ensuring the right outcomes for each individual child is the quality of professional advice to the courts. It's vitally important that social workers and managers are trained and supported to the highest possible standard to ensure their input into this process is authoritative and they have the confidence to present assertively what they think is right for the child.

That brings me to social work reform more broadly.

(Social work reform)

We welcome the focus in recent years on driving up the quality and consistency of social work practice.

In that context the development of a fast-track professional qualification process for the most highly qualified entrants through the Step Up and Frontline programmes is making a small but valuable contribution to this endeavour. We must ensure that these new approaches link closely with the bulk of broad-based social work training through HEIs and contribute strongly to raising standards across the whole system. Colleagues in our regions tell us that improving standards for newly qualified social workers are already evident across the system and that the impact of the ASYE programme is very positive. Connecting all of this strongly to the emerging teaching partnerships offers the opportunity to connect employers more strongly to the sector and for the way in which training is shaped to equip social workers better for the realities of practice on the ground.

Accreditation also has a contribution to make. It must be linked to career progression pathways which are already closely managed by local authorities. It will create a mechanism for setting high standards which is what the profession needs. Introducing this for the existing workforce is more complex, but if we get the standards and the framework right, it is something that employers will want to do as

long as there's flexibility to introduce this locally in a way which does not destabilise the fragile market for social workers.

There is a parallel challenge – the underlying supply of people entering the profession. As a former social worker myself I am familiar with the challenges and also the hugely rewarding nature of the work. As leaders of children's services we are absolutely committed to promoting and rewarding one of the most important professions in the country. Social workers are engaged day in and day out in the most challenging and complex family situations. They routinely work with children and families that have experienced dreadful abuse and carry exceptional responsibilities on behalf of us all.

But, we are not training as many social workers as we need and too few remain in work after they've qualified. Some of this can be addressed by the mechanisms which are being introduced by the Chief Social Worker but I believe there needs to be a fundamental rethink of how we incentivise the right people to become social workers. As part of this we should shift the way in which Bursaries are awarded to be locally controlled in order that the arrangements can be tuned to the circumstances of particular regional markets.

And that brings me to the recent demise of The College of Social Work.

It's important to remember why the college was created in 2012 as an independent body with government funding.

It emerged from the recommendation of the Social Work Task Force set up following much heart searching in the sector and by Government after the death of Peter Connelly in 2008. There will no doubt be debate about the extent to which it was able to achieve its ambitions in the relatively short time of its existence. However its successes and difficulties are judged, it is clear that the College has held a significant place within the wider system and has had real meaning for the social work profession and beyond.

Whatever happens next we need to hold onto the intention which lay behind creating the College in the first place – to give the social work profession the standing it deserves and the status it needs to influence national policy-making and public debate. That purpose is still valid and needed perhaps now more than ever. We need a cool hard look at all possibilities to work out the best way forward.

Social workers are at the front line of protecting vulnerable children, young people and families from abuse, neglect and grooming. These are increasingly complex and inter-locking issues and I want to touch on some of those briefly next.

(Child protection and safeguarding)

Firstly, I want to say that we welcome the Ministerial task force on child protection, importantly for us, it is to be chaired by the Secretary of State for Education. It is a strong message about the ownership of this important national issue across so many government departments and mirrors the local leadership given by Directors of Children's Services who carry, on behalf of their authority the statutory responsibility for ensuring co-operation and partnership working in their local area.

Let me reflect for a moment on one such partnership – the LSCB. There is confusion. There is expectation creep. The original objective of the Board, as defined in statute is to co-ordinate and ensure the effectiveness of what is done by each local partner agency for the purposes of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in the local area. But increasingly we have seen these Boards expected to be responsible for the delivery of operational imperatives well beyond that of child protection. So there needs to be more clarity about expectations of Local Safeguarding Children's Boards.

But we also need to think differently about how the combination of local partnership arrangements can be brought to bear on the series of interlocking and interdependent issues that define the complex ecology of local child protection systems.

You only need to think about radicalisation and child sexual exploitation to recognise that child protection activity is becoming ever more complicated.

So, extremism is at the same time an issue of safeguarding vulnerable young people, maintaining community cohesion, a local crime issue, a national security issue, an issue for our schools, colleges, local employers and more. So simultaneously at a local level it becomes an issue for Local Safeguarding Children's Boards, Local Safeguarding Adult's Boards and Community Safety Partnerships. Messy isn't it?

We need to be clear that responsibility for delivery, as with all partnership arrangements, sits with the respective organisations who have particular duties to fulfil. And each of those organisations needs to be accountable for the delivery of their contribution. What the partnership arrangements need to do is join it all up and they should be judged on how well this is achieved. ADCS will be saying more about this in the next few weeks.

Now then, you might ask how do we inspect such complicated multi-agency arrangements? Well, it wouldn't be an ADCS annual conference if we didn't have something to say about inspection folks!

(Inspection)

Let me put our position on inspection bluntly. There are good things about the Single Inspection Framework - much of the methodology is rigorous and there's a welcome focus on getting alongside frontline staff and listening directly to children and young people. We should hold on to the good things and carry them forward into what happens next.

The calibration is simply wrong - the SIF itself is broken and discredited. It is burdensome and disproportionately consumes the resources of both the inspectors and the inspected.

In March of this year, ADCS published in conjunction with LGA and Solace a proposed alternative to the SIF. An annual unannounced inspection of front door arrangements would identify those places where the arrangements are not adequate and there the focus should then be on understanding in more depth the extent of challenge and doing whatever is needed to put it right. Those places that are found to have adequate arrangements should be left to get on with it. Ofsted's resources could then be applied to helping the system to improve through a more extensive range of thematic inspections.

Let's be clear, this is not an argument for less scrutiny or less accountability. We both need and want a rigorous approach to independent evaluation of the effectiveness of services. It's clear that Ofsted does not have the resources to complete the current round of SIF inspections so they should be set aside now and replaced with something better.

That 'something better' is not in our view the proposed multi-inspectorate joint targeted area inspection operating in addition to the SIF.

Some inspectorates have been inspirational in their desire to ask what their agency brings to the enterprise of protecting children, and single inspections do have the leverage to hold agencies to account with the seriousness this deserves.

We do need to consider the right arrangements for inspecting how well local area partnerships are working to protect children as part of the redesign of inspection arrangements as a whole. We must not create yet another layer of inspection adding to the already unreasonable burden. Local authorities simply cannot cope with any more.

So, we need to redesign the arrangements as a whole and do it now.

Can I just check with my Yorkshire colleagues that that was blunt enough?

(Leaving Care)

I hope I can be forgiven for taking the opportunity to press again for an extension of the support for all young people leaving care.

The National Audit Office has recently raised concerns about the lack of ownership across government departments for delivering the support which is already required for young people leaving care.

We have welcomed the Staying Put scheme for young people leaving foster care. There are yet practical and financial issues to resolve about how to implement this fully, but it's been the right thing to do.

As you know, I feel strongly, that similar support should also be available to young people leaving residential care. Too often the most vulnerable of our care leavers, for that is what they are, are leaving residential care earlier than is right for them. And I firmly believe that we need the flexibility to continue to support young people for longer and in doing so we will equip them better for their future lives and try to reverse some of the poor outcomes that our care leavers experience

We know it's not as simple as just allowing young people to carry on living in residential children's homes. We will need a whole new range of living arrangements and forms of support and this would require additional investment into the system.

This is a case of us all finding a way to do the right thing, as any 'good parent' would.

(Early help and public sector funding) Let me move on to talk about funding

Before I say what I'm going to say about funding I want to say something about how Directors of Children's Services do their job in local authorities, because it has a bearing on how I want what I'm going to say to be interpreted.

I'm in my 14th year of being a Director of Social Services, Director for Children and Adults and Director for Children's Services. I have a local, and now national, reputation for being measured in what I say.

Directors of Children's Services up and down the country are advising their local authority about the impact of reductions in spending. And each of us shares the corporate responsibility of our Councils to ensure that other local needs are met and that our Councils can deliver a balanced budget. So whilst we have a duty to advise on what is needed and represent the interests of children and young people services, to be effective, we have learnt not to exaggerate. Our credibility is at stake.

So, when I stand here today, on a high profile occasion, representing the views of Children Services Directors from across the country and I say we are dealing with a ticking time bomb, I am not exaggerating

I have a deep concern that the full impact of recent cuts to local authority funding are not yet well understood. Many of the changes being made are complex to implement and take time. The impact will not wash through the system for another one, two or three years. At the same time further cuts will need to be made. .

No one should underestimate how hard local government has worked to minimise the impact of reducing resources and manage increasing demand but the signs are now all too visible that the system is approaching the limits of capacity to continue to absorb such pressures. Local authorities are reporting changes in the profile and characteristics of their populations – greater number of families in poverty, inward migration and complex family structures. These factors impact upon safeguarding activity because there is a correlation between activity across the protection system and levels of deprivation.

Local authorities are keeping more children safe than ever before.

In the three years between 31 March 2011 and 31 March 2014, local authorities experienced:

- a 65% increase in initial contacts (2.3million in 2013/14 alone)
- a 21% increase in referrals (660,500 in 2013/14)
- a 65% increase in the number of children becoming subjects of child protection plans
- and a 48% increase in the number of children starting to be looked after.

Funding reductions in other areas of council business coupled with financial pressures in other public agencies, especially the police, health, education and youth justice systems are now having a clear impact on the preventative offer and children's social care services.

Significant reductions in early help services have already been necessary to balance the books despite recognition that this will, in time, impact negatively on social care activity when we will find ourselves as a nation paying a heavy price as a consequence of late intervention. The Early Intervention Foundation has recently estimated that heavy price to be £5billion per year – that is a very expensive consequence of late intervention to prevent poor social outcomes for young people. All of this amounts to a very serious situation. We must understand the cumulative impact across the system, across the country, and all of these things coming together. And in doing so we must look to the future and weigh the potential impact of what we will and won't be able to do in the future.

But there is a looming crisis in relation to our ability to keep a balance in the system between investment in early help and the costs of late intervention. Government needs to monitor this very closely and consider if steps will need to be taken to ensure we do not do irreversible damage to our ability to prevent serious harm occurring.

(Regionalism)

So to conclude. Two strong themes emerge from everything I have said today: the power of collaboration and the importance of local determination. This imperative applies equally to how we ensure our children receive the best possible education to how we protect the most vulnerable.

And there are new opportunities to work in locally owned and locally designed ways in the emergent devolution arrangements. We have all watched with interest the bold approach being taken by the Greater Manchester Area.

Looking to the future where Combined Authorities could become 'the new normal' we must take the opportunity to ensure that children's needs are prominent in the thinking about how to make the most of opportunities for devolution – area-wide school improvement arrangements; regional adoption agencies; fewer local partnership arrangements in favour of stronger, better resourced safeguarding partnerships. There is an exciting chance to put children centre stage in the development of devolved arrangements. I know we will all press hard to ensure that this happens. Our strong regional arrangements are well placed to both support and to lead these conversations.

The success and wellbeing of children is fundamental to the success of our society as a whole.

Thank you!

Introduce Sir Peter Fahy, Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police and National Policing Lead for Prevent